

Document 14.3: Interview with Charles Wang about effects of the Cultural Revolution on his life and on his village, 2012

Charles Wang grew up in a rural village where he experienced the effects of the Cultural Revolution. Charles is now a successful businessman living in a large city an hour's bus ride away from his village.

How did the Cultural Revolution change access to education and to opportunities for your village? For you personally?

The Cultural Revolution started in early June in 1966 when I was still young. I was a freshman at Chang An # 1 High School, one of the key schools of our province. I was dreaming of finishing and then going to a university through the universal national entrance exams as I did for middle school and high school. But the Cultural Revolution changed my life.

In the beginning we did not understand what was going on at all .We just read the news reports from newspapers. But rapidly our teachers were criticized. And we students were mobilized to put up *dazi bao* (big character posters) against our teachers, though I did not know what to say about it. Since the teachers were criticized and some were even labeled as counterrevolutionaries, our classes had to stop. All schools in the beginning of the Cultural Revolution were closed including the village primary school. Students did whatever they wanted. The little kids in the village primary school just went home and played by themselves. The university and high school students were more actively involved in the revolution. Very soon the students split into conservative and rebel factions. Rebels actively opposed the teachers in the beginning, and then the government officials. The conservatives held different views or just did nothing. However, everyone followed Mao's call. He issued instructions from time to time, and the students just followed what he said. The whole thing was chaos and the young people followed and pushed the movements.

I was one of the younger ones in the class and was very nervous about what to do with the teachers or officials. I never joined in smashing or beating the others. So I was labeled a conservative. Most of the time during the two and half years of high school, I went back to the village and worked in the fields as a peasant doing all kinds of farm work.

When I was supposed to graduate from high school in 1968, the government just sent me back to the village to work like a peasant who had never passed the exams to go to a high school or even a middle school. My 16 years of hard work in my studies finally turned into a bubble just like my hope to become an urban person through education. So the Cultural Revolution stopped my education in high school and totally destroyed my hope for a better life.

However, fortune came to me in 1972. After six years the universities reopened to recruit students. And this time no universal national entrance exams were required. The students were recommended by their working units and were called “worker,” “peasant” or “soldier” university students. At that time I had already been chosen to teach at the village primary school as a peasant teacher thanks to my time at the high school less (than a year). In addition to the work points I received like the other young peasants in the village, I was given an allowance of half a U.S. dollar a month. I worked hard and the school and the village recommended me to become a university student. I was told to learn English as my major in the Foreign Language University in Xi’an. So, I should say I benefited from the Cultural Revolution as well. But many of my schoolmates were not as lucky as I was. The Cultural Revolution interrupted their education, and they never had a chance to go back to school.

How is the Cultural Revolution remembered in your village?

Only the villagers over 60 years old can remember the Cultural Revolution. No one talks about it anymore unless they recall their lives during the Cultural Revolution when old friends get together. The deepest impression on them now is the personality cult of Mao. They often question why they believed in him at that time as a god. Of course, the Cultural Revolution is also remembered as a disaster to the country’s economy, though the countryside was the least damaged because the peasants had to farm to support themselves. And the urban people got a supply of food from the government.

Leftism went to extremes during the Cultural Revolution. The income of the villagers was only from collective farming. They were not allowed to sell their own eggs or anything they made in their spare time. This kind of practice was criticized as capitalism. Plus no one in the government was keen on the usage of machines or more chemicals. The villagers had to work like animals. I joined them pulling plows and sowing machines and millstones. But we did not have enough to eat. A dumpling dinner with pork was a luxury just once in the Chinese New Year. So, the

villagers remember the poverty of the life caused by the Cultural Revolution. I don't see any good changes it brought to the village, but people learned good lessons from it. Now many officials are corrupt and people complain a lot. The villagers sometimes say, "We'd better have another Cultural Revolution to overthrow the bad officials." Maybe this is the only good part of the Cultural Revolution that they remember and would like to have today.

How do you feel now about the Cultural Revolution and the changes it brought?

On reflection, the Cultural Revolution did bad and good things to me, I would say. It stopped my education in the high school, and the universities were closed. So I was sent back to the village to work as a peasant. I wasted six years of my young life with no education from 1966 to 1972. On the other hand, I was from a poor peasant family and this gave me a good political background in the Cultural Revolution. It was very important that I could be selected to go to a university with no entrance exams. I was very lucky because I finally went to a university and majored in English. After graduation from the university, the government gave me a good job working in the foreign affairs office of our province. Ever since then, my life has greatly changed and it has become better and better.

Source: Charles Wang. Interview by Carolyn Platt. 2012.