

Document 14.2: “The Red Guards Cut Your Mother’s Hair,” an excerpt from *Growing Up in The People’s Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution*, 2005

MA XIAODONG: In my family there wasn’t much communication between parents and children, since my parents thought we were just kids. In my memory, the atmosphere at my home was already quite depressing prior to the Cultural Revolution. We stopped going to parks, cinemas, and restaurants. I don’t think it was because my parents thought my brother and I were too old to take us out. I noticed some changes in my father. He looked tired. At the dinner table he seldom spoke. His mood affected everybody else. We all kept quiet and there was no joy at home. I missed the good old days my family used to have together.

Then the Cultural Revolution began. My father didn’t suffer very much. As a middle-ranking cadre in his ministry he was not a primary target. But it was different for my mother, as she was the party secretary of a secondary girls’ school. In the hectic days of August, I often stayed at school overnight and sometimes didn’t go home for days. When I did go home, I could tell that things were not going well. My father often closed their bedroom door and my parents would whisper inside. Those days anybody who had held a responsible position before the Cultural Revolution could be under attack, so I knew my parents wouldn’t be spared. But it never occurred to me that my mother would suffer greatly until one day in late August.

That day I happened to go home from school. As soon as I came through the door, my father grabbed my arm and took me aside. He said, “Mother’s inside. The Red Guards in her school cut her hair. Be prepared when you go in.” I was dumbfounded. Somehow I finally entered her room. Her hair was a total mess like a trampled lawn, cut roughly with scissors. They had given her a “yin/yang” haircut. When my mother saw me, she began to cry. I also cried. My father stood there saying nothing. It must have been very painful for him.

It was obvious that my mother couldn't go out like this. People would be able to tell right away that she was a black gangster¹ and she could be further humiliated. We couldn't find any store that sold hats for women, so my mother had to wear a man's cap. When winter came, my sister-in-law knitted a woolen scarf for her so that she wouldn't look so bad. It took more than half a year before she could go outdoors without a hat.

YE WEILI: I didn't realize your mother had suffered so much. Why did you wait until now to talk about it?

MA XIAODONG: It was too painful, not only because the subject itself was hard for me, but also because I only recently learned the details of that day. My father wrote an account soon after my mother's death in 1981 in which he described what happened in the summer of 1966. He only let me read it in 1998. This is what he wrote:

Hewen [Ma Xiaodong's mother] was forty-two in 1966. She was in the prime of her life, well educated, experienced at work and in good health. But then came the Cultural Revolution. Schools, especially secondary schools, were the first to be turned upside down. Hewen became a black gangster at her school. She was confronted at numerous meetings, where she was spat at, hit by stones, had her body bent in the "jet airplane" position and was forced to don a heavy board over her neck and a dunce hat on her head. She tried her very best to endure all these abuses.

The worst finally came on August 24th when, at a meeting in the school, Hewen was severely beaten along with five other former leaders of the school. Two died on the spot. Hewen's life was

¹ During the Cultural Revolution, the term "black gangster" was used to brand anyone accused of being anti-Party or anti-socialist. Top administrators in schools, industry, and government were the most likely targets. The label was a reference to criminals who worked in the underworld before the founding of the PRC.

spared, but her hair was shaved and wounds covered all her body. When she came back from school, all I could do was to clean the blood from her body. While dressing her wounds, I cried and asked myself why she had to suffer like this. I was afraid that after this horrendous experience Hewen would not want to live anymore. We stayed up the whole night and I tried my best to comfort her and to discourage any thought of suicide. Early the next morning, Hewen had to return to the school. I saw her off at the gate. Watching her walking haltingly away, I knew she was in great pain. I cried again. In the ensuing weeks she did heavy manual labor at school. Imagine a woman with a queer-looking haircut laboring under the public eye. Constantly mortified, Hewen defied adversity. It was not until late November that she was able to wear a scarf to cover her head. After this incident, Hewen was easily startled and would often wake up in the middle of the night. She also developed heart problems. It is not hard to understand why she would have cancer later in her life.

I felt terrible that I had not known the details of what happened that day. After the incident I didn't notice any change in my mother's demeanor and my father also seemed to behave normally. It was incredible how my parents were able to hide their pain from us children. I had never seen my father cry, so it broke my heart to read about his crying.

After the beating, we were nervously waiting for the Red Guards to come and search our home. My father warned us repeatedly not to confront them when they came. But they didn't come. Meanwhile, the people in the compound continued to treat my mother kindly, and nobody took advantage of this incident to abuse my brother and me.

I never doubted that my parents were good party members and I knew they were certainly not black gangsters. I constantly remembered what my father told us, "We should trust

the masses. It's only natural that they may make mistakes. Allow for their mistakes.”
These words calmed me down.

YE WEILI: But how could you still trust the “masses” if they were capable of doing horrible things? I lost that trust.

MA XIAODONG: I thought the masses were wrong in the case of my parents, but I also knew that mistakes were inevitable in a big movement like the Cultural Revolution. I tried not to be angry even with those Red Guards in my mother's school.

YE WEILI: You were a lot more generous than I. I resented those individuals who had mistreated my parents.

MA XIAODONG: I never met the students who tortured my mother, and I didn't want to know who they were. What could I do about them? They were just teenagers. It is those who started the Cultural Revolution and encouraged the violence that should be blamed.

YE WEILI: But shouldn't the individuals who carried out the violence also shoulder some responsibility?

MA XIAODONG: I have chosen to put these matters out of my mind. Thinking about them would open up deep wounds. I cannot bear to watch any scenes in films or on TV that depict the brutality of the Cultural Revolution. My father is even worse. Whenever he sees a scene like that on TV, he will turn it off and leave the room.

In 1981 my mother died of cancer. In her last days she would sometimes murmur in her sleep. More than once I heard her talking about that August day when she was badly beaten. I then realized that horrible event had stayed with her all those years, even though she never talked to us about it again.

A year after my mother's death I gave birth to Niuniu. Since then my mother has always come to my dreams. Once I saw her emerging slowly from afar. Her face was vague but her voice was clear. In the end she said, "The dawn is here. I must go," and she faded away. When I woke up I thought to myself, "Isn't this *Hamlet*!" As a child I saw *Hamlet* both on stage and in film. I also read Shakespeare's play when I was older. The ghost of Hamlet's father and the conversation between father and son had left a deep impression on me and now often makes me think of my mother.

After my mother became a black gangster I had to withdraw from the Red Guards. The organization would not tolerate children of "ox ghosts and snake spirits," and I understood this was the rule. But the Red Guards in my class did not disdain me. To the contrary, they regretted that I could no longer be with them. I still remember the first time they left me behind. Standing on the second floor balcony, I watched my classmates gathering in the schoolyard below. They looked up at me. There was no hostility in their eyes.

As I think about it now, how a person was treated by her classmates had a lot to do with the class leader. In my class, the leader was a girl who was politically more mature than most people her age. I remember a meeting she chaired. Before the meeting, she made it clear that no violence was allowed. And the meeting proceeded peacefully. There was a girl in my class whose father had participated in all the five anti-communist military campaigns in the 1930s as a Nationalist officer. If his daughter were in another class, she could have suffered tremendously and her father could easily have lost his life. My classmates did not assault each other as was the case in your class. We were fortunate to have a good leader.

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. 88–91.