

Document 14.10: Descriptions of two women’s reactions to the Cultural Revolution, an excerpt from *Growing Up in The People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution* by Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong, 2005

MA XIAODONG: My enthusiasm at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution also reflected my yearning for more thrills in life. I had always wished to be born during the time of war. Now my turn had finally come. My spirits were very high. I was busy making revolution and often didn’t go home for days. At night we put a few desks together as beds and slept in the classroom. I was so excited that I didn’t need much sleep.

YE WEILI: I shared some of your excitement. I was captivated by the full name of the Cultural Revolution: the Historically Unprecedented Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It sounded galvanizing. I felt I was participating in the making of history. It was a grand feeling. I was in this mood when we marched in a parade hailing the launch of the Cultural Revolution after the publication of *The People’s Daily* editorial¹. We just walked around the school campus, shouting slogans and so forth. The parade was led by school administration even though the campus was now covered with posters denouncing them. As soon as the parade was over, I heard some students say that when the assistant principal, Hu Zhitao, was shouting slogans, she only raised her right arm. It means that she supported rightists in her heart. This was absurd.

MA XIAODONG: You already saw the absurdity?

YE WEILI: Just in this particular case. I thought the charge was ridiculous. Wasn’t it natural that right-handed people raised our right arms when we shouted slogans?

¹ Both women believe the editorial “Sweeping Away the Ox Ghosts and Snake Spirits” was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The editorial stated that “the high tide of a stormy proletarian Cultural Revolution has risen in our country.” Immediately afterwards, all secondary schools and universities in Beijing ended classes.

It was clear that the school administration had lost respect. The students were pretty happy about this, but some teachers were worried. They warned us privately not to oppose the school leadership. They said that the current situation resembled that of 1957 when people at first were encourage to criticize the leaders, but later were purged for doing so.² The lesson of 1957, it turned out, didn't apply to the Cultural Revolution. This time, Mao was dismantling his own power base. It was indeed unprecedented....

YE WEILI: I am still puzzled by why our generation was capable of committing violence. Before the Cultural Revolution we saw violence such as torturing only in movies. It was always done by the enemy to revolutionaries—so it was unacceptable.

MA XIAODONG: But our education didn't teach us to oppose all violence. Counter-revolutionary violence was bad, but revolutionary violence was necessary. Violence was justified if it was against the class enemy. When the Cultural Revolution began, one could either be on the side of the revolutionaries or with the enemy—there was no middle ground. As a revolutionary you were supposed to be firm and tough-minded. There was no room for soft feelings. I tried very hard to eliminate my petty bourgeois sentiments. Whenever they came up, I would squelch them.

YE WEILI: You were striving to be a revolutionary. I found it hard to make myself into one. After the violent death of Bian Zhongyun³, I thought to myself, “if this is what a revolution is about, I cannot be a revolutionary.”...

MA XIAODONG: The most important thing I learned during the Cultural Revolution was that authority could collapse overnight. Nobody was infallible, not even the top leaders of the country⁴. The world turned upside down in front of my eyes.

² A reference to the Hundred Flowers Campaign (see Lesson 13)

³ Bian Zhongyun was the Party secretary and assistant principal at Ye Weili's school. Students beat her to death at the school on August 5, 1966.

⁴ Such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

YE WEILI: If I were asked to describe the most familiar feeling I experience during this [early] stage of the Cultural Revolution, I'd have to say it was fear. The death of Bian Zhongyun certainly left a deep scar on my psyche. My fear intensified against the movement. I couldn't help but vent my anger and frustration periodically. I would curse Jiang Qing⁵ and the Small Group loudly. My family now was left with only one room and the walls were very thin. After I let off steam, I would be seized by fear, afraid that some neighbor had heard me and would call the police. I would stay frozen for a while, waiting their arrival. When nobody appeared, I would take a deep breath and tell myself, "OK, I got away this time."

My parents had an old friend who once said to me, "Remember, everybody has a dossier. Everything you do and every word you say that is improper will be kept on record and the dossier will follow you for the rest of your life." This prospect truly scared me. Then I came across a metaphor about an imaginary net. It was invisible, but no matter where you turned, you could not escape it. This image of the net captured the state of my existence.

Source: Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong. *Growing Up in the People's Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 73–74, 82, 96.

⁵ Mao Zedong's estranged wife, one member of what became known as the Gang of Four.