



## WA China Watch Digest Special!

### *Interview: Sidney Rittenberg on Cultural Revolution 50 years later, its violence, its lessons*



By Wen Liu May 12, 2016

This website was not meant to be this political. But one cannot watch China and skip a historic date, May 16, the 50th anniversary of the official start of the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, which served as perhaps more than anything dark, scorched, bloody yet fertile soil for, as well as a huge rear-view mirror of, today's China of skyscrapers, bullet trains, Xi Jinping, and even Internet censorship. One cannot also watch China and forget that it was in 1972, during the Cultural Revolution, that President Nixon went to meet Mao in Beijing. To help us reflect on the Cultural Revolution, its meaning, its violence, its lessons, there is no better person than a great fellow Washingtonian, journalist, scholar, a participant as well as a prisoner of not only the Cultural Revolution, but for 35 years Mao's revolution: Sidney Rittenberg.

**WCWD:** May 16, 2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the official start of China's 10-year Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which the Communist Party concluded in 1981 as "wrongly launched," "disastrous," and an "internal turbulence." As both its participant and prisoner, what is your definition or understanding of the Cultural Revolution?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** It was called "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." In fact, not one of its top leaders was a "proletarian," meaning a member of the modern working class. It was basically counter-cultural. And it was essentially counter-revolutionary—as Lin Biao, then the #2 leader, said, it was a revolution against China's 1949 revolution.

It was marked by wild, destructive mob violence, incited and protected by a half-mad Mao Zedong and his followers. An estimated one million people were killed, ten times that number were victimized, the

destruction of cultural objects and of the economy were inestimable. As former President Li Xiannian said, it was China's Holocaust.

**WCWD:** For those who did not experience the Cultural Revolution, it is very hard to understand the connection between culture and violence. Could you explain how a cultural revolution could become so violent?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** The method behind Mao's madness was an attempt to revolutionize the young generation of Chinese, to make them like his generation. But he believed that they could only learn revolution by making one. Against whom might they revolt? It had to be a revolt against his own Party and government. He wanted to use a generation of young rebels to remove the orthodox Party leaders like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, to destroy the old CPC, and to recreate it in his image. Unfortunately, there was also permissiveness to commit horrible crimes against innocent people. Even Mao was surprised by the volcanic response of the young people.

What was Mao telling his young zealots during the violence? He was saying, "Fight with Words, not with Force." But these statements were in a rather small voice. What was trumpeted from the rooftops was, "It's right to rebel!" And, "There's no construction without destruction. Destruction comes first, and it will entail Construction." And especially, "Revolution is not a dinner party..." It was Mao who was the apostle of violent change, and his wife, Jiang Qing, was his Prophet.

The aging parents of a Communist Party member at Radio Beijing, where I worked, were murdered by young kids, who were looking for "class enemies" in order to carry out The Great Leader's call for class warfare. The elderly couple had run a little shop in pre-PRC days, and were now in charge of a state-owned, Socialist store. The kids decided that they were capitalists, and enthusiastically harassed them to death. Qinghua University Li Leiluo, our friend, who was against the violence, was killed while trying to protect army troops from a Rebel group which was attacking them with guns. They mailed us a photograph of this brave young man with a bullet hole drilled neatly through his neck.

**WCWD:** Global Times, published by People's Daily, had an article back in March titled, "Cultural Revolution At 50: Reflection should not be extreme." It warned people discussing about the anniversary not to be extreme in either trying to re-evaluate it more positively or re-repudiate it more thoroughly. What was the positive side of the Cultural Revolution if there was any?



**Sidney Rittenberg:** It was, for the first year and a half, the first experience of free and open democracy that China has ever had. Ordinary people in schools, factories, Party and government offices formed their own voluntary political organizations, removed unpopular leaders, elected their own chosen leaders, published their own press, freely criticized anything and anybody—except for the sole Supreme Authority, Mao Zedong, and his little secretariat, who guided the day-to-day movement. It was a time of exhilarating freedom and permissiveness. Even formerly disgraced and isolated "undesirables" were allowed to join the revolution—the Party dossiers were sealed.

There was another sense in which the CR was a positive force. It reduced the old system and the old ideology to absurdity, so that after it was over it made it impossible for China to ever have another god-like Leader, another infallible doctrine (Marxism-Leninism-Mao Thought), and another established church which ran everything. After CR, Chinese no longer believed everything their leaders or their official media said. They ask themselves, "Is it really so?"

**WCWD:** The 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution in theory should be a very significant anniversary for China, as today's China is basically a correction of that China 50 years ago. But we haven't heard much about it from China's leaders. What do you think is the mindset of the Chinese leadership on this historic anniversary?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** China's leaders are not encouraging talk about the CR. They are not yet prepared to discuss issues of political reform. But the day will surely come when they understand that the only way to ensure fundamental democratic reform is to engineer economic reform through political reform.

**WCWD:** When I asked you earlier this year if the Cultural Revolution could come back, you said no. However, when the real estate tycoon Ren Zhiqiang questioned Xi Jinping's demand for media's absolute loyalty to the Party, Ren was attacked as a capitalist traitor, a bourgeois liberal, opposing the Four Principles, speaking ill of the Party Central, singing a different tune from the Party, violating the Party rules, and had his Party membership suspended. Didn't that seem like a Cultural Revolution-kind of movement waiting to happen?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** The attack on Ren Zhiqiang was not reminiscent of the CR. It was the kind of response to critical challenges that the CPC has used since its founding. If it had been CR style, it would have been followed by thousands of Big Character Posters, meetings of accusation, struggle meetings, etc.

Some people think that Xi Jinping is channeling Mao's ways of political mass campaigns. Actually, Xi's ways are opposite from Mao's ways. Mao had a mystical faith in the history-making role of the masses. His basic method for political struggle was to "Activate the masses with an open hand." With Xi, to the contrary, the campaign against corruption is a strictly government controlled movement. No mass meetings, but only reports to government authorities.

**WCWD:** When I interviewed you last year, you said Xi Jinping needed two years to consolidate his power in order to carry out much needed reforms. Now he has consolidated perhaps more power than Mao, with the newest title the commander-in-chief of the PLA's Joint Battle Command. The Economist called him "Chairman of Everything." There are also propaganda cartoons, rap songs and daily front-page coverage about him. Doesn't that remind people of Mao-like personality cult?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** While there are new signs today of a personality cult, it is not even close to the position that Mao held, nor will it ever be. Furthermore, it was the Cultural Revolution which opened the way for Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening," and made it inevitable. China would never have changed in such a short time without the destruction and mass disillusionment of the CR. Deng said, there is no "other side" of the Cultural Revolution. I beg to differ—history shows us that there is. Of course, the price paid for this advance was much too high. No one would prescribe that medicine in advance. But since the tragedy has already happened, it requires a rational assessment.

Will the CR happen again in China? No, not possible. In spite of the current buildup of a single authoritative figure, Xi Jinping is nowhere near a Mao Cult, nor can he be. The buildup of authority today is intended as a device to break through the tremendous bureaucratic resistance to fundamental economic reform. Will Xi persist in seeking fundamental reforms? Will he succeed? The jury is still out. I firmly believe, however, that Beijing University Professor Yu Keping is absolutely right: Economic reform cannot succeed without political reform. Recently, China has been moving in the opposite direction. The opposition to reforms like restructuring the huge state-owned monopolies and converting them into mixed-ownership enterprises with foreign capital and private Chinese capital—this opposition is still more powerful than the reform forces, at this point. That is the main reason why they are so nervous about any form of opposition, and they try to suppress it. But there are signs that this may be changing. Otherwise, the economic reforms will fail.

**WCWD:** The Cultural Revolution came and went a long time ago. It could even be what the Chinese would describe as "a short bend in the long river of history." But the lessons of the Cultural Revolution may be there for a long time to learn. With your singular, extraordinary and almost humanly impossible American-Chinese experience surviving the Cultural Revolution, what is the most important lesson we should all know and remember?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** I may sound fairly reasonable today, but at the time I was a highly enthusiastic supporter of, and participant in, the Cultural Revolution. Like many others, I thought that Mao was building a brave new world in which the collective would serve the individual, instead of the other way around, and Socialism would become as free as a Town Hall democracy. As for the violence, I protested it, complained to the top leaders, managed to keep it completely out of our Radio Administration—but I

substantially went along with it. Why? Because, as Mao said, “Revolution is not a dinner party.” How could they make an omelette without breaking eggs? The painful lesson here is that mistaken ideology can produce thoughtless cruelty in gentle, kind-hearted people.

The most important lesson from the CR is to stay away from ideological blindness, from playing “follow the leader” wherever you are led, to think independently, critically, and not to believe in overnight miracles of social engineering.

**WCWD:** Last but not least, do you think it is important for Americans to know about the Cultural Revolution, even 50 years later, and its lessons, especially when a new American president coming in early next year will be dealing with Xi Jinping, who has shown in his policies a great deal of influence of Mao and the Cultural Revolution?

**Sidney Rittenberg:** Americans should know about the CR and its lessons. One of the main lessons is that democracy requires an informed public who understand how it works. Otherwise, it may quickly turn into anarchy, or it may simply hide an actual dictatorship of the Mighty. Chinese even more should study and learn from this experience. Unfortunately, most young and middle-aged Chinese have no clue as to what happened and why. This is history that needs to be absorbed, as a guide and a preventive.

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