

Another Swimmer

XUJUN EBERLEIN

When I first met He Shu, he wanted to know how my sister Ruo-Dan had died. He was painstakingly collecting historical facts and stories about the pitched battles between rival factions during the Cultural Revolution era in China, and he thought that my sister must have been killed in one such skirmish.

I was visiting my hometown, the booming riverfront metropolis of Chongqing, in August 2006. He Shu was a scholarly man in his late fifties and was working on a book about the city in the late 1960s. We sat at a plastic table at a teahouse downtown—well, not really a teahouse at all, though that was what it called itself, but a café, which served Coca Cola and Sprite, with their names translated into Chinese. It was a far cry from the traditional teahouses I so fondly remember from my youth: square bamboo tables, teapots sporting foot-long spouts that could be poured across a table with never a drop spilled, penny-a-cup “old cool tea,” and chirping, chatty “tea guests” cracking sunflower seeds. Those were gone, replaced by soda shops, like the one where I met He, with prices out of range for the average Chongqing resident. Such a commercialized “teahouse” felt like an unfit place to talk about a tragedy forty years old.

I gave He Shu a copy of the Canadian magazine *Walrus* that contained an essay I had written about my sister’s death. It was not bullets that killed Ruo-Dan. She drowned in July 1968 while commemorating the second anniversary of Chairman Mao’s famous swim in the Yangtze.

Ruo-Dan went into the Jialing River without so much as elementary swimming training. She did not expect that the current would be so rapid. Today's young people might not understand why she did it, but at the time, it was an act of faith, a hearty response to Mao's calling on Chinese youth to be tempered in big rivers, to "learn how to swim by swimming."

Without question, the Cultural Revolution that roiled the country from 1966 through 1976 was one of the biggest disasters in modern China's history. And yet a question continues to bother me: How should I evaluate the role of its many well-meaning young participants, such as my sister? My first meeting with He Shu was a moment for personal and intellectual exploration of the two years of intense violence that engulfed my hometown during the height of the Cultural Revolution. The masses split into two competing factions, each of whom claimed that only they truly understood Mao's words and theories. They engaged in *wudou* (armed fights) that amounted to a civil war. Faction members included not only the student Red Guards but also workers and peasants who called themselves "Rebels," a proud name alluding to Mao's famous maxim "It is right to rebel."

These kinds of factional fights broke out nationwide, but the deadliest battles occurred in Chongqing, in part because it housed many munitions factories. Thousands of people were killed on each side. Both my sister's and my mother's diaries from the time are filled with pages describing the horrors they witnessed: buildings burning, bodies lying on streets, and the gruesome deaths of acquaintances. This period is the subject of the book He Shu was working on when I met him.

. . .

He Shu was born in 1948, three years before Ruo-Dan. Though a native of Chongqing, he was not in town during the conflict, thanks to the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957 when his father was designated a "rightist" for criticizing the Chinese Communist Party. As the son of a rightist, He was not allowed to attend high school and was instead sent to a temporary job at an oil field in the remote mountains of Sichuan Province. In the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, He Shu's oil field shut down and he was sent back to Chongqing, arriving home just as two years of violence in the city was ending. The distance gave him a literary sort of perspective; he saw the grandness of the Cultural Revolution as the perfect subject for an epic novel. To his delight, his father

had collected and neatly bound nearly all of Chongqing's factional tabloids, which published everything from news and political commentaries to essays and poems. The tabloids ceased publication in late 1968, when Chairman Mao began disbanding all factional organizations and dispatching the student Red Guards from the cities to the countryside to be "reeducated" by poor peasants.

In 1970, Beijing launched a new nationwide campaign against "reactionaries," an elastic term, this time aimed at the ex-Rebels who had fought in Mao's name. Chongqing's authorities threatened to severely punish anyone in possession of faction tabloids. The pressure was so great that He's grandmother constantly cried and begged his father to get rid of their papers. He Shu reluctantly unbound the tabloids, picked out a few pages to hide and used the rest for cooking fuel. "It was very painful to see those hard-to-find-again tabloids turning into ashes," he told me.

In 1975, He wrote a screenplay about Chongqing's Cultural Revolution and mailed it to every film production company in China. Rejections and criticism were the only responses he got, the angriest from the E'mei Film Studio in nearby Chengdu, which demanded: "How dare you call Lin Biao 'comrade!'" The media had once hailed Communist Party Vice-Chairman Lin Biao as Mao's "most intimate comrade," but after his plane crashed in Mongolia on September 13, 1971, during an alleged attempt to defect, he could only be referred to as a "bandit." In a scene when Lin is still alive, a character in He Shu's screenplay uses "comrade Lin" instead of the official postmortem damnation, thus violating convention. (When He told me this, we both laughed hard at the absurdity of the rebuke.)

He Shu again started to collect artifacts of the Cultural Revolution in late 1976, after Mao had died and the country had begun to emerge from the chaos of the preceding decade. The deeper into his research he went, the more he realized that "the true historical contents and details are far more complex, exciting, surprising, and hard-to-imagine than fiction." Over time, his focus changed from fiction to history. In 1996, on the thirtieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, his article about foreigners in China (respectfully called "foreign experts") who participated in Rebel factions was published in the Hong Kong journal *21st Century*. Since then, he has been devoted to Cultural Revolution research and writing, both in his capacity as an editor of a Party history magazine—an unusual position for him to hold, because he is not even a Party member—and in his spare time.

In recent years, He Shu has helped many former leaders of Rebel factions write their memoirs to “rescue the folk history” of the era. He talks with urgency about these memoirs: those who remember are getting old and some have already passed away. The writings, without a publisher in mainland China, mostly circulate online among old comrades of the authors and researchers like me.

He Shu’s effort is significant, especially because the Cultural Revolution research, limited as it is, has not given voices to the participants. Only when the mentality of the participants is adequately understood can another such “unprecedented great revolution,” as it was called at the time, be avoided.

• • •

In that first meeting with He Shu, I mentioned a date: July 16. On that day in 1966, the 72-year-old Mao Zedong reportedly swam fifteen kilometers in the Yangtze. It was a show of strength to Mao’s political enemies and signaled the violent high tide of the Cultural Revolution. It also sparked a thought for He.

“Do you know who still swims on July 16?” He Shu said.

I was surprised. “Who?”

“Zhou Rong.”

To use a Chinese idiom, the name struck my ear like thunder. Zhou Rong was a household name when I was a child. His Red Guard group was known to have the most intrepid fighters in Chongqing. Every once in a while, we heard that Zhou had been killed in battle, but somehow he always managed to resurface. I wanted to meet Zhou, the other swimmer. His feelings might help me understand how my sister had felt on July 16.

He Shu said he could arrange a meeting. In Chongqing, the most interesting talks take place at the dining table, so three days later, I reserved a private room in a restaurant across the street from my hotel. I went early, worried that Zhou would not show up. He had been in jail for many years and might still be under police surveillance; meeting with an overseas writer was a sensitive matter.

But Zhou arrived exactly at noon, the agreed time. At his heels were He Shu and an older man, Li Musen, another prominent figure in Chongqing’s Cultural Revolution, who had been a defense factory technician when the fighting began. Nowadays, Li is the self-appointed convener for Chongqing’s old Rebel leaders; they meet annually and on significant birthdays, regardless of which faction they once fought

for. Then, they were irreconcilable enemies, but now they are intimate friends, bound together by shared memories of their grand youth, however painful it was.

All three men wore short-sleeved dress shirts. He's had light-colored checks, Zhou's was textured white, and Li's was bright blue. Li was nearly seventy, the oldest of the group, with a white crew cut. He was the only one wearing shorts and looked fit for his age. My Chongqing accent surprised and pleased Li, who addressed me loudly and respectfully as "Teacher Xu," using my Chinese surname, then, with both hands, presented his business card. On the card were five titles, the first three from the Cultural Revolution era, the fourth his professional rank at retirement, and the last his post-retirement business title:

Vice Director, Chongqing City's Revolutionary Committee

Vice General Commander, Chongqing City People's Militia
Headquarter

Director, the Mediation Committee of Chongqing Jiangling
Machinery Factory

Senior Engineer, Chang'an Automobile Company

Vice General Manager, The 8th Village at Dashiba, North Bank
(Rural Pleasure Resort)

Because of the first title, Li was stripped of his Party membership in 1986, a humiliating punishment at the time.

It was a hot August day in this "furnace city." Notwithstanding the restaurant's air conditioning, each of the men carried a paper fan and waved it in leisurely fashion. While they exchanged absurd political anecdotes from their youth and laughed, I ordered spicy Sichuan dishes and offered them Tsingtao beer. Zhou was the only one who accepted. "I can only drink half a bottle though," he said.

Zhou was a robust, short man with a down-to-earth face that made him look younger than his sixty-one years. His hair, still black, receded slightly at his forehead and his complexion was the peculiar brown of the Yangtze's muddy torrents. A scar about two inches long, a memento of his combative youth, crossed his right cheek.

"Did you go into the river this July?" He Shu asked him, apparently for my benefit.

Zhou replied lightly that his house faced the Jialing River and he swam there almost every day.

“I grew up by the Yangtze. It was a natural hobby,” he explained to me. “I was called a ‘water monkey.’ Wherever I go, I swim.”

“Especially on July 16,” said He Shu.

“July 16 *and* August 31,” Zhou corrected.

August 31 marks the formation of Zhou’s Red Guard group, aptly called the “August 31” organization. On these occasions, he would swim for several hours, wrapping his clothes in plastic bags and dragging them behind him in the rapid water. Sometimes he was able to persuade a companion or two to join him, but more often he swam alone because it was too hard to find anyone who could keep up.

“Every year?” I asked.

“Every year.”

I understood the personal significance of August 31, but I asked him why he still celebrated Mao’s swim. Zhou chuckled, as if it were a funny question.

“This man, Mao Zedong, he was a great man,” Zhou said after a pause. “Even though I disagree with many of his national policies.” Zhou stressed that he wasn’t a blind follower; he had been an independent thinker from a young age, and he was oppressed even before the Cultural Revolution. He was born in 1945 into an impoverished construction worker’s family and was a 21-year-old cross-disciplinary student studying Fine Arts and Chinese Literature at the Southwest Normal College when the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. A bit older than his classmates, he had three years’ experience as an apprentice at a natural-gas plant, where he had been both a “model worker” and a rebellious young man.

Zhou had lived through the anti-rightist campaigns of the late 1950s, experienced three years of famine from 1959 to 1962, and participated in the 1964–65 rural “Socialist Education Movement.” These events had victimized innocent people whom he knew personally, which convinced Zhou that the local bureaucrats were doing something very wrong. Though he never doubted the Party as a whole, his thinking was unorthodox, and he constantly clashed with Party bosses, first at the factory and then at the university. Despite his best efforts, he was never allowed to join the Communist Youth League, let alone the Party. He Shu told me that among the leadership of the August 31 Red Guard group, Zhou was the lone “commoner,” meaning that he had no Party affiliation.

“What the bureaucrats needed were thought slaves, not people who could think for themselves,” Zhou said. “No matter how ‘good’ your

family background, as long as you had your own thoughts, you were ‘the other kind’ in their eyes.”

When Zhou thought about Mao, he was mostly impressed by the daring swim in the Yangtze. “I’ve read lots of biographies of great men in the world, and none dared to go down into a river at that old age. In his seventies Mao could still swim in the Yangtze, in the rapid currents at Wuhan no less!” Smiling, he added: “For one thing, swimming is my hobby. For another, I think his swim, his spirit, encouraged people’s fitness practice nationwide.”

“When Mao Zedong went into the water, how many safety measures had been deployed for him?” Li mocked good-naturedly.

“And you went all by yourself,” He Shu chimed in.

“Mao’s swim had a political agenda,” I said as mildly as I could. “I don’t think his purpose was to encourage people’s fitness practice.”

“There was the political motive at the time,” Zhou agreed. And then he disagreed: “but from a very young age, Mao promoted the idea of a ‘civilized spirit, barbarous body.’”

Zhou’s words reminded me how, as a child, I had enthusiastically recited a poem Mao wrote in his twenties: “Confident of living for two hundred years/Will hit the water for three thousand miles.” I wondered if my big sister had had those lines in mind when she stepped into the churning river and never looked back. I thought of how those well-meaning young people like my sister and Zhou had contributed to a great catastrophe despite their good intentions.

. . .

The Red Guards were never a uniform organization of Chinese youngsters. The majority of groups were self-organized and spontaneous. At the beginning, many had righteous motives. In Chongqing, the earliest Red Guard group was formed by Chongqing University students in the summer of 1966. The death of the university’s well-respected president Zheng Siqun gave rise to the “August 15” faction. Threatened by Mao’s enigmatic call to dig out “lurking capitalists” in their ranks, local Party leaders had denounced the 54-year-old Zheng, a senior revolutionary and devoted educator, as a “black gang element” in an attempt to protect themselves. In the early morning of August 2, 1966, while imprisoned on campus by a city council “work team,” Zheng cut his own throat with a razor blade he had hidden in a volume of *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, one of the few things he had been allowed to bring with him into detention. Outraged students blamed

the Party city council, which they suspected was complicit in Zheng's death. In response, the city council formed another faction called "Mao Zedong Thought's Red Guards," popularly dubbed "Thought Guards," a citywide organization composed of middle school and older children from families loyal to the Party. The two factions, referred to as "Rebels" and "Royalists," fought for months, with verbal debates turning into fistfights.

My big sister Ruo-Dan, a middle school student who grew up to "love the Party, love Chairman Mao," at first saw defending the city council as defending the Party, and became a firm Thought Guard. Little did she and her fellow Thought Guards know that their loyalty to the Party was actually getting in Mao's way. To destroy his political enemies and the ground from which they had sprung, the Great Leader planned to break the entire state apparatus. By January 1967, it became clear that Mao's Cultural Revolution headquarters in Beijing supported the Rebels, not the Royalists. The Thought Guard organizations disbanded, and their members miserably admitted their errors and changed sides.

This development befuddled and agonized my sister. For two months after her fifteenth birthday, Ruo-Dan's diary was filled with accounts of her inner struggles. She wrote about how she had painstakingly convinced herself that she had been on the wrong side, despite her whole-hearted wish to follow Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. On January 27, 1967, she joined the August 15 Rebellion at her middle school near Chongqing University. But the Rebels soon split into new factions, whose fights escalated into civil war.

At Southwestern Normal College, Thought Guards defended school officials, but denounced and beat teachers whom the Rebel students tried to protect. Zhou's August 31 group was formed to oppose the officials. Zhou said that his school's president, Xu Fangting, was notorious for labeling many students "rightists" in 1957 and sending them to labor camps. From the beginning, Zhou thought he understood Mao's purpose in launching the Cultural Revolution: to crush the old bureaucratic apparatus and construct a new, better governing body. That was exactly what Zhou wanted too. He believed that the Party bosses of Sichuan Province and Chongqing City were the principal culprits behind the famine and oppression he had witnessed, and that it was only serving justice to overthrow such authorities.

In January 1967, Chongqing's Rebels seized power. The two Rebel groups, August 31 and August 15, had been allies in the fight against

old authorities and Thought Guards. But once power changed hands, the Rebel factions turned against each other. August 15 members took seats in the new power structure composed of Rebels, army representatives, and select Party cadres from the old government. August 31 labeled the whole thing a “capitalist comeback” that excluded true Rebels, and Zhou’s group became the core of a new faction called the “Crushers.” The conflicts became irreconcilable. Physical fights first broke out among students, and workers, and peasants soon joined in. The violence lasted two years.

Zhou led his group in several famous battles; his scar was the result of Chongqing’s first large-scale “armed fight,” which broke out on his campus. He still believes the conflicts were unavoidable given the historical circumstances. His only regrets are for friends who died or were injured because his faction was not better prepared for the many battles that followed. He regards those comrades as heroes, just like those who died fighting the Japanese or Nationalists in earlier times. This “revolutionary heroism,” He Shu concludes in his book about Chongqing’s armed struggles, was one pernicious consequence of the education system in the Mao era.

Zhou does not hide his fondness for weapons. The fighting gave him the opportunity to play with all kinds of guns, he told me. “What a great joy,” he said. “It really hit the spot!” And he laughed as though he were twenty-one again—the only time I saw him let go completely during our five-hour conversation. “Joy? No matter that someone got killed by your gun?” I asked. He did not take offense. “No one was killed by my hand,” he replied plainly. That, I suppose, does not count those who fought to the death in the battles he led.

Zhou fought for a little over a year. In October, 1970, two years after the fighting had stopped, he was arrested without explanation. At the time, he was an art editor at *Yibin Daily*, a newspaper in a small city up the Yangtze from Chongqing. He received a call at work that his mother was sick. A filial son, he immediately went home to Chongqing where plainclothes police handcuffed him on arrival. On the second day of his arrest, a severe beating by prison staff left him with a broken arm. He had “shouldered everything from ancient torture instruments to a modern yoke” in five different prisons, he told us, chortling. Zhou treated most subjects with jests. “I can write a whole book about China’s prison system,” he said with a chuckle.

Just as he was jailed without charge, Zhou was released without explanation six years later, after Mao’s death on September 9, 1976,

But he was prohibited from returning to his old battleground, Chongqing. *Yibin Daily* took him back again as an art editor. He was good at what he did and repeatedly won awards for the paper. They valued him. He had his own studio, darkroom, and even a yearly vacation, which was rare at the time. But Zhou had changed. One day in 1984, during a business trip to Chengdu, he came across a Chinese translation of Alvin Toffler's 1980 book *The Third Wave*, where he encountered the concept of the "information age." On his return to Yibin, Zhou sent in his resignation. In 1985, at the age of forty, he violated the prohibition on going back to Chongqing to start an advertising and interior-decoration business there, based on Toffler's concept. For the next five years, as an illegal resident of his own hometown, he had frequent run-ins with the authorities who saw him as a political criminal.

Chongqing's Personnel Bureau ordered him to return to Yibin and criticized him for "anarchism." Zhou recalled one conversation this way:

"Anarchism?" Zhou replied with his usual sarcasm. "Then to which government is it that my business taxes have been going?"

"We wouldn't want you to get into trouble again."

"What trouble? Aren't I following our Party's call to develop a private business?"

"Who are you to say 'our Party'!"

"My mistake. Make it *your* Party then."

Tired of the repeated summonses, Zhou wrote a four-line poem in the classic seven-syllable quatrain form ridiculing the government's prohibition of his resident registration. He mailed the poem to the then Party chief of Chongqing, Liao Bokang. About a month later, the local police station summoned him again. He prepared for another arrest. The police reproved him for writing a "reactionary poem," but this time, they permitted his resident registration. There was an instruction from "above," the police said. Zhou's illegal resident status had finally ended, and he was able to run his business and make enough money to feed his wife and three young daughters.

. . .

In April 2011, I visited 87-year-old Liao Bokang at his Chengdu residence to find out why a Party chief would have given a former Red Guard a break. Liao's own history with the Party is ambivalent. In 1963, he was persecuted and sent to do labor reform because he had

secretively reported Sichuan's severe famine to Beijing, contradicting the province's official report. It was two decades before Liao returned to office. I asked if he remembered dealing with Zhou's resident status. Liao, whose mind was still surprisingly sharp, said he knew the name, but the particular incident did not ring a bell. However, if Zhou's letter had been addressed to him, he would most certainly have read it. "I read every letter myself then," he told me. I wondered whether Liao's own experience as a victim of Party bureaucrats had made him more liberal or inspired him with sympathy for the Rebels. When I asked Liao what he thought of the Red Guards, he said, "They were just being young and ignorant, like the Boxers [during the 1989-1901 Boxer Rebellion]."

Zhou was lucky. Many old Rebels came out of prison without job prospects. Some were even prohibited from being employed. The government's lack of "procedural justice," a term often used by Chinese scholars today, reaffirmed Zhou's belief that he had done nothing wrong as a Red Guard. In his view, both his rebellion against the Party bureaucrats and using weapons to defend his beliefs were not only justified, but noble. Zhou still thinks it was Mao who provided him the opportunity to rebel. There are others who feel the same way. In April 2010, about twenty old Rebels gathered at Chongqing's Red Guard cemetery, the only cemetery in China dedicated to people killed in "armed fights" during the Cultural Revolution. He Shu watched their nostalgic speeches and songs. "Their thinking is stuck in the 1960s," he told me when we met again. "They are the products of Communist education." The romanticization of heroism in the Mao era encouraged—even honored—violence, and indoctrination put ideology above law.

When I visited Liao, I also asked whether he thought there might be a repetition of the Cultural Revolution, which he had said candidly should be totally repudiated. "No," he said, "just as the planned economy won't happen again." His optimism surprised me.

It's a common refrain in China that Chinese people cannot afford to let another Cultural Revolution happen because they have too much to lose now. But He Shu thinks differently: "The exact whole situation probably won't repeat," he said to me a week after I met Liao. "But partial repetition is already happening."

As of this writing, Chongqing's current Party boss, Bo Xilai, is pursuing a "red song" campaign, demanding that every work unit sing songs in praise of the Party and the People's Republic of China.

Bo Xilai was born in 1949 into the same generation as Zhou and He, and he was once a Red Guard himself in Beijing. Some of the “red song” singing is spontaneous, but much of it is organized by work units; some even pay their workers to participate. Though singing such songs is not a new phenomenon itself, pushing it as a mass campaign—with government financing—certainly has not been seen in recent decades and is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution.

The legacy of the Cultural Revolution, at least part of it, lives on. He Shu, now retired with a modest pension, engages in his research ever more diligently. He has become a walking encyclopedia of Chongqing’s Cultural Revolution. Day after day, he is busy editing the e-journal *Remembrance*, which the renowned Swedish China scholar Michael Schoenhals describes as the first journal dedicated exclusively to academic research on the Cultural Revolution. “I have no other hobby or indulgence,” He told me. In late 2010, his book *Wei Mao zhuxi er zhan* (Combating for Chairman Mao: A Factual History of Chongqing’s Large-Scale Armed Fights), was finally published in Hong Kong. He had not bothered to look for a mainland publisher.