

# **Mao was My Neighbour: Yao Zhongda and the “Opening” of Chinese Adult Education**

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## **Abstract**

*After Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 reform and opening, foreigners had a chance to see adult education in China. As a result, many met Yao Zhongda, Chief of the Bureau of Workers’ and Peasants Education. From 1921 onwards, adult education has been a vital corollary of Communist revolution. Although Yao’s biography was extremely relevant to what foreigners saw, few knew much about their host. Yao made enthusiastic responses to Roby Kidd’s efforts to “open” China to the Toronto-based International Council of Adult Education. By 2013, he was 88 years old. The primary purpose of this paper was to capture his biography and reflect on what it means for 21st century China. A secondary purpose was to alert Beijing scholars to the importance of this key actor in the colourful drama of globalization and adult education in China.*

*Key words: Chinese communism; revolutionary adult education; People’s Liberation Army; biography; family; International Council for Adult Education*

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### Not a Prophet in His Own Land

By 2013, Yao Zhongda was 88 years old, and still an outstanding figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese adult education. For many foreigners, Yao was their first contact with China. In contrast, the current inhabitants of the Zhongnanhai leadership compound (at the Forbidden City), along with Chinese university scholars, have been slow to manifest any interest in Yao. He is the Norman Bethune of China, better known abroad than at home. Near his Fengtai apartment building, pile drivers hammer at the pillars of China's modernization. As the old soldier-turned-cadre ambles up dusty lanes to reach his favourite fruit market, he sees neighbourhood friends and acquaintances but is ignored by university scholars. Ageism explains part of the neglect, but what else?

There are three mostly incompatible social systems inside China. First, there is *third world* China, which depends upon family ties largely beyond official control. Third world China echoes rural life and was reinforced by communes and the hukou residence card system. Second, there is *socialist China* – the Maoist world built within danwei (former work units) where status depended upon rank. It exists in all cities, but particularly the Northeast. Third, there is *newly-industrializing China*, obsessed with markets, exports, money, and progress through competition. Power depends on guanxi (connections) lubricated by cash (Madsen, 2003).

University scholars, particularly in Beijing, are more affiliated with the third than either of the other two social systems. Because of his Hebei childhood, Yao understands life in third world China. He also has links to the other two but no strong affiliation with any, hence, the disjunction between his position and the interest of university scholars.

Chinese scholars are increasingly called upon to contribute to newly industrializing China and the quest for modernization. Most universities are being built on commercial imperatives. Although adult education has a very colourful history, it has increasingly been sidelined by training, human resource development (HRD), lifelong learning, or techno-zealotry wherein everyone learns on a computer. In addition, leading Chinese universities are playing in the global rankings game, endeavouring to become “world-class” and ruminating about how to build a learning ethos inside teacher centred pedagogy.

Most Chinese scholars are wedded to “scientific civilization” within an objectivist ontology, and not enthused by studying daily life and dilemmas of individual Chinese. Post-liberation literacy programs launched from Zhongnanhai, and the efforts of the Ministry of Education or Chinese Adult Education Association are part of a rapidly fading past. While fascinating for foreigners, they bear little relationship to so-called modernization or preoccupations of universities endeavouring to be world class.

Instead of adult education or literacy for citizenship, China now wants to build the biggest learning society in the world (Boshier & Huang, 2006). Where once there was innovative and very large-scale adult education, there are now unclear commitments to lifelong learning and attempts to be at the front of UNESCO efforts to develop learning city indicators. Hence, Yao does not attract much interest. But, for Canadian adult educators interested in “opening” China in the 1980s, he had an unrivalled view of adult education for revolution at the highest levels of the Chinese state.

### **Mutual Misunderstanding**

Senior civil servants involved with adult education usually lurk at the periphery of political life. Yet, in Maoist China, adult education was considered the key pillar of revolution. In 1954, Yao Zhongda, the man at the apex of Chinese adult education, moved into the Zhongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing's Forbidden City. Neighbours there included Premier Zhou Enlai and, a bit further away, Chairman Mao.

From 1949 until 1976, it was hazardous for Chinese to have contact with foreigners and adult education focussed on literacy, production, 5-year plans, and rooting out "rightists." Mao died in 1976 and, starting in 1978, China opened to the world. At first, Yao watched what he said to foreigners. Later, there were frank exchanges and numerous trips abroad.

A visiting delegation was taken to Yao Zhongda, after calling on the Minister of Education. For the first time since 1949, Chinese could interact with foreigners (or "foreign devils" as they were labelled in the Mao era). During a May, 1978, question-and-answer session, a member of an Adult Education Association (USA) delegation asked if the Cultural Revolution had eliminated illiteracy. Imagine Yao's horror when his interpreter said, "yes ... illiteracy was eliminated by the Cultural Revolution" (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

The careless (lying or terrified) interpreter was only a small manifestation of larger difficulties in relationships between China and the West. Chinese ignorance concerning foreigners was more than matched by naive anti-communism and fanciful ideas in the West. Even so, the Toronto-based International Council for Adult Education wanted to engage with China. This meant working with Yao Zhongda. But, who was this agent of Chinese adult education? According to birth order theory, being the 4<sup>th</sup> born, he was in a socially disadvantaged position. So how did a man like him come to have Mao Zedong as a neighbour?

### **Purposes of the Study**

The purposes of this study were to:

- Create a narrative account of the socio-political biography of Yao Zhongda, a key figure in Maoist and post-Mao adult education in China.
- Explain how, despite war and revolution, the 4<sup>th</sup> born son of a Hebei farmer ascended to the top rungs of the Chinese civil service and, as such, became a key player in the globalization of Chinese adult education?

### **Methodology**

The task here was to build a biography from interviews with Yao Zhongda, relatives, and friends. The first interviews were conducted over a ten-day period in a cold Beijing winter and spread out so as to avoid exhaustion. The author (and a Beijing interpreter) mostly alternated interview "on" and "off" days. During "on" days the author talked with Yao. During "off" days, the author made transcripts and created new questions. Copies of questions – written in English and Chinese –

were given to Yao before each session. The most recent interview was during the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in December of 2012.

Interviews were conducting in Chinese and captured on a digital recorder. Then, recordings were emailed to Vancouver colleagues for safekeeping. Half the interviews were conducted in Yao's 9<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in Beijing while others were in a quiet room at a neighbouring hotel. As work advanced, Yao produced photograph albums, papers, and maps.

This was the first time the author had set aside ten days to interview one person and, as Yao's story unfolded, it felt like the right approach. Before this article was finalized, a Chinese version of the manuscript was read to him to which he made corrections. Then the article was read to him again. He does not agree with all the interpretive aspects of this article. But, throughout the process, Yao Zhongda, the author and a Beihang University doctoral graduate worked hard to get the biographical details correct. This study involved an interview methodology and document analysis – all located in an interpretivist perspective.

### **Farm Boy from Tangxian**

How did a boy from a small revolutionary Hebei village survive a Japanese invasion, civil war, and communist revolution to become a key actor in Chinese adult education? In China, it is common to claim movements for change arise from the "thoughts" of the emperor – sage and otherwise – and rare to ascribe much importance to ordinary citizens. Hence, the biography is not well developed. But, in this case, Yao's family background explains a lot.

#### ***Impoverished Village***

Yao Zhongda was born in 1925 in Yaojiazuo village in Tangxian County, Hebei, a strategically important province with important battlegrounds and mountain passes (Hutchings, 2000). In the 1930s, Japanese invaders marched into Hebei to protect Manchukuo, their puppet state to the north. But, because of disorganization and shortages, Japanese control was restricted to railways and cities. Hence, communists administered territory behind Japanese lines.

Yaojiazuo village was just east of the Taihang Mountains - the site of ferocious battles between communist and Japanese soldiers. When Yao was a boy there were about 100 families in the village. The area would receive international attention after 1938 when Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune tended to wounded soldiers in communist armies. Bethune died in Yu, the landlord's house at Huangshikou (Yellow Stone) village – about 100 kms from Yao's place – at 5:20 a.m., 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 1939 and was buried at Zucheng in a remote part of Tangxian. Yao Zhongda does not recall meeting Bethune. But, living in a communist village in a war zone close to Japanese command posts and Wutai mountains gave life an unusual focus and edge.

The Yao farm consisted of 20 mu (about 3.29 acres). They farmed 13 mu (about 2.14 acres); the remaining 7 mu (about 1.15 acres) were leased to a tenant. They lived in a mud-brick (adobe) house that had been in the family for several generations. There were small rooms, no windows along the back and a larger room at the front. It was 20 miles to Fangshui, the nearest market town. Xiankou Township was closer but the way there was impeded by mountains.

Hence, when Yao and his mother used a donkey to take persimmons to the market, they went to Fangshui.

The family had a pig, donkey, a cow, and laying hens who wandered through the house. They used a wood fire for cooking and there were unrelenting searches for firewood. Lighting was by candle. They had no irrigation and, despite Herculean efforts and the reasons explained by Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden (1991), their land produced only meagre crops.

### ***Family Background***

Three notable (English language) books describing life in Hebei counties provide a firm foundation for understanding Yao's childhood and the seductions of a revolutionary life. The first is Gamble's (1954) 1926 to 1933 study of Tsing Hien, Hebei. The second is the analysis of Raoyang County (Friedman, Pickowicz, & Selden, 1991) which explained why children from old elites joined a resistance program committed to tax reform, fighting Japanese, and developing dignity and security for all. The third is Gatu (2008) who analyzed wartime battles and conditions in Hebei villages.

Yao's grandfather was an elite member of Hebei society and, as a result, Yao Zhongda's father received some formal education at an old-style private school. Han Xiuying, Yao's mother, had bound feet and no formal education. Even so, her family also had cultural capital. She was deeply committed to education and a crucial force in Yao's upbringing.

In Mao's (1933) China there were five class labels – landlord, rich peasants, middle peasants (“old”, “new”, and “well-to-do”), poor peasants, and workers. Yao's parents were middle “well-to-do peasants” and thus much worse off than Mao's “rich peasant” parents. The label attached to families determined how they were treated during the Great Leap Forward where it was a catastrophe to be labelled a landlord.

Yao was 4<sup>th</sup> born in a six-child family. In 1940, at age 15 years, he was called home from school because his father was dying from heart disease. During interviews with the author he first dismissed the significance of his father's death “because China was at war and there were many fatherless families” (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009). But, when pressed, he talked at length (and in nuanced ways) about the impact of the missing father. With his dad gone, there were more chores, Yao's mother had a bigger influence on her son and they developed a deep and enduring relationship. In addition, during teenage years, Zhongda increasingly depended on his big sister (Yao Chunyue).

### **Joys of School**

Yao's mother gave the children the option of school or farming. At age 8 years, Zhongda ambled over to the communist primary school less than 500 metres from their home. There were two classrooms and a room for the teacher residence. Teacher Wang, a man, would dart back and forth between two classrooms – each containing about ten pupils. Later Yao went to the higher primary school (Grades 5 & 6) in a village about 1 km from Yaojiazuo. There were no reading materials or electricity. If paper was needed, it had to be negotiated with the teacher. Nobody had

a book, map, or magazine. Information was slow to reach the village. Rumours were plentiful and dangerous.

Yao adored going to school and wrote neat Chinese characters. Handwriting is highly valued in China. He also liked mathematics and Chinese language and writing. Schools were controlled by the communist underground but Yao had no idea the Party was a special organization. Communism was just the way life was lived. He had a 1.5 metre long stick for military drill but, being not much higher than the weapon, did not look like a formidable fighter. He was 11 years old on 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 1936, when Chiang Kaishek was kidnapped by his own men. The Xi'an Incident was underway and a nationalist-communist United Front would soon form to face Japanese invaders. He also vividly recalls the 7<sup>th</sup> July of 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which launched the Japanese invasion of China.

Living in Jin-Cha-Ji, he was at the centre of major battles but had a feeling Japanese armies would not have resources needed to subdue a large country like China. Even so, having to run into hills every time Japanese soldiers approached meant schooling was a hit-and-miss process. However, lurking in trees watching Japanese armies march through the village gave life an edge not experienced by youngsters in safer cities to the south. It also created a strong sense of solidarity amongst villagers. Although deadly serious, today, more than 70 years later, Yao giggles when he recalls hiding from Japanese soldiers (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

### ***Warlord Army***

In 1936, his 18 year old brother (Yao Zhongxuan) left home, joined the warlord army of Yan Xishan, and mailed back a photo of himself (in uniform). For the next eight years, the family did not know if he was alive or dead. Big brother had moved to Yan'an in 1937 where he studied at the Marxist-Leninist Institute and learned to speak Russian. As Yao Zhongda recalled,

I was at the North China University in Zhangjiakou. A train was arriving from Yan'an with troops going to the northeast. I had a feeling big brother was in the area and hung around the railway station. One day, just after a movie, I was on a street and twice heard my nickname. I turned and there was my brother. We were both very excited. I wanted to skip university and go with him. He wanted us to know he was alright. (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009)

In 1938 the Japanese army passed through Yao's village en route to battles in the Wutai Mountains. Villagers removed animals, grain, and themselves to the mountains. Yao watched Japanese marching through valleys below. Communist militiamen told them when it was safe to go home. Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune and New Zealand nurse Kathleen Hall were active in the area. The Wutai Mountains were the place where famed Jin-Cha-Ji army commander Nie Rongzhen built his reputation for "sudden attack and elusiveness" (Rigg, 1951, p. 6).

With his Yan'an pedigree, big brother rose to become a battalion commander responsible for 3000 men in the People's Liberation Army. After 1949, he was a trusted Party official with very big responsibilities.

### *Jin-Cha-Ji Revolutionary Middle School*

Behind Japanese lines, communists established schools and organs of government. After primary school, Yao Zhongda wrote an exam and was admitted to the Jin-Cha-Ji middle (secondary) school. There were no schoolrooms or books (except for those captured from nationalists), and teaching materials were printed on mimeograph machines.

The school owned one rifle (made in the famous Hanyang armoury in Wuhan) and, at night, students stood “guard duty” against Japanese. Yao excelled at mathematics, language, and writing. He liked breaking-down and reassembling the Hanyang rifle. Classes were held in village homes or on the ground. Yao and his classmates carried their belongings in a blanket. “It was a half-military life .... We would put down our packages, sit and classes began” (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Yao had only ever lived with his own family and considers middle school the “hardest period” of his life. However, it was a worthwhile introduction to collectivity which became a pillar of communist orthodoxy. Middle school was a “glorious” experience and he is shocked to hear some 21<sup>st</sup> century children do not like teachers and drop out of school (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

### *Northern China United University*

In 1943, millions of northern Chinese died when drought was followed by Japanese plundering grain (Friedman, Pickowicz, & Selden, 1991). In 1943, harvests amounted to almost nothing. In families with a lot of mouths to feed, ways had to be found to reduce the burden. In 1944, Yao was 19 and assigned to work a mimeograph machine at a half-work and half-study university created by the Communist Party. His job was to prepare and run stencils on the printing machine. He learned a lot from reading textbooks prior to making stencils, and when proof copies arrived, he had to correct errors. He also took courses on Marxist logic. This was a defining moment and he feels his adult education career started in the mimeograph shop at North China United University.

Japan surrendered the war with the United States on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, 1945 after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Mimeographed sheets were produced to spread the news. In north China, Lin Biao’s armies grabbed vast quantities of sophisticated Japanese weaponry. Peasant fighters would soon have something more lethal than a stick. At the time Yao was aware of secret meetings to which he was not invited. Because North China United University was communist, he assumed he was automatically a Party member. But, he was not in the Communist Party and a decision would soon be needed.

### **People’s Liberation Army and Road to Beijing**

On 28<sup>th</sup> of August, 1945, Mao Zedong climbed into an aircraft for his first ever flight. The Chairman was leaving Yan’an bound for Chongqing and American-inspired negotiations to end

the conflict between nationalists and communists. After 46 days, negotiations failed and the Chinese would now fight each other.

Yao joined the Communist Party and People's Liberation Army. The university staged a farewell ceremony where he rode a horse while wearing a red rose. He reached an army base in October 1945 where they had run out of uniforms for small men like him. The only thing available was an officer level uniform with four (rather than the normal two) pockets. As well, Yao was given jodhpurs – normally reserved for officers with a horse.

The short new soldier sauntered into the mess hall wearing the 4-pocket uniform. How could a newcomer like him get such a fast promotion? Even now, years after these events, he chuckles at consternation created by the uniform and rummages in the closet to find relevant photographs. Yet, what happened was congruent with Yao's fast-developing duties in the People's Liberation Army and Communist Party.

By July 1946, there was heavy fighting throughout China, and attempts to negotiate a truce were going nowhere. Communists and nationalists were in a final struggle for control. Yao was appointed Technical Secretary in the Political section, Department of Supplies, Jin-Cha-Ji military region. As an "intellectual" he was not a front-line fighter and normally 20 kilometres back from the front. He was well-organized and his job was to ensure needed supplies went where they were needed.

After two years in his first posting, Yao was transferred to the 18<sup>th</sup> regiment of the Jin-Cha-Ji army. The Officer in Charge was Xu Xiangqian and, while in the 18<sup>th</sup> regiment, Yao formed a lifelong relationship with Hu Yaobang – later to become a progressive Secretary-General of the Communist Party of China. After the Cultural Revolution, Hu and Yao were friends and Yao went to Hu's Beijing home. This friendship strongly suggests Yao was in a "reformist" Party faction.

### ***Beijing Bound***

Yao Zhongda was at Baoji (near Xi'an) on 1st of October, 1949 when Mao went to Tiananmen to announce formation of the People's Republic of China. Hu Yaobang represented the 18<sup>th</sup> regiment at Tiananmen festivities. But, orchestrating a revolution was not the same as running a government and communists soon faced complex dilemmas of victory (Brown & Pickowicz, 2007).

By 1950, Yao's army days were over and he was sent to a foreign-owned petroleum company in Chongqing. He was 26 years old and delighted to meet and marry Wu Zhezha, a history graduate from the Southwest Women's University. In 1981, his wife from Chongqing died of myocardial infarction and Yao married Zhang Dingfang, a classmate from middle school in Jin-Cha-Ji.

In 1953, at age 28 years, he was appointed Section Chief, Bureau of Culture and Education for Cadres in the central government. He got this job because he was politically reliable, a good organizer, and had an irrepressible enthusiasm for learning and education. The task was to persuade even illiterate officials to learn something. Yao had to research the situation and felt most adult educators had their "feet on the ground." This contrasted with worrying

developments in Beijing where an anti-rightist campaign illuminated hazards on the road ahead (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

At this time, most Beijing cadres were much older than him and Yao was critical of the way Mao attacked intellectuals. He found the Chairman's stress on continuous struggle not congruent with the utopian purposes of communist revolution. Like Hu Yaobang, Zhongda identified more with humanistic forms of communism. Having witnessed too many campaigns, he watched what he said and tried to avoid situations where the task was to humiliate or hurt others.

### **Moving in with Mao**

In 1953, Yao became Chief of the Bureau of Workers' and Peasants Education in the Ministry of Education. Now aged 28 years, his wife and baby daughter moved with him into the Zhongnanhai leadership compound. Zhongnanhai is adjacent to the Forbidden City and ordinary citizens cannot go there. Few people (Chinese or foreign) have seen inside. Farms throughout China produced food for those living there. Tasters screened what Mao ate.

Within Zhongnanhai there were three sections divided according to their function. Mao lived in District No.1. Yao Zhongda lived and worked in the No. 3 district. His neighbour was Premier Zhou Enlai who resided and worked in the same facility about 100 metres from Yao's office. Crossing from one district to another required a pass.

Inside Zhongnanhai, Yao and his wife were not living like emperors. They were assigned only one room of less than 12 square metres. There was no space for daughter Yao Lili so she lived with a nanny in another section. There was no kitchen and dining halls for meals. In the No. 3 district one dining hall was for ordinary cadres and the nanny who minded Yao Lili went there. The other was for mid-level cadres like Yao. His wife worked in the Ministry of Commerce and also ate her meals there.

Each district had its own events and, at Saturday night movies, Yao would find himself sitting near Premier Zhou Enlai. Zhou's secretary and security guard sat on either side of the Premier. Mao retained his privacy by rarely leaving No. 1 district.

Illiteracy was an enormous impediment to building "new China" and a first priority was to produce books. In 1956, Beijing established a National Council for the Eradication of Illiteracy headed by the 4<sup>th</sup> Army General Chen Yi. One slogan was "one thousand teachers, ten thousand learners." Another said, "march to science and civilization." But anti-rightist campaigns drained energy and talent and, for most of the 1950s, teachers and intellectuals were on the defensive. Nevertheless, Yao and colleagues at Zhongnanhai spared no effort to stimulate literacy learning. It was an extraordinary situation. China had been at war for 30 years, many people were illiterate, there was only rudimentary healthcare and, not long after announcing creation of the People's Republic, Mao joined another war in Korea. In this context, it would be an uphill battle to launch creative forms of adult education.

In December, 1955 Yao was reassigned to a job at the Ministry of Education outside Zhongnanhai. His new job involved preparation and distribution of reading materials and textbooks to different regions. Peasants were required to learn 500 and workers 2000 Chinese characters. All regions needed literacy organizations. But rural citizens did not like being cajoled

into literacy programs only loosely linked to farm life and too many older people considered themselves incapable of learning. This “would make the teacher angry,” said Yao with a chuckle (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Between 1949 and 1956, adult education was a fundamental pillar of government policy. Hence, thousands of spare time middle (secondary) schools were built, factories created study centres, and mimeograph machines churned out materials. It was the widespread embrace of learning in farms, factories, and other nonformal settings that distinguished Chinese adult education from elsewhere. Yao needed to study the situation in regions and often left Beijing to do sociological investigations (e.g., Yao, 1981). Beijing life was filled with intrigue but, as a former farm boy, Yao enjoyed forays into the countryside.

### **Catastrophic Great Leap Forward**

Becker (1996) claimed 30 million died from famine induced by the 1958 to 1960 plan to establish communism overnight and surpass the U.S. and U.K. in steel production. Jung and Halliday (2005) said the death toll was “close to 38 million” (p. 438). During the Great Leap Forward, private land was collectivized. Instead of tending land, citizens were required to build (more than 600,000) steel furnaces which produced mostly useless lumps of metal.

In April, 1958 there was a trial abolition of private plots and joining together of 27 Henan cooperatives into a huge commune of nearly 10,000 households. Because of widespread famine and crop failures, there were no new adult education initiatives from 1958 to 1960. Even so, in 1961, Yao was trying to promote literacy in Anhui but saw farmers sitting in fields. Emaciated and starving, they had no energy for work and did only a “bare minimum” to qualify for work points. They had a “vacant expression, suffered from depression and were not interested in adult education” (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Anhui was in crisis and eventually discarded the central tenet of the Great Leap – the complete public ownership of land. Mao accused Anhui officials of turning into capitalists (Becker, 1996, p. 147), and Zeng Xisheng, the Secretary of the Anhui Provincial Party Committee, was denounced. Yao had gone to Anhui to investigate adult education and literacy “but the masses needed food and had no interest in education” (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010). Returning to Beijing, he was having doubts about Mao’s emphasis on turmoil resolved to see things with his own eyes. He would soon face additional challenges and worries.

### ***Big Brother Becomes a Right-Opportunist***

At one time, Yao’s big brother was the Deputy Political Commissar of Nanyuan airport. In 1937, he had studied Russian at the Yan’an Marxist-Leninist Institute. Before the Great Leap Forward, because he spoke Russian, big brother was sent north to supervise construction of a Russian-funded military airport in Jilin. At the time there were 56 Russian-funded infrastructure programs underway in China. But when the Great Leap Forward was launched, Yao’s brother was told to make steel.

Yao Zhongxuan had grave doubts about amateur steel making and, with considerable courage, ignored steel making and continued building the airport. He had disobeyed Chairman Mao's order. Although a man of character (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010) big brother was soon labelled a right-opportunist.

Later, big brother's 1930s affiliation with warlord Yan Xishan would help famed army commander Bo Yibo expedite Zhongxuan's rehabilitation. Bo Yibo had represented the communist side in the Yan Xishan warlord army and knew Yao's brother from that time. But, it was always a serious matter to defy Mao and big brother never again had a top position in the government or Communist Party. In some ways he and the rest of the Yao family got off lightly. As Becker (1996) noted "to be labelled a right-opportunist was in some places tantamount to receiving a death sentence" (p. 141).

Bo Yibo – who helped Yao's big brother – was father of Bo Xilai – who, in 2012, in the biggest Chinese political upheaval since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, was purged from the Party and his high-level position in Chongqing. As a princeling (i.e., son of an admired former leader) people expected Bo Xilai to ascend to high office. At one time it was Bo Xilai (not Xi Jinping) who was favoured for the top job as President of the People's Republic of China. Instead, his wife got a life sentence for murder. Bo Xilai was expelled from the Party, faced criminal prosecutors, and has an uncertain future.

By June 2013, China's President Xi Jinping was giving few hints concerning the future of Bo Xilai. Yao Zhongda felt Xilai lacked the moral fibre of his father. For him, the Party investigation of Bo Xilai will yield the correct outcome (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2012). But what matters here are ways the refusal of big brother to make steel provided evidence for the Yao family being talented and rebellious. Eventually, Yao Zhongxuan was "rehabilitated" and rewarded for constructing the airport. Yao Zhongda chuckles when he tells this story and is very proud of big brother, the right-opportunist who defied Chairman Mao (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

After Mao's 1959 purge of right-opportunist Peng Dehuai on Mount Lu (Lushan), the Communist Party was in turmoil. In 1960, Yao Zhongda was transferred to the Office of Culture and Education in the State Council (equivalent to the cabinet in a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy). Chastened by the challenge to his authority during the Lushan plenum, Mao decided to eliminate threats to his leadership. The ten years of chaos – the so-called Cultural Revolution – would soon begin. Nobody could escape its madness and it would only be a matter of time before family life would be torpedoed and Yao Zhongda sent for reeducation in the countryside. Even the high-level State Council would be "rectified."

### **Cultural Revolution**

During the 1966 to 1976 Cultural Revolution, Yao's bosses at the State Council were labeled capitalist roaders. As demonstrated when Madame Li Li of the Shanghai Education Commission was denounced and had her hair pulled, being a high-level adult educator offered no protection from cruelty, delinquency, and thuggery (see Boshier & Huang, 2009).

In 1966, there were massive Nuremburg-style rallies at Tiananmen. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1966, a million teachers and students converged on the famous square. During this six-

hour long event a female Red Guard put an armband on Mao, thus “obtaining his imprimatur” (MacFarquhar & Schoenals, 2006, p. 108). On 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1966, there was another million-person rally at Tiananmen where Yao Zhongda took “red scarf young pioneers” upstairs to meet Mao. At the top of the stairs Zhou Enlai shook hands and welcomed each Red Guard. Mao’s wife (the actress Jiang Qing) was master of ceremonies and, according to a biographer, enjoyed the drama of massive Red Guard rallies. “For the rootless one, always aspiring but often slighted ... it was exciting” (Terrill, 1984, p. 257).

Despite having lived nearby in Zhongnanhai, Yao had not previously met Chairman Mao face-to-face until 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1966, at Tiananmen. “I was just doing my job,” said Yao who stood within one metre of Mao and, with a roll of the eyes and chuckle, acidly noted Lin Biao and the overweight Chairman took the elevator (lift) while Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Red Guards all climbed stairs. Yao was not impressed with the health of leaders on 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1966. But, for Red Guards, seeing Mao was like going to heaven (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Between August-September, 1966, Red Guards murdered 1,772 Beijing residents and the Minister of Police Xie Fuzhi said “bad persons are bad, so if they are beaten to death it is no big deal” (MacFarquhar & Schoenals, 2006, pp. 124-125). After a rally on 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1966, Mao insisted on motoring through crowds. Chaos ensued and ten people were trampled to death (MacFarquhar & Schoenals, 2006). But, by 26<sup>th</sup> of November, 1966, the date of the eighth and last rally, Mao had stood before 26 million Red Guards. *Chairman Mao inspects the Red Guards*, the first of seven film documentaries on rallies at Tiananmen, was watched by over 100 million people (Clark, 2008).

In December 1968, Yao and other State Council employees were sent to Ningxia for reeducation. Ningxia is a remote border region north of Gansu. Imperial, Republican, and Communist governments have all used border regions to banish miscreants and, during Mao’s anti-rightist campaign, many intellectuals were sentenced to “reform through labour” (laodong gaizao) or “ideological remoulding” (sixiang gaizao) in Ningxia and other parts of the wilderness. From late 1957 to early 1958, more than 300,000 rightists and right-opportunists were hauled off to border regions (Wang, 2007). Zhang (1994), in his autobiography *Grass Soup*, vividly described life in Ningxia labour camps.

Yao and other State Council employees were dropped into a former prison farm on Helan Mountain. His wife was sent to a cadres school in Henan province. Their son (Yao Xiaojun) was left with big sister in Beijing. Yao Lili, their daughter, was sent for reeducation in Neimeng (Inner Mongolia), which is described in the worrying but extraordinary autobiography by Ma (1995). The Yao family was now fractured and, for Zhongda, it would be four years before he would see the city again.

Yao did not consider reeducation on Helan Mountain a complete waste of time. In several ways it was less dangerous than the madness of Beijing. Yao rode horses and herded stock. If he got animals onto grazing grounds early, he could fish in a river. Unlike Tangxian, Ningxia had irrigation and grew rice. Yao worried about communism but did not ditch the Party. When he had “doubts” and worries, they were “temporary.” Even now, he follows the Party line on Mao. The Chairman was correct 70% and wrong 30% of the time (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

On 21 of February, 1972 when Richard Nixon swooped into the vastness of Beijing the city was cold and drab. In the Ningxia labour camp, there were no newspapers or radios. Inmates only heard about the U.S. President after his plane departed. Yao and comrades had not missed much because only two members of the Politburo – other than Mao and Zhou – spoke to the Americans.

Untold millions of Chinese citizens were killed or committed suicide because of the Cultural Revolution. According to Mao's interpreter Ji Chaozhu (2008) "red guards, some as young as thirteen, were responsible for the beating death of one person on every block in Beijing" (p. 226). There has never been an explanation or apology from the Party and, as archives are pried open, Cultural Revolution history is only now being written (e.g., Clark, 2008; Esherwick, Pickowicz, & Walder, 2006; MacFarquhar & Schoenals, 2006).

The first Red Guard cohorts contained numerous sons and daughters of high officials. Older role models and the excitement of rebellion misled immature young people. Instead of truth and reconciliation, the government opted for amnesia. Yao believes it will take "several generations" to heal wounds left from the Cultural Revolution (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

In the mid-1970s, Mao was suffering from motor neuron (Lou Gehrig's) disease. On 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1976, Yao was in Shijiazhuang when news of the Chairman's death arrived and "unlike others, I did not cry," he said. From 1959 onwards, Yao had worried about the direction of the revolution and contrasts events surrounding the death of Mao and fall of the gang-of-four with the genuineness of grief stemming from the passing of Zhou Enlai and Hu Yaobang (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009).

### **Foreign Devils Looking Over the Wall**

In 1977, Deng Xiaoping told a meeting of educational leaders to "speak-up ... you are over-cautious and afraid of making mistakes ... you should work freely and boldly, and think independently instead of always looking over your shoulder" (Deng, 1977, p. 82). Citizens had heard this before. There were (and still are) very good reasons why people looked over their shoulder but, by the early 1980s, citizens were developing confidence in the fact reform and opening was not another Hundred Flowers fiasco.

After continuously blaming foreign devils for 100 years of humiliation, China was going to play on a global stage. New teaching techniques were needed and burgeoning radio and TV universities had to do more than scroll text over a screen. Illiteracy was still a problem, teaching techniques were primitive, and healthcare almost non-existent. Too many books were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution.

The 1978 Democracy Wall was not far from Yao's office, but he was uneasy about democracy activists. The most famous poster claimed democracy should be the "5<sup>th</sup> modernization." Yao urged workplace comrades not to get swept along in the excitement. Colleagues went out to read the posters, but Yao stayed clear. "We had suffered deeply from the Cultural Revolution and did not need more tumult," he said (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

Since 1949, it had been dangerous to consort with foreigners, and Yao's boss was under suspicion because his son married a German and his daughter hooked-up with a Russian. During the Cultural Revolution, high officials were persecuted because of the romantic inclinations of their children. Yet, in 1978, Deng said China needed ideas from abroad. Hence, in March of 1974, 25 Canadians visited China under the auspices of the Canadian Association for Adult Education. They went to Guangzhou, Shanghai, Wuxi, and Nanjing but not Beijing. Their reports – in a special issue of *Convergence* (1974, Vol. VII, No. 3) suggest Chinese minders did a good job showing only the positive side of China. The Adult Education Association (USA) arrived in 1978 with a delegation led by Herb Hunsaker. Capitalist running dogs and imperialist lackeys were now waiting in Yao's outer office. In the West, China trips were suddenly popular and hordes of foreign devil educators jostled for attention in China.

Foreign delegations would typically call on the Minister, be taken to Yao Zhongda, and then to farms, factories, a TV university or community centre. In 1978, Yao was working as Deputy Chief of the Department of Adult Education in the Ministry of Education, and as Secretary-General of the Chinese Adult Education Association. Having lived through many campaigns and movements and experienced reeducation in the countryside, he was reluctant to say much to foreigners. "At first, I was conservative and careful," he said (Yao, Z.D., personal communication, December 10, 2009). But, after seeing 40 delegations, friendships developed, there were frank exchanges, and Yao enjoyed himself.

The International Council for Adult Education had been founded in 1972 but was unable to penetrate the Middle Kingdom. With Deng calling for reform and opening, in Toronto, Roby Kidd sensed the time had arrived. Roby Kidd and Tanzanian Paul Mhaiki went to Beijing in May 1978 looking for Yao. The visitors found China in a "sober mood of self examination" (Kidd, 1978) but open for exchange. Kidd (1978) praised the "warmth and humanity of Chinese colleagues," and pressed Yao Zhongda to prepare reports and participate in events outside China. But, with reform and opening an untested novelty and memories of the Hundred Flowers campaign and Cultural Revolution still vivid, Yao had to be careful. Five years passed before China joined the International Council for Adult Education in 1983.

### *The 1984 Shanghai Symposium*

The mid-1980s was a time of unprecedented openness and innovation in China. In 1984, Budd Hall was Secretary-General and Chris Duke Associate Secretary-General of the International Council for Adult Education. Duke was handed the "China file" and, working with Charles Wong of Hong Kong, tasked to engage with China. What was needed was the ability to turn pleasantries into commitments.

Yao had visited the USA in 1980. Affluence in other parts of the world was a reminder of poverty at home. He states:

When I was 15 years old I joined the resistance movement ... education was traditional ... based on Marxism and Stalinism. Thus, for a long time, imbued with these ideologies one becomes convinced ... capitalism is bad and ... communism good. After being out and

looking at different places one realizes this is far from being so ... each side has its own assets and deficiencies and there is a need to learn and cooperate. (Yao, 1994, p. 7)

The 1984 Shanghai symposium on adult education was a resounding success and opened doors for Chinese and western participants (Boshier & Huang, 2005; Duke, 1987). Most foreigners were making their first trip to China and local delegates had never interacted with foreigners in such a sustained and informal way. Many group photographs were taken – most showing Yao in the front row with his name tag pinned to the left! At age 88, Yao can still name most of those in the group photos. In significant ways, 1984 was the year globalization landed on Chinese adult education. Foreigners went to places off the tourist trail and started seeing authentic Chinese adult education and learners.

Yao left the civil service in 1987. He lives on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment building for retired cadres and has five albums of photographs mostly taken at adult education events. He also has ten volumes of a diary he started writing in 1959. It is an extraordinary document listing everything he has ever bought and the amount paid. His writing is as neat now as it was at school in Tangxian. He does not have a computer and is astonished to learn a foreigner would endure Beijing winters just to talk to him. He need not worry about Facebook and Twitter. Both are banned in China.

### **Globalized Modernity**

As noted at the outset, Yao is not a prophet in his own land. For modern “leaders” tales of rural hardship or ill-fitting army uniforms are an embarrassing reminder of a primitive past and not relevant to science, modernization or being world class. Hence, Chinese graduate students would be hard-pressed to locate Yao’s life in larger stories about rural life, family, war, learning, and revolution.

In a world of Internet chatting, texting, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, delving into the theatrics of Chinese adult education is not a priority. This is particularly the case amongst pragmatic graduate students destabilized by the fact there is no longer a danwei (work unit) to find them a job. Yao is far removed from the technocratic preoccupations of business-oriented professors and their students. However, just as *Red Star Over China* (Snow, 1938) educated Chinese about their own revolution, the fact Yao is written about in foreign journals could spark interest in other adult education reds under the bed.

Chinese now enjoy more openness and personal freedom than in the Mao era. Yet, there will be no truly modern China until more people find their voices. Today’s scholar-officials could learn a lot from adult educators like Yao Zhongda.

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