

## Bai Di: Growing Up in Revolutionary China

*Bai Di grew up in socialist China (before capitalism was brought back after the death of Mao in 1976) and participated in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). She is a co-editor of the book, Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up During the Mao Era and is the Director of Chinese and Asian Studies at Drew University. The following interview with Bai Di was done in February 2009 by Revolution correspondent Li Onesto.*

**Li Onesto:** A young person who heard you talk about your experiences growing up in socialist China told me that before this they had no idea at all what it was like during the Cultural Revolution, including what it was like to be a woman during that time.

**Bai Di:** In my generation, most of the women hoped to accomplish great things. When we were young, when we were teenagers, there were revolutionary ideals. We worked for some goals. We felt that our lives were full of meaning, not for ourselves but for all these larger goals of society. That is what we were discussing at that moment. We were idealistic about the world that we envisioned. We were about 15 years old when we went to the countryside, around 1972. At that point I graduated from high school. The school was reopened after about a year of closing in 1966. We spent most of the time studying Chairman Mao's works, and some math, chemistry and physics. Later on we were digging tunnels in the school yard because of the Soviet threat of war. We were trying to protect our country.

Our class had more than a thousand students and four of us, all women in our high school, got together and decided to write an epic of the history of the Red Guards. We were very ambitious at that moment, now to think about it. There were two guys who tried to join us and we interviewed them. I remember that each of them presented something poetic written by them, and the four of us looked at them. We decided not to have them in this writing group because they were not good enough. We just laughed at their writings because they were not up to our standards. We totally rejected them. The four of us, we thought we were the best. We wanted to record our deeds of trying to educate other people with Chairman Mao's teachings. We organized the first "Chairman Mao Thought Propaganda Team" in the school.

**Li Onesto:** When most people hear the term, "propaganda team," they don't know what that is and/or they look at it like a negative thing, like it's about just telling people what to think, that it goes against critical thinking.

**Bai Di:** The Mao Zedong propaganda teams in the beginning of the Cultural Revolution were organized by the revolutionary Red Guards so that educated people, students, armed with all the songs and poems, could go to the neighborhoods in the cities and later on in the countryside to spread knowledge to the not so well educated. They tried to teach the so-called "less educated people" about the party's directives and Chairman Mao's ideas. Our propaganda team taught people revolutionary songs and read the current events from the newspapers to them. We organized our school's students to go to clean up the neighborhoods and after that we performed dances and songs and called on people to clean up the neighborhood because sanitation was very important. We felt that was part of building a greater society.

**Li Onesto:** How did you see that in relation to the ideals that you had?

**Bai Di:** The idea was that we could make a change, that there were all these opportunities. We were going to change the world; we were going to change China. That was the mission of my generation because we lived in a very special era: the great 1960s and 1970s. We called that moment the dawn of communism, that's the point. We were working to build up this great society and we felt that everyone in that society should have education. Because we students could read and we could write so we used this to try and inspire other people—to teach them to sing and teach them sections of Mao's works. That was what the propaganda teams did. Something gets lost in the translation of this concept to English. In Chinese right now this phrase still refers to what is considered a very positive thing. The phrase propaganda team is not a negative thing, it is to let everybody know what they need to know, the ideas of the party's central

committee, what they are doing. During the Cultural Revolution everybody needed to know that. China at that point, it was such a large country, and the government organization at each level had a propaganda department, you needed this at every level. There was a lot of illiteracy. And Chairman Mao's teachings aren't all very easy and they are open to interpretation. If you change one line, it changes the meaning. You can't just teach the words, you have to explain it.

Take something like what was called the "constantly read three articles" by Mao: "Serve the People," "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," and "In Memory of Norman Bethune." Look at the old story about the foolish old man—why do we have to talk about that? That is an ancient Chinese fable that everyone already knows. It is about an old man who called on his sons to dig away two big mountains that were obstructing their way out. Others made fun of him saying it was impossible for them to dig up these two huge mountains. But the Foolish Old Man replied, "When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity." This resilience impressed the God so much that God sent down two angels, who carried the mountains away on their backs. But Chairman Mao changed it and said it was the hard working people who moved the mountains. He said, right now, we the communists, the party are like the Old Foolish Man. We will try to move all these three mountains—imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism—but we cannot do that. So we have to impress the Chinese people; they are the God. Only they can move away the three mountains that are oppressing us. And we have to entrust the people. Do you get that? So we have to move them, we have to understand what we are doing. You have to explain that to people, why that is very important. We have to keep doing something and we have to keep letting people know what we are doing. We have to politically educate people—that is our job. When I think back—that was our whole mission. We were so lucky that we were able to get the ability to write and understand things and others didn't understand that, didn't see the connection. So that's what we were doing and when I think about it, what confidence we had.

**Li Onesto:** What effect did the Cultural Revolution have on the status of women?

**Bai Di:** One example is what I told you before, that young women changed their names. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 Chairman Mao would greet the Red Guards at huge rallies in Tiananmen Square, for about eight times I think. At one of the rallies, one girl went up to Tiananmen and put a Red Guard armband on Mao. He asked her what her name was. She said, Song Binbin. Mao said, that is very Confucianist, Binbin means prudence and modesty. And Chairman Mao said, why be prudent, why be modest? You should Aiwu; you should love that militancy in women. So she changed her name from Binbin to Aiwu that stood for loving militancy, fighting. Then there started a trend: the girls who had feminine names like flower or jade or whatever, changed their names.

According to Chinese culture, your name means something. My name never had gender connotation and this was due to my parents. Bai is my family name; it means cypress, like the tree. It's a great surname in the first place. I was the first born and my parents were very progressive at that moment in the 1950s. They were checking out the dictionary to get a name. My father grew up in the communist system and he was among the first class in the Foreign Languages School run by the Communist Party in 1946, when the Russian Department of that school was moved, Yen'an moved to Harbin. He was in the class with children of many famous communists including Chairman Mao's second son. He and my mother were very revolutionary. So they went to the dictionary and they found "Di" which means wood, which is not very assuming but very easy to survive. And it seems that I have lived up to the name. When young women were trying to change their names from these girlish names to something revolutionary, I didn't have to change my name because it meant independence already. Girls tried to change their girlish names if they weren't revolutionary or were too feminine - they would change it into something fighting and strong like the men's names. After capitalism came back, I can give you three instances where women changed their names back. One of my friends, before the Cultural Revolution, her name was very womanish, so she changed it to Wenge which literally means "cultural revolution." But recently I heard from her and she changed her name

back. I have another friend who is an editor in a Beijing publishing house and her name was “red” and she changed it back to “little flower.”

**Li Onesto:** You’ve written a lot about the role of women in revolutionary China. Can you compare the status of women before 1949, then 1949 to the Cultural Revolution, then during the Cultural Revolution and then what it is like now for women under capitalism?

**Bai Di:** I always like to look at the differences among the three generations of women in my family as an indicator of how China had changed under the Communist Party. Both my grandmothers were born at the turn of the 20th century and they both married early, one at the age of 14, the other at 15. They both had bound feet and each of them gave birth to 14 kids. They were in arranged marriages. They were both illiterate. They did nothing for their whole life but giving birth and having kids, seeing some of the newborns die helplessly. My mother’s life is very different. She was born in the ‘30s so basically in 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was founded, she was in middle school and in the early ‘50s she went to college to study Russian, dreaming to be a diplomat. Both my parents were the first generation of college educated in their respective families. My mother was a translator and researcher in Russian literature before her retirement. Then I think of my generation, I am a college professor with a Ph.D. degree. I have been traveling around the world teaching and writing. Compared with my grandmas and my mother, I am more ambitious, more idealist and more confident. I am very grateful that I grew up in an extremely special moment in Chinese history. The dominant ideology was that women hold up half of the sky; what men can do, women can do. Those may sound now as hollow slogans; but I lived through that period really believing in myself, in my ability in bringing about changes in my own life and the lives of other people. And then I think of the fourth generation of the family. I do not have a daughter, so I will use my niece as an example. She is now about 26 years old, having a college degree and a very high paid job in China. It seems that all she is interested in are brand name bags and clothes. She likes to talk about who has money, who has brand name bags, what kind of husband is there. And I just look at her now and I see that there is another generation right now, it is called “post-‘80s” in China; a generation that puts most of their energy into this consumer culture. When I was young, the social ideal was to do something good for other people, to work to change the world into a better system. We were willing to sacrifice. And we all believed in fair and equal distribution of social wealth. But right now for young people growing up in China, it’s me, me, me. And the whole culture buttresses that. And also the women’s role today, you can see it ingrained, basically that you should be a good wife and then right now the Chinese popular culture is full of this kind of discussion. On CCTV, on the women’s programs, both the hosts and guests will focus on what kind of husband you will be happy with; how one can be more feminine so that she is more attractive. The famous women in every realm of the society are invited in to talk about this. Can you imagine a program that famous men were on to talk about how to be a good husband? They never ask the guys this kind of question.

**Li Onesto:** One of the things during the Cultural Revolution was refutation of Confucian thinking and how this is oppressive, especially to women, the feudal and patriarchal thinking. Can you talk about that and compare this to now?

**Bai Di:** This kind of criticism of feudalism was going on back in the May 4 Movement at the beginning of the 20th century. But the real legal reform started in 1930s in the Red Soviet areas controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the first law that the new government passed was not the Constitution, the Constitution was passed in 1954. The first law passed by the Communist government in 1950 was the Marriage Law—for the first time it abolished the concubinage system, abolished arranged marriages, saying men and women should be partners in marriage and that women should get equal inheritance and divorce rights, banned polygamy, child brides and also the concept of “illegitimate” children. That was a great moment in history. Think about how the government saw the role of gender issues in changing people’s minds and lives.

In order to build a new world, women have to be liberated. Like Marx said, for the liberation, you have to liberate everybody. And if women are not liberated you cannot say that the nation is liberated. This showed the progressiveness of the Chinese Communist Party. So the first law passed was the Marriage Law and the second law passed a month later was the land reform law. So basically you can see in 1950, the next year after the founding of the People's Republic of China, two laws basically representing the new government's focused agenda. First, the change of superstructure—because families were so ingrained in Confucian family hierarchy, this was so ingrained in Chinese culture, that you had to change it. So I think that was a symbol of the change of culture.

Secondly, the change in the infrastructure of the economic base, that is of the poor peasants and their ownership of the land. You were not only changing the economic structure, you had to change the superstructure, including people's ideas. And law is a part of superstructure. So that's Mao's great idea, changing both sides, rather than just the economy. On the other hand, those who wanted to bring capitalism back, like Deng Xiaoping, said that if you just change the economy, everything else will change. But at the beginning, the Chinese Communist Party saw that you have to abolish the old things that are oppressive. There is a dialectic, you can see this in anything. Like the problem with the Marriage Law. There was great resistance all along. Because it's not like you will just have a law and then all the people will follow that. There were still a lot of women's issues for the 17 years after 1949 from the start of the new socialist government until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

When new China was founded in 1949, the new government met so many challenges: prostitution, concubinage, drug problems. And miraculously, within two or three years, all the prostitutes were reformed and all the drug addicts got treated. My grandmother told me about how there was this place in Harbin where there was this neighborhood for prostitution and it then became a normal residential area. Unfortunately today that area has gone back to its "tradition" of prostitution.