

# Wang Zheng: “We had a dream that the world can be better than today”

*The following interview with Wang Zheng was conducted by the Set The Record Straight (SRS) project. Wang Zheng is a professor of women’s studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories and numerous research papers, including State Feminism? Gender and Socialist Formation in Maoist China. Wang Zheng brings a feminist perspective to her work.*

*Wang Zheng is an editor of and contributor to Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era (Rutgers University Press, 2001), a collection of memoirs. The nine contributors reflect on family relationships, school, neighborhood, workplace, popular culture, and going to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and the impact of, as the introduction puts it, “the Mao era’s gender equality policies.” The essays challenge what the editors call the “dark-age master narrative” of Chinese socialism and the Cultural Revolution in particular. As the book jacket describes, these writings “shatter our stereotypes of persecution, repression, victims, and victimizers in Maoist China.”*

**SRS:** There are many memoirs being written by people who lived in China during the socialist years, or “the Mao era” (1949–1976), especially about the Cultural Revolution decade. What compelled the writing of *Some of Us*?

**Wang Zheng:** This book is collective memoirs by nine authors, all from the People’s Republic of China. We were all graduate students in this country, and then most of us got teaching positions here. The motivation to do this is that we were amazed by many memoirs published by the Chinese diaspora, people from China. Those memoirs that were promoted or that achieved the most market success were the ones depicting Mao’s era in China as the “dark age”: terrible, nothing but persecution and dictatorship and killings, all the horror stories, just a one-sided voice.

Even though I cannot say they are telling lies, a lot of the stuff is fictional. Like Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*, which was widely used here, even in universities. She claimed it’s autobiographical when she was in the U.S. But when she went back to China, among all her friends and relatives, all the people who knew her, lived there in that setting, when people asked her about this book, she said it’s fiction. So that’s one point.

That type of autobiography achieves the most market success due to the politics of publication in this country. What kind of books are they promoting in this country? You see that pattern there. They play into this Cold War mentality, still in the U.S., in the West, that capitalist countries are wonderful lands of freedom, socialist countries are terrible, Communist China, red China was awful, like hell. So they are telling all these horror stories to you. Those books always have the widest circulation, always receive a lot of media attention.

My point is not that persecution disasters did not happen. Our point, I just want to say, is that China is so big, with a population of one billion. We have different social groups, and different social groups experience even the same historical period differently. As Chinese, when we read

those memoirs, we don't share a lot of their experiences. Whatever their experiences, even if it's true, it's not our experience.

I found out in my peer group of all these Chinese women that we shared the same sentiment towards those memoirs. So we wanted to do something. At least we can raise our voices. If they're telling their stories... what about our stories and our experiences? But our experiences didn't get told. So we feel, especially I myself as a historian, that the important thing is not to vindicate anybody; rather, it is to present a complicated picture of history.

Also if you look at who wrote all this "condemnation literature," they are usually people from elite classes. You really don't hear the voices of workers, peasant class, those who are in the lower classes, the bottom of society. How did those people experience Mao's China, or Communist China?

The Communist Party was very complicated, with different factions with different visions of China, different visions of socialism even. People had different visions in the Communist Party. In those years, there were all kinds of people involved in different things and the policies proposed by different people within the Party had different effects.

It was an extremely complicated situation. But in this country, what you hear is just one single voice, condemnation—how the people from the elite classes suffered during those years. That's a terrible distortion of the larger picture if you believe that's the truth, the only truth.

**SRS:** Why did this "condemnation literature" get such play?

**Wang Zheng:** There was a mass movement to produce victim narratives in the late 1970s and early 1980s in China, a line that was later largely transported to the West along with those Chinese who found an especially lucrative market in the capitalist "land of freedom" to claim the status of "victims" emerging in the post-Mao era.

"Thoroughly negate the Cultural Revolution" was a scheme by Deng Xiaoping<sup>1</sup> to pave the way for his dismantling of socialism while consolidating political power. It was a way to whitewash or shift attention from his and his associates' crimes.

After Deng Xiaoping's call to thoroughly negate the Cultural Revolution, being a victim of the Cultural Revolution was a hot status symbol in China. Chinese intellectuals jumped on this bandwagon to produce narratives of victims. This was sanctioned by Deng Xiaoping, and helped him clear the ideological ground for staging neo-liberalism and social Darwinism to accompany the rise of a capitalist market economy. In the process, they have retrieved their power and privileges that had been reduced in the Mao era, especially in the Cultural Revolution. Those who dare to deviate from the design of the new architect Deng Xiaoping have been excluded from the privileges enjoyed by the new elite if not punished with imprisonment.

**SRS:** One of the stories in your memoir is about when you first came to the U.S., you heard a woman describe her daughter as a cheerleader and your reaction to that.

**Wang Zheng:** Yeah, well, it was after Deng Xiaoping initiated condemnation of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In my essay, I also talked about that. I was confused by all this, because everybody was talking about how they were victimized by the Cultural Revolution, by the Communist Party, but I couldn't find any examples in my life to define myself as the victim or victimizer. It was kind of a confusing period. I didn't even know how to figure out the situation

because in China at the time, a lot of intellectuals were talking about that, producing these kinds of “victim narratives.”

Then my experience in the U.S. made me see more clearly in a sense the significance of the Chinese revolution, the changes the revolution had made—because I had this comparative perspective that enabled me to compare the mentality of women here with the mentality of women in the Mao era, in the socialist period.

One example from my life here, staying with an American family, was when my landlady’s friend came and she talked about her daughter. I asked her, “What is your daughter doing?” She said very proudly and thrilled, “Oh she’s a cheerleader,” in a spirited voice. I didn’t know this word “cheerleader,” and I thought what kind of *leader* is that? I was very interested and when she explained that to me, I was not just shocked, I had contempt in my heart. I thought, wow—you’re feeling so much pride in that kind of stuff? I thought this woman has never imagined her daughter being a leader cheered by men.

So it was little things that brought into sharp contrast my experience as a young woman being raised in red China, socialist China, with the experience of women generally in this large society here, their mentality, their views about what they can do and their view of their life—there was a sharp difference.

**SRS:** It’s a strong theme that emerges from the various memoirs in the book.

**Wang Zheng:** The gender issue, that’s a point I have been making in my writing actually. I would say that the Communist Party, since its inception, incorporated a feminist agenda and attracted feminists, even though in the Party’s long history, in the war, in other critical struggles, gender equality had not always been high on the Party’s agenda. My research has demonstrated that all the policies related to women and gender equality have been promoted by feminists within the Party. The Party has never been a monolithic body but always including people with diverse political visions and interests. Each policy is a result of negotiations and contentions among different interests. In this sense, Communist feminists have been quite successful in promoting policies for gender equality.

**SRS:** What were some of the policies?

**Wang Zheng:** Marriage laws. Because all these women worked very hard from day one, from 1949, to promote gender equality, equality between men and women became the official dominant ideology. Not now, but in those years, dominant through all kind of cultural production, literature, movies, posters, everywhere. Everywhere. Women broke gender barriers in all the occupations—female pilots, militia, train drivers, all kinds of things. Anything previously regarded as male occupations and professions...women were encouraged to break into all these male dominated fields.

So my generation, we were all born into this kind of cultural atmosphere or political culture, So we took gender equality for granted. Of course, equal opportunity to education, to employment, equal pay—that was our experience, especially during the Cultural Revolution. The socialist system had embraced the egalitarian idea that worked to women’s benefit, and also the socialist economic system tried to equalize their share of the resources and that also worked to women’s benefit. Maternity leave, you were guaranteed if you worked in state enterprises, and also in employment, education, there was no gender discrimination.

But I have to say that many of those benefits were limited mostly to urban women. In rural settings, there were different economic policies. Even during the commune period in the rural areas, it was very difficult for women to gain equal pay for equal jobs, because in rural society resistance to gender equality is so strong, even if women were doing the same work, women were often paid less, unlike in the urban setting.

It's a lot more difficult to promote equality in China today because now all the gaps, gender, class, everything, regional, all the gaps are widening. Of course before—especially during the Cultural Revolution when Mao wanted to reduce the urban and rural gap and the worker-peasant gap—the Party adopted some policies, such as barefoot doctors<sup>2</sup> and rural teachers promoting rural education, and made efforts to do those things during those years.

**SRS:** We often hear that all the schools closed down during the Cultural Revolution, books were burned, and everyone's education suffered.

**Wang Zheng:** Yeah, that's one of the myths. During the Cultural Revolution, the first two years, the schools were closed but that doesn't mean we were not able to read. Actually we read a lot because the books from libraries were circulated. The Red Guards took the books from the libraries and circulated them.

We were reading a lot of books. Actually a lot of young people had talent and had the time, didn't have to go to school, so they were developing their talents. People who wanted to play the violin, or if their interest was math or physics, just did that. So a lot of people didn't go to school but kind of immersed in their own talent. Actually the majority of people were doing that. You only hear about the terrible violence done by the Red Guards, that in that generation of young people, everyone was Red Guards. No! Statistically, the Red Guards were a small minority of my generation. I never joined the Red Guards. Many of us didn't. We were called "Xiao Yao Pai." We didn't like violence, we didn't like all those struggles, we just dropped out. We didn't participate in violence, we didn't do any of those things. We would just go home, doing whatever we wanted to do.

My critique of the film *The Morning Sun* by Carmelita Hinton, which I told her, was that I liked the first part but I didn't like the second part because the second part focused on Red Guards violence. First of all, not all the Red Guards were involved in violence. Second, the Red Guards were a small percentage of our generation. Why do the stories of the lives of the majority never get told? There were the Xiao Yao Pai who dropped out to develop their own interests during those years. Her [Carmelita Hinton's] response was that this is a documentary film, we want footage, and she didn't have footage of the Xia Yao Pai. If you are smashing something, people will shoot a picture of you. If you are staying home reading, that's boring, no one wants to shoot a picture of you reading. The representation of the Red Guards in those footage is of them smashing things, beating people. Yes, many Red Guards did that, but I am afraid that may not be the majority.

**SRS:** From our research, it's very clear that the Red Guards played a highly positive role in the Cultural Revolution. They were a kind of catalyst. They raised people's awareness of what was going on in society. Their spirit of criticizing and challenging reactionary authority emboldened workers, peasants, and others to lift their heads and raise their voices about the problems in society. Violence was not the main trend of the Red Guard movement. And much of the violence that did occur was fomented by leading capitalist roaders coming under criticism who were trying to discredit the movement. The Cultural Revolution was aimed at preventing the

revolution from getting turned back, and it was aimed at transforming society more deeply and changing people's thinking.

**Wang Zheng:** The issue is that at a time for my generation, there was a goal. We knew that we wanted to be different human beings, new kind of human beings, to create a different society so there's some vision, some purpose there and these different human beings were not just craving material possessions, houses, cars, consumer goods.

We wanted to make contribution to the common good, we were concerned about human beings as a whole, society as a whole, not only just China, the whole world, how the whole world can be peaceful, happy without exploitation and oppression. In a sense we can say that's a utopian dream starting from long, long time ago. Whether utopian or not, we had a dream that the world can be better than today.

I would never condone any violence. However... a revolution to achieve an egalitarian society did involve some drastic measures, like land reform to confiscate landowners' land, to redistribute among all the landless people. So, if you go to interview the landlord, their children, they would tell you that the landlord's land had been confiscated, the landlord had been executed—if you hear that story, of course, they are full of hatred. But if you go to interview the landless class and they got land from the communists, you will hear a very different story. So that's why it's important to have a fuller picture of what's going on. The relationship of the poor peasants to the communist revolution is drastically different. But those poor peasants cannot write their memoirs in English. That's why you have never heard a peasant talking. Or even those peasants' children who can write English—their writing can never be promoted in this country because the people who control the publishing market, they will not promote these kinds of stories.

The world should have equality and justice. We wanted to improve ourselves internally so that we can build that kind of world. I don't see anything wrong with this dream. I still don't see anything wrong in this dream, even though people may say that's naive. But I think the human race needs to have something beautiful in our mind, otherwise we will all become ugly animals. What's the point to live in this world that's dog-eat-dog, an ugly world? What's the point? Meanwhile, possessing so much material wealth while destroying this earth. What's the point? We could live in a different way, that's why dreams are important.

**SRS:** It's an important point that the world doesn't have to be like this, and during the socialist period in China, those changes started to happen because it wasn't just a utopian dream. I want to talk about the mass movement of urban youth like you that were sent to the countryside. That's one of the things being attacked.

**Wang Zheng:** Yes, yes. There are a lot of debates in terms of why Mao and the Party did that in terms of motivations. Even today, I don't think it's wrong to ask the urban educated youth to make a contribution to the poor areas even though we may not have to use that kind of drastic measure. Still I think it is necessary for educated people to go to the poor places, to contribute their knowledge to develop those areas.

Even though I was *sent* to the countryside, I never shed a tear all those years when I was on the farm. If you read all those memoirs talking about how terrible it was for “sent down girls,” like in *Wild Swans* for example, where she [Jung Chang] talks about her “sent down” experience, her countryside experience... oh, she felt so wronged. Because she was from this high Communist

cadre official family—how can *she* be sent to work on the farm like a peasant? She just couldn't work as a peasant. It's horrible! When I read that part, I was so offended by her sense of entitlement, her sense of being elite, how can *she* do that kind of work? So when her parents went through the back door and got her out of the countryside, oh, she was so elated. And even to the time when she was writing, she never reflected on that privilege.

Why couldn't you be a peasant where some 90 percent of Chinese were peasants at the time? On what ground could you not work as a farmer? Do you have a crown on your head? I just don't see it. If you read all those condemnations, they are all complaining, saying that we are urban people, we are educated, my parents are professors or high officials and I had all these talents, now I have to work as a peasant. What is wrong with that? You can contribute your talents to the peasants, to the rural community. I still don't know what is wrong with that.

**SRS:** The Setting the Record Straight project is also working to take on the distortions and lies and to bring out the true history of socialism. Given your own interest in this history, how do you see amplifying our work?

**Wang Zheng:** Yes, they have the whole machine behind them to promote. We don't have that. Yes, how to increase our volume in a sense. We have been trying to raise our voice to be heard, but always kind of overshadowed or suppressed by the market. That's a huge issue because we do live in this capitalist market economy.

Maybe one important thing for scholars is not to just produce academic works confined to academic circles. I just came from a conference in the China field. Many scholars think that Jung Chang's new book [*Mao: The Unknown Story*] and their story of Mao is a piece of shit. These scholars do research, study history and documents, and they know this book cannot be held against academic standards. I think that academics in the China field, all my colleagues, as far as I know, have been trying to inform their students. But you know in this country, a lot of the students are not interested in anything besides America. So our classrooms are not large. A few are informed, but not many. Conferences are not a venue to inform the large public. That's the big issue, the big problem here. How to make your work accessible to the larger audience, and circulate among them? It is actually who can promote you. So these are political issues in this country, because the mainstream has an interest to demonize socialism.

Let me just say, how much does the U.S. government invest in the Iraq war, more than \$70 billion now, right? Okay, so in this system you can invest so much money to kill people with another religion, rather than offer free education, college education, to make your citizens an informed citizenry. Is this system better than China when it was socialist when many people were informed through free education? Are there any efforts made in this country to offer free medical care, free education instead of so much money to kill innocent people? This is evil. If you talk about evil, this is evil.

If the practice of Chinese communist revolution had been thwarted by various mistakes or various forces, we need to explore new ways. Whatever the Chinese Communist Party's mistakes, it doesn't prove the superiority of capitalism.

#### ***Revolution Editors' Notes:***

1. Deng Xiaoping was a major capitalist roader in the Chinese Communist Party. He was a pivotal behind-the-scenes organizer of the reactionary coup that overthrew proletarian power in China in October

1976. He was the main architect of the restoration of capitalism in China and the “opening up” of China to imperialist exploitation and plunder.

2. The “barefoot doctor” movement was an innovation of the Cultural Revolution. Young peasants as well as urban youth sent to the countryside were trained to treat minor diseases and injuries and to administer immunizations and help with birth-control programs and other public-health activities in the rural areas. By 1976, there were close to 1.5 million barefoot doctors in the countryside.