

Chairs And Stools: Wu An'na's Recollection In The New York Times

Extract from 'Readers Respond: The Cultural Revolution's Lasting Imprint', *New York Times*, 16 May 2016.

Wu An'na, 55, Guangzhou, China

'I was 5 years old when the Cultural Revolution started. Even though my parents were locked up and father was often taken out to witness executions and be mock executed, fortunately they both survived. My sister and I didn't die and weren't lost. Compared to others around us, we were lucky in bad times. There's too much to say, but I do want to write about my little finger. Because grandfather was a general in the Kuomintang and mother's family lived overseas, during the Cultural Revolution we were a "target of the revolution." We were raided and my parents locked up. Our nanny was sent back to the countryside because having a servant was considered exploitation. But before she left, nanny took my 2-year-old sister with her, worried that she wouldn't survive without adults.

Left without a family, I set out to look for my parents. I had no idea if they were alive or dead. All I could do was go to the struggle sessions and see if I could find them. Because I was small I always took a small stool. I would stand on it to see the people on the stage.

Once when I heard that father's college was having a struggle session, I took my stool and rushed over. Before I'd had a chance to see who was on the stage I saw a colleague of father's, his two arms tied behind him, kneeling on the ground, a student struggling against him and kicking him in the stomach. I heard a horrible cry and he fell to the ground in pain. I was terrified and, picking up my stool, ran away. In my panic I slipped and the stool crushed the bone of my right small finger. Hospitals wouldn't take someone like me so I found a piece of cloth and bound it. By the time I found my parents, my finger couldn't be straightened.

In the 1990s, when the Cultural Revolution had been over for 20 years, I met that man again. I asked him about that scene and he was surprised. He said, "You were only five. How can you remember so clearly?" I said, "It's etched in my bone. I can't forget." He said that his liver had been ruptured and he nearly died. Thanks to a kind herbal doctor he lived.

And he said one thing else. After the Cultural Revolution, the student who kicked him was up for promotion to a leadership position and the organization [the Communist Party] came to him to check if that person had been one of the "Three Kinds of People" [instigators of rebellion, supporters of the Gang of Four or "beaters, smashers and looters"]. Because if he was, he couldn't be promoted.

I was very surprised and exclaimed, "Of course he was a Three Kinds of People! I can prove it!" But this man said, "I didn't tell the investigators what he did at the time. On the contrary, I said good things and he was promoted."

I was angry and asked, "How could you? You forget that you nearly died. And what about my finger?" He said, "You can't destroy a young person's future. Let the past be the past." And he added, "Child, I have been working hard at learning forgiveness. You should too."

I didn't know what to say. True, people should learn to let go of bitter experiences and learn to forgive those who have hurt them. But if we do, will those who caused damage in the Cultural Revolution ever be punished? If there is no punishment, would those who committed violence

voluntarily change and become good people?

Later I learned that many people who experienced the Cultural Revolution chose forgiveness, silence and forgetting. Because they had deep wounds in their hearts, and to bring this up again would reopen those wounds. So many people like us quietly celebrated the fact that we survived.

When I look at my crooked finger, I don't know what to do. Sometimes I think it's too tiny and not worth anything. But people are not grass or trees, and my finger isn't iron. It's flesh and blood and connects to my heart. Fifty years ago it hurt, and today it still can. It often hurts quietly.'

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