BOOK REVIEW
Wang Youqin, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution: Testimonies of China's Tragedy*, translated and edited by Stacy Mosher (London: Oneworld Academic, 2023)

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Wang Youqin and translator Stacy Mosher have rearranged and updated Wang's *Wenge shounanzhe*, originally published in Chinese in 2004 in Hong Kong. Mosher notes that the 2023 English version "should be treated as a companion volume" to such general histories as Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals's *Mao's Last Revolution*, Yang Jisheng's *The World Turned Upside Down*, and Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao's *Turbulent Decade*, among others (xxii). Wang's *Victims of the Cultural Revolution* is so important and powerful that I would recommend it as a starting point—it should be read before any other book about the Cultural Revolution because it puts people first, prioritizing the names and stories of those who died. By doing so it honors and humanizes the victims and their family members while also posing vital intellectual questions about justice, suicide, perpetrators and victims, and youth violence that should fuel new PRC history research for many decades to come.

Wang's book is the result of decades of conversations with eyewitnesses and the loved ones of people who were murdered or who committed suicide between 1966 and 1977. Its goal is to show how ordinary people suffered and died after being brutalized by teenaged Red Guards in August and September 1966, and by state authorities during the Cleansing of the Class Ranks (1968) and One Strike and Three Antis (1970) Campaigns. Wang argues that the violence of China's Cultural Revolution was "comparable to Hitler's slaughter of the Jews, or Stalin's Gulag Archipelago," but that "much less of what happened during the Cultural Revolution is a matter of record, as a result of which its horrors are more liable to fade from human memory" (xxxiii). By painstakingly recording how, when, and where victims died, and by naming their names, Wang has created a memorial full of righteous indignation and pain. She primarily blames Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and other top leaders for the atrocities. She also criticizes individual murderers and abusers, as well as officials who have whitewashed the past and denied justice, even refusing to offer meaningful apologies or explanations to survivors.

The original Chinese version of the book was an alphabetical list of victims, a format that asked readers to confront each individual victim's story in isolation from its temporal or spatial context. Mosher and Wang have helpfully reorganized the material in this English translation, proceeding chronologically from 1966 through the 1970s, with separate sections for each city and province within each of the book's seven parts, which are titled: The Cultural Revolution in the Universities, The Red Guards in Primary and Secondary Schools, Other Killings Early in the Cultural Revolution, Victims of Factional Struggle, 1968 Cleansing of the Class Ranks, The 1970 One Strike and Three Antis Campaigns, and Late Cases.

The book's organization effectively conveys how the movement unfolded in successive waves emanating from Beijing. Before reading Wang's book, I had accepted Andrew Walder's argument that the deadliest phase of the Cultural Revolution was the consolidation of state control coinciding with the establishment of revolutionary committees in 1968 and 1969, rather than Red Guard violence in 1966 or factional warfare in 1967. Walder finds that "of the

more than 10 million reported victims of political persecution, more than *90 percent* suffered at the hands of authorities," mostly beginning in May 1968, rather than being harmed by Red Guards or rebels earlier in the movement.[1] Wang does not mention Walder's work, but she agrees with his general conclusion, writing that the top-down Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign was the "fiercest and most protracted operation of the Cultural Revolution, and persecuted the greatest number of people" (350). In terms of emphasis, however, Wang devotes more than half of her book to the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, which were less deadly in statistical terms but which, in Wang's recounting, established a pattern of brutally dehumanizing torture. The overall effect of Wang's work pushes back against Walder's corrective by showing that each senseless murder mattered, no matter when it occurred, and by showing that the extreme horrors of the first two years of the Cultural Revolution paved the way for the mass killings and executions of the following years.

Wang and Mosher's reorganization results in the book opening with Beijing universities because they were the starting point for the movement and were where the Cultural Revolution's struggle sessions, labor reform teams, and informal prisons "first appeared on a major scale and developed even further." Wang writes that "these persecution methods then spread throughout the country, leading to the deaths of untold numbers of people" (2). Wang's accounts of the persecution of university administrators highlights a pattern that recurs throughout the book: leaders who had previously taken the lead in oppressing hundreds of colleagues and students, especially during the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, but also during other political campaigns, became targets of persecution themselves during the Cultural Revolution.

This was true of Jiang Longji, president of Lanzhou University, who killed himself in June 1966 after students assaulted him and marched him through the streets as an academic authority who supposedly opposed the Cultural Revolution, even though he had led the initial stage of the movement. Wang writes that Jiang's earlier persecution of more than 500 people who were labeled as rightists "was paving the way for himself to be similarly treated further down the line" (15).

While years separated Jiang Longji's journey from victimizer to victim, the pattern unfolded rapidly for others during the second half of 1966. In Chongqing, for example, municipal Party Secretary Lu Dadong and vice-mayor Yu Yueze led the way in purging Chongqing University President Zheng Siqun, who died after slicing his neck with a shaving razor on August 2, 1966. A few months after Zheng died, Lu and Yu were targeted as enemies (19). Wang argues that because so many relatively high-profile people victimized others before becoming victims themselves, in the aftermath of the violence they chose silence instead of openly reckoning with what had happened. Wang unites, "it was altogether possible that people who had started out leading the Cultural Revolution would be crushed in its attack. It is because of this chain of persecution that the people in each link, if they were fortunate enough to survive the Cultural Revolution, had difficulty squarely facing this tragic and shameful history with courage and wisdom" (19).

Questions of survival and death loom especially large in Part Two of Wang's book, especially the 137 pages covering primary and secondary schools in Beijing. This heartbreaking read helped me to understand elements of the Cultural Revolution that I had previously found confusing, especially the disturbing prevalence of suicide and the horrifying variety of ways in which people tried to kill themselves. I have long struggled to grasp why so many people attempted suicide during the Cultural Revolution. When I was working with the files of deportees from Tianjin, I held my breath until reaching the end of each reinvestigation form, most of which contained four characters indicating that the former political outcast had "returned to work in Tianjin." A few of the files, however, noted that the individual had killed themself before gaining permission to return home from rural exile. I wished that they had been able to hang on until the political situation eased after Lin Biao's death in 1971. All political movements during the Mao years eventually came to an end, I thought. Didn't the deportees know that their suffering would not be permanent?

Wang Youqin's book shows me how much more I have to learn about what it was like to be a target of persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Groups of teenagers encouraged by Mao Zedong and other top leaders beat, tortured, and imprisoned teachers, homeowners, anyone with a bad political label, and even bystanders and passersby who showed weakness. I had known that this was true in a general sense. But reading the blow-by-blow details of how girls at secondary schools tortured and killed principals, teachers, and vulnerable neighborhood residents by beating them with metal belt buckles in August and September 1966 made it clear how unbearable the experience was for victims. They could wait for the groups of children invading their homes to invent longer and more painful torments involving boiling water, bricks, broken glass, metal wires, and excrement. Or they could seek immediate relief from the torture by choosing their own way to die. Thousands of people jumped from tall buildings (some were pushed by their persecutors). Many others drowned themselves in rivers, lakes, ponds, and swimming pools. Others swallowed sleeping pills, hanged themselves, drank pesticides and other poisons, or cut themselves. In Shanghai, one of the few places in China where residents used gas for cooking at the time, suicide by gassing was a preferred method.

Victims arbitrarily locked up in makeshift prisons were so desperate to end their misery that they chose difficult and painful ways out: one swallowed thumbtacks; another pierced his head with a metal rod. Wang argues that the Cultural Revolution's "suicides were to all intents and purposes murder by revolution" (xx). The evidence she presents is convincing: without the persecution of the Cultural Revolution, how many of the decade's suicide victims would have chosen to end their own lives?

In addition to being "murder by revolution," suicide was also an act of resistance to the arbitrary cruelty of the Cultural Revolution. Chen Mengjin, a poet and archaeologist, told his friend, "I'm not going to be toyed with like a monkey anymore" before killing himself in Beijing in September 1966. Before Peking University professor Jian Bozan and his wife overdosed on sleeping pills in December 1968, Jian wrote the following to Zhou Enlai's office: "The only request I would make is that when I'm struggled, it should be by adults and not children" (381). Jian was a high-profile professor whom Mao repeatedly criticized by name. In Wang Youqin's view, Jian was allowed to make requests because Mao wanted to use him as a negative example. The date of his suicide is worth noting. It shows how misguided I was to wish that victims would have chosen to suffer until the political situation improved. Many victims who were persecuted in 1966 were then locked up, tortured, and sometimes executed in 1968, 1969, or 1970. *Victims of the Cultural Revolution* shows that the era's suicide attempts were avoidable tragedies, but in the context of the time they were reasonable and brave responses to torture.

Wang Youqin's research continues beyond the publication of this book. She is still unearthing and documenting the names and stories of victims on ywang.uchicago.edu and cchrm.org (Chinese Cultural Revolution Holocaust Memorial). Her research has sparked questions for me in three areas: missing pieces and new directions in Cultural Revolution studies, responding to recent scholarship, and vicarious trauma. Wang's project began with Beijing and remains heavily centered on ordinary people in China's capital, meaning that rural victims receive less attention than urbanites. What are the advantages and disadvantages of starting with Beijing? Should rural victims be the next focus of Cultural Revolution research? What about ethnic minorities? Which missing stories and unexplored directions should researchers prioritize next?

Wang's book could be effectively paired with other recently published research on the Cultural Revolution, especially Andrew Walder's *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (along with his earlier articles) and Daniel Leese and Puck Engman's *Victims, Perpetrators, and the Role of Law in Maoist China: A Case-Study Approach.*[2] Walder argues that the state-sponsored terror that tried to stop the excesses of the first two years of the Cultural Revolution was worse than the violence it aimed to curb. Given Walder's findings, how should scholars make sense of the Red Guard movement in relation to the massive state repression that followed? Should Red Guard violence receive less attention than atrocities perpetrated by state authorities in future histories of the Cultural Revolution?

Wang's book discusses how the lawlessness of 1966, when teenagers could beat and kill teachers with impunity, was replaced by a new system, the "triumvirate" of public security, procuratorial and judicial organs. According to Wang, the merging of investigation, prosecution, and judgment "enhanced the efficiency of persecution to a horrific extent" (504). Leese and Engman's edited volume documents surprising continuities between legal practices during and before the Cultural Revolution, depicting a functional legal system that met its aim of strengthening the Chinese Communist Party's dictatorship. How does this idea of a Cultural Revolution legal system affect the way that scholars should view victims and victimization?

In her book, Wang regularly mentions the obstacles and challenges she faced while doing research. Administrators ignored her inquiries, informants got scared and refused to talk, and some commenters callously pointed out that some victims genuinely had problems that made them targets. These are all symptoms of working on a sensitive topic on which an authoritarian regime has closed the door. Another challenge that Wang encountered was the pain sparked by hearing and narrating hundreds of violent deaths. She writes, "when one finally does clarify the facts behind the death, the tragedy and horror plunges one into grief rather than bringing the joy and satisfaction that rewards other kinds of research" (400).

Wang's deep immersion in unimaginable atrocities draws attention to the toll of vicarious trauma for researchers as well as readers of such vital histories as *Victims of the Cultural Revolution*. Each research finding is a gut punch. Each discovery represents someone who should not have died and who could have contributed so much to their family, workplace, and society had their life not been cut short. When I was writing about the Beijing massacre of 1989, the grief of getting to know the victims was often paralyzing. I now find myself declining speaking invitations because I cannot bring myself to revisit the traumatizing stories. If I were to ask Professor Wang about this, I would say, "how have you been able to do this for more than four decades?" But I hesitate to ask because the personal toll must have been immense. I would rather simply thank her for doing this painful work because the scholarly achievement is exceptionally valuable. The world needs to know the names and stories of the victims.

[1] Andrew G. Walder, "Rebellion and Repression in China, 1966–1971," *Social Science History* 38, no. 3–4 (2014): 521. Italics in original.

[2] Andrew G. Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Daniel Leese and Puck Engman, eds., *Victims, Perpetrators, and the Role of Law in Maoist China: A Case-Study Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

Response

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Over the last 40 years, I have collected documents and interviewed survivors of the Cultural Revolution in order to find the victims who have been systematically neglected in China's historical literature.

Violent attacks against teachers occurred in every school without exception, for example, in the 10 girls-only middle schools in Beijing I investigated, three principals and three teachers were beaten to death by their Red Guard students in the so-called "Red August" of 1966. In addition, 63 people at Peking University died due to political persecution, and 16 Chinese scholars who studied at the University Chicago between 1913 and 1950 were tortured to death. Unlike Stalin's "Show Trials," the Chinese "Struggle Sessions" did not even attempt to feign legal proceedings. Unlike the Soviet Union's organized and remote "Gulag Archipelago," the Chinese system of so-called "Cowsheds" were informal jails established at every workplace that not only murdered millions of innocent victims but also poisoned the morality of the Chinese people. Aside from massive persecution, the leaders of the Cultural Revolution planned to build a "new world" without commodity production, distribution according to work, and a monetary exchange economy, all of which the Khmer Rouge completed in Cambodia during 1975-1979 with Chinese government's support. Though my narratives come from Chinese history, I believe the injustice, poverty, and death that the Cultural Revolution caused can serve as a lesson for the world beyond China.