

06/06/1968

This project is for my grandfather, who died during this “revolution”.

This project is for my grandmother, who kept his picture beside her bed for thirty-nine years afterward, until her own death.

This project is for my mother, for keeping both their memories alive in her children. I thank her for teaching me about this time, the way it really happened, so that I might know the true story of my family, the true story of my people, and the strength and the tragedy inherent in both.



介绍

Introduction

Growing up, my grandfather was always my biggest fan. I was a very difficult child; I was quick to anger and had a hard time with the word “please”. My parents oftentimes had short tempers when it came to dealing with me and though I was an only child for the first twelve years, but I never felt like I was the favorite child of either parent. But that never bothered me, because I knew I was my grandfather’s favorite. Every time my parents would yell at me, I would tell myself, “If my grandfather was here, he’d defend me. He’d tell my father to shut up and my mother to be nice.”

But as the years went on and I got older and progressively more difficult, my grandfather never showed up. He was never there, not when I was born in China, not when I came to the United States, and he certainly isn’t with me today. In fact, I have never seen my grandfather in real life, I have never heard his voice and to be fair, I don’t know for sure if he would like me or not, for he has been dead for almost forty years.

He died when my mother was nine years old. As a child, I would always ask my mother for the details of

his death but she would only say “He died because bad men took him away” and then she’d get angry if I asked any more questions. Now and then, she would say a few words about him as I listened eagerly. I drank up details about him, and used them to create a larger picture of a man who was the best part of my entire family, the best part of me. “He was always so nice to me. Every afternoon, I’d race from school to see if I could beat him to the gate of his company, but he’d always already be there, waiting for me.” I memorized these stories until my grandfather became something quite real in my everyday life. I would talk to him when I got bored, I’d ask his advice on something but end up doing what I wanted to do anyway, and I’d yell at him for not being there when someone bullied me or when my parents yelled at me. Looking back, he was probably the most enduring friend of my childhood. But he was never really there.

When I came to college, my grandfather faded from my life. I think this is because my life just got so much easier after leaving home, and my relationship

with my parents has gotten infinitely better. It no longer feels like the world is against me, so I guess bit by bit, I let go and in his own way, so did he.

Yet after three years he’d gone, he came back to me this past summer. I was in Baotou, a town in Inner Mongolia where my mother grew up. I was volunteering and during that time I stayed with an old family friend, Uncle He from my mother’s elementary school days. The last day, he drove me to the train station. As we pulled onto the expressway, I noticed three tall smokestacks approaching. They were just normal smokestacks, nothing notable about their charred, polluting forms. Then Uncle He pointed at them and said, “That is where your grandfather died” I felt every part of my body recoil as I looked at him and looked at the smokestacks. “What do you mean?” I asked. “Oh you don’t know?” He sounded surprised. “Your grandfather, during the Cultural Revolution...they were really torturing him in every way possible and finally one day he asked to go fetch some water...and climbed the tallest one and...jumped.” “I see.” I didn’t say anything else for the rest of the trip. And

just like that, my grandfather was back in my life.

Something about the sight of those smokestacks triggered an angry reaction inside of me. My grandfather was perfect. He was supposed to be stronger than me. Somehow, after seeing those smokestacks, he stopped being perfect and he stopped being strong. I started to resent him for leaving me because I knew a part of him chose to leave me—and in choosing to leave me, he had also deprived me of a best friend and the feeling of being loved the most by someone. But what angered me the most was that it had to come down to this. At some point, there were people who made him feel that he had no choice but to die. They made his life so bad that he decided to give up everything good he had in this world so he didn’t have to face them anymore.



As I started learning more and more about this time, my anger shifted. I’d taken a Chinese history class before,

but the course did not cover this era in depth. It only offered a vague explanation that Mao wanted to preserve his power and turned the Chinese people against the other leaders. It spoke of people in one area of society turning against another, but that was it. Nothing was said about what actually happened. Not a word about how they tortured him. How they humiliated him. How finally they finally broke him. History did not begin to describe this period that took him away.

Ever since I saw the smokestacks, I have become obsessed with those moments right before he jumped. Part of me desperately wants to know what was going through his mind. Was he thinking about changing his mind? Was he thinking about the additional things he'd have to face if he didn't do it? Was he thinking about what he'd seen? What he would never get to see? Or was he not thinking at all. Maybe by that point, he was already gone. Maybe he'd decided, like one of the men in my posters that "the world was too dark" and moved on to a brighter place.

I decided to do this senior project because I want more than anything to understand why my grandfather did what he did. The posters, which are the end product of my work and research, are expressions of my final impression of this period. They are my struggle to understand what made an entire nation of people turn against itself, what made them develop a cannibalistic thirst for their own blood. I wanted to move past sadness, past anger, and past judgment to be able to truly see what made Chinese

people act this way and what made the men who tortured my grandfather feel justified in doing so. Finally, I needed to know what kind of world my grandfather felt like he was going to have to return to if he didn't jump.



My project comes in two parts: the first being my original impression of the era. I used propaganda images of the period—images that the government wanted the public to see and slogans that the government wanted the people to believe and contrasted them with actual photographs taken during that time. I wanted take two forms of imagery from the time and use them to reveal its hypocrisy and perversion. The first set of whole images are focused on this.

But upon further study of this era, I realized that the words "hypocrisy" and "perversion", though accurate are not sufficient to describe the actions and motives of the Chinese people. I also got a sense of the overwhelming confusion that came with the unstable government of the time. Because Mao only cared about protecting himself, no one knew which leader he would accuse of being counter-revolutionary next, no one knew what his criteria for judgment was, they only knew that it was good to follow Mao and that it was good to be revolutionary. These were the points of reference; this was the ideal

that people had to follow. There was no right or wrong, there was no morality or ethics, there was no up or down for the Chinese people unless the Chairman said there was. Along with this uncertainty, people also dealt with an overwhelming fear that they would be the next victims of the viciousness of the Red Guards. The tides changed so quickly that people only knew to follow the crowd to ensure their own survival.

This is the idea for my second set of posters—the clear images of the first set of posters are now fragmented, inverted, and turned upside down, just like the politics and lives of the Chinese people at the time. Because it is hard to tell what is going on, it is also hard to tell who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. Though one can tell that a horrible thing is happening, it has become hard to pass individual judgment on the people doing the act. These posters are my attempt to give some sort of explanation for why this happened, without resorting to the simple explanation that my mother has always given me: "These people are just evil."



I am still somewhat confused. However, I think I am closer to understanding this time period than I was before. I am closer to forgiving most of the Chinese for doing this to my grandfather, or at least I can sleep easier at night having

shed some of the anger I carried before.

In the end, I hope my project accomplishes two things: First, that it engages some members of the audience to study this time period further. The Chinese government has distorted the facts of this era to the point that the story they tell to Chinese schoolchildren has no semblance to what actually happened at this time. This alarms me because if a people do not know the truth about what their country has gone through, then how will they ever prevent such terrible atrocities from happening again? If they blindly revere their government, how will they see what the government is doing wrong? The scores of people who died during this period deserve to be remembered by the Chinese people accurately and by the world with more than just a few sentences in a history textbook. Anything less and they would have died for nothing.

Second, I hope that my grandfather likes what I've done. I hope he finds this work a fair tribute to his memory. I hope he knows that though he died a long time ago, he is still very much alive in me and I will make sure that he is never forgotten.

A note about the title: June 6th 1968 is the date of my grandfather's death.

热爱劳动热爱生产

Embrace hard work, embrace productivity.

Another popular slogan during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution which encourage the peasant population to work harder and aspire to higher levels of productivity.



Here a mother and daughter are pulling a raft (probably carrying dirt or rocks) upstream. During the Great Leap Forward, and for much of the Cultural Revolution, the Party commissioned projects which required huge amounts of technology and manpower. To make up for the lack of technology, China poured the muscles of its peasant workers like this family shown here. Their plight was compounded by the fact that there was never enough food because provincial leaders exaggerated production figures, causing more and more grain to be collected and sent to the central government.

As this trend continued the people who of rural China, malnourished and forced to do backbreaking work for the glory of China, died by the millions.



A gift for Chairman Mao
Artist: Gao Ruqian
Ninxia People's Publishing House, 1963

“We must firmly implement the Chairman’s instructions, whether we understand them or not. We must believe in the Chairman’s innate genius, in his wisdom and in his intelligence, always ask him for instruction and then act accordingly, never interfering in big matters or bothering him with trifles.”

– Lin Biao

Leader of the People’s Liberation Army at the time of the Cultural Revolution

人人有吃有穿

Food and Clothing for all.

A typical slogan of the government purporting the non-existent prosperity of the time.



Shown here is a train full of Chinese refugees, new to Hong Kong in 1962. Immediately after their arrival, they are begging for food. The Chinese government, fearing criticism from the Soviet Union, concealed the devastation and loss of the Great Leap Forward from its citizens in the cities and especially from foreign countries. When Chinese refugees arrived outside of China, their stories were never believed or publicized. The entire world was kept in the dark by state issued slogans and images of great prosperity.



Picking Tomatoes
Artist: Wang Weishu
Shanghai People's Publish House, 1960

The government would give each peasant 180 kilos of coarse grain. When it was ground into meal, it became 90 kilos. This was not enough and when winter came, most of the peasants ran out of meal and money. They took to begging. Entire villages would go to the cities to beg for food. I remember going to visit my relatives in the country and they made a meal for me; a soup of “vegetables” they found boiled with a handful of rice. It was disgusting, but I ate it anyway because I knew that to them, this was an honorary feast.

*– Shusen Zhang (my father)
Phone Interview, 4/21/08*

社会主义好

Communism is Great!

A popular slogan during this time period, typical shouted at rallies and criticisms.



The man pictured in the dunce cap here is Luo ZiCheng, the former head of the work group assigned by the provincial Party committee. At the start of the cultural revolution, work groups were assigned to local schools in order to teach people the proper way to denounce and struggle those who ran counter to the revolution. They were then recalled because they were considered too restrictive of the students' passions, in other words, they tried to restrain violence and indecent behavior (sexual assault) at criticism rallies. Some of the higher-ups of these work groups were later denounced.

Here Luo is charged with "following the capitalist line and opposing the mass movement." His attempt at educating the young was not appreciated.



**"Follow Chairman Mao; The world is red all over."
Artist Unknown; 15" x 21"
Shanghai People's Press, 1967**

In a whirl of conflicting emotions, students cudgeled their brains as to how to find fault with classroom teachers, with whom in many cases they had bonded. They did not want to humiliate them too drastically, but equally they wished to avoid criticism from their peers for being only indifferently revolutionary. They were also conscious that if, as so often before, there was a sudden change of direction in the movement, they could well become the targets of vengeful teachers, who had considerable power over their future educational or vocational prospects.

– Macfarquhar & Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*
"The Fifty Days," page 68

儿童是革命的希望

Children are the future of the Revolution.

A slogan used in schools to mobilize young students all over the country to criticize and terrorize their teachers and friends.



Although the Great Leap Forward cost the nation millions of lives, there was an attempt on all levels of the state to keep up appearances and uphold the ideology of the revolution. Children from the (politically) best families were recruited to perform in dance troupes. These troupes were paraded in public, performing choreographed dances with wooden rifles and singing patriotic songs.



Everyone is a soldier in defence of the fatherland
Artist: Wen Yizhi
Shanghai People's Publishing House; 1968

Everyone was crazy. The whole country was crazy. There was no good, no bad, no ethics, and no morals. To be “revolutionary” was the highest good. People were out of control, drunk on vague ideas of revolution and this was the result.

– Wei Su
Interview, 3/03/08

这就是我们的革命

This is our Revolution.

A popular slogan said by students during the Cultural Revolution.



The man at the center of this photograph is Ouyang Xiang. He was the son of Ouyang Qin, who was the first secretary of Heilongjiang's provincial Party committee. Because of his position, Ouyang Qin was one of the first targets of the Red Guards. Eventually Qin got the protection of Zhou Enlai, an old friend, and was spared his life.

His son, however did not receive such protection. He was charged of writing an anonymous letter to the provincial revolutionary committee in defense of his father. His handwriting was identified, and he was charged of being a counterrevolutionary. Struggle sessions were held for him and during one of those, he tried to shout the slogan "Long Live Chairman Mao," but was quickly censored by a Red Guard who stuffed a glove in his mouth.

He died several days late after being pushed out of the third-storey window of his detainment facility. His death was ruled a suicide.



Chairman Mao is our red sun
Artist Unknown
Publisher Unknown, Early 1960's

You think you have “guts”? You think that you are brave? In my entire experience of that time, I did not meet one person was “brave” as you call it. But maybe you are, maybe you would have acted differently from the rest of us at the time. But at that time, that wasn’t called “brave”, that was called “reckless”, that was even called “selfish” because you’re not only destroying your own life, but also the lives of everyone associated with you.

Remember, you are only as brave as your society lets you be.

*– Qiong Li (my mother)
Phone Interview, 2/06/08*

百花齐放,百家争鸣

Let a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools of thought contend.
A slogan used at the beginning of the Communist Revolution by the Party to encourage criticism of the government.



The two people being criticized here are Wang Yilun, Party Secretary and Li Xia, the wife of Li Fanwu, the governor of Heilongjiang. He was accused of being a “counterrevolutionary element”, for committing incest, and for sporting a haircut that too much resembled Chairman Mao’s and as a result his whole family suffered for it. Naturally, at the first criticism session, his hair was shorn off with shears manipulated to tear the hair, rather than cut and his wife is here shown having had ink spilled all over her body. The members of the Li family were criticized over two thousand times during the course of the cultural revolution.

However, the most permanent damage to this family were the allegations of incest which the Red Guards forced the eldest daughter to write. Till the day he died, Li refused to see his daughter; even in his will he stipulated that she was barred from attending his funeral.



Getting ready or military exercises
Artist: Zhao Jinlong
Tianjin People’s Art Publishing House, 1976

Looking back, I think I can understand the people who followed the crowd to the public self-criticisms. Maybe they acted out of fear or maybe they were just confused. They might not be bad people. But for as long as I live, I can't understand those that actually beat people, that actually tortured people, that pushed your grandfather to kill himself. I have no explanation for those people. Maybe China at the time was a place filled with bad people. Or maybe this is really how all people are, maybe deep down this is how they've always wanted to treat other human beings.

*– Qiong Li (my mother)
Phone Interview, 2/06/08*

毛主席万岁

Long Live Chairman Mao.

A popular patriotic slogan during this time, usually followed by "long live the People's Republic of China."



Pictured here is the aftermath of a public execution. At this time, executions were becoming a common form of punishment in the cultural revolution. The condemned consisted of four men who were charged with common crimes, a woman and her lover who had killed her husband. Another two men were charged of being "counterrevolutionaries". As engineers, they were accused to writing an article titled "Looking Northward", the title was interpreted to mean that China should look to Russia as a model. Deemed "revisionist", these two were quickly condemned to die.

One of the convicted counterrevolutionaries, named Wu Bingyuan, shouted "世界太暗了" or, "the world is too dark" after his sentence was read. He then shut his eyes for the rest the journey.



Serve the people wholeheartedly

Artist: Shen Daci

People's Art Publishing House, early 1970's

Mao craved a measure of measure of catalytic terror to jump-start the Cultural Revolution. He had no qualms about the taking of human life. In a conversation with trusties later in the Cultural Revolution, the Chairman went so far as to say: "This man Hitler was even more ferocious. The more ferocious the better, don't you think? The more people you kill, the more revolutionary you are."

– Macfarquhar & Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*

"The Red Guards," page 102

敢想敢干

Dare to think, Dare to act.

A popular slogan during the Great Leap Forward, where peasants were encouraged to form communes and increase production levels, later appropriated for the Cultural Revolution for students to speak out against their teachers.



At the height of the Cultural Revolution, every kind of order was replaced by pure confusion. Rival factions formed in competition of who were the “real” revolutionaries and who were just pretending. Ideological differences regarding what to do with the government now that all power structures had been destroyed led to violent clashes and a renewed onslaught of accusations and criticisms depending on who had the upper hand at the time.

Here a leader of a rebel faction is being denounced for a run-of-the-mill anti-revolutionary crime. He is being criticized in the same spot that leaders of another rival faction group were criticized a week before.



Answer the call of Chairman Mao with determination and support the revolution in the countryside.

Artist Unknown

Shanghai People's Art Publish House, 1970's

“There was this female comrade, she also killed a bunch of kids with a knife. I killed five—one got it in the waist, the second, third, and fifth one in the back, and number four in the neck. They were all maybe eight, nine years old. Killing a young boy would get you 20 yuan. For killing a “Combat Team” member, you got 50 yuan. For killing an enemy of the Hongwubing (Red Guards), you got 50 yuan. For the people you killed, you picked up the money from the chiefs of the Hongwubing. We got the weapons we used to kill people from the Hongwubing during drills in the Jiangnan Public Park.”

—Testimony of a seventeen-year-old Wuhan high school “Million Heroes” mercenary

党的光辉照我心

The warmth of the Party reflects the warmth of my heart.

A popular slogan at the time.



The prisoner waiting to be executed is Wang Shouxin, Party branch secretary and manager of Bin county Coal Company. After the Cultural Revolution and the prosecution of the Gang of Four was complete, most of the other officials involved during this time escaped with their jobs and lives intact. However, Wang was one of the few who did not escape the turning of the tide. She was tried and convicted for the embezzlement of over one hundred thousand dollars from the local government.

Before her execution sentence her jaw was dislocated so she could not proclaim her innocence. Her trial and conviction were intended to be seen as a triumph of the government in righting the wrongs of the decade before.



Support the rural population and serve 500 million peasants

Artist Unknown

Publisher Unknown, Late 1960's

Were there any good people in the (Cultural) Revolution? We were all looking for good people. But then we realized when a good person does a terrible thing, they could no longer be called good anymore. Then where were we supposed to look?

– Wei Su
Interview, 3/03/08

爹亲娘亲不如毛主席亲

Chairman Mao is dearer to us than mother and father.

The last line of a letter from my aunt to my mother in July of 1968 reacting to the news of their father's death.



This is a picture of my grandfather taken in 1964, four years before he died. Educated in Manchuria and The Naval Academy in Maryland, he worked as an engineer for a government defense company designing tanks and warheads. Because of his high level of education and rank in his company, he was particularly vulnerable to criticism during the Cultural Revolution.

He was arrested by the Red Guards in May of 1967 and imprisoned from then on. During his imprisonment, he faced constant torture and public criticism. On June 6, 1968 he asked the guard if he could go fetch a pail of water. When given permission, he left the prison, walked past the public well, and onto the closest tall structure, which happened to be a set of smokestacks. He climbed up the tallest one and then jumped down, killing himself. My mother was 9 years old at the time.



**A view of the Baotou smokestacks
Present Day**

*“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”*

– Maya Angelou

