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Great Walls from Mao to Now: A Biographical Perspective on Adult Education Inside Chinese Communist Revolution

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Keywords: Chinese communism, revolutionary adult education, biography;

Abstract: From 1921 onwards, adult education was a vital corollary of Chinese Communist revolution. In 1954 Yao Zhongda lived near Mao in the Zhongnanhai and became Chief of the Bureau of Workers' and Peasants Education. He is now 86 years old. The purpose of this study was to capture his biography and reflect on what it means for 21st century China. Data was secured during a 10-day Beijing interview session. Yao is an outstanding figure in Chinese adult education and today's scholar-officials could learn a lot from him.

Mutual Misunderstanding

Senior civil servants involved with adult education usually lurk at the periphery of political life. But not in Maoist China where adult education was a key pillar of communist 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 contact foreigners and adult education focussed on literacy, 5-year production plans and rooting out "rightists." Mao died in 1976 and, starting 1978, China opened to the world. After a visiting delegation called on the Minister of Education, they would be taken to Yao. Chinese ignorance concerning foreigners was more than matched by naive anti-communism in the west and Yao watched what he said. Later, there were frank exchanges. Who was this man who lived next to Mao and spoke on behalf of Chinese adult education?

Methodology

The task here was to build a biography informed by a psychoanalytic perspective. Interviews with Yao were conducted over a ten-day period in December, 2009 and spread out to avoid exhaustion. During "on" days we talked with Yao. During "off" days, authors made transcripts and created new questions. Written copies of questions – in English and Chinese – were given to him before each session.

Farm Boy from Tangxian

How did a boy from a revolutionary Hebei village survive a Japanese invasion, civil war and communist revolution to become a key actor in Chinese adult education?

Yao Zhongda was born in 1925 in Yaojiazuo village in Tangxian County, Hebei, a strategically important province with important battlegrounds and mountain passes. In the 1930s, Japanese invaders marched into Hebei to protect Manchukuo, their puppet state to the north. But, because of disorganisation 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 Yao farm consisted of 20 mu (about 3.29 acres) and they lived in a mud-brick (adobe) house. The family had a pig, donkey, a cow and laying hens who wandered through the house. They used a wood fire for cooking. Lighting was by candle. They had no irrigation and their land produced only meagre crops. The area received international attention after 1938 when Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune tended wounded soldiers in communist armies.

Yao was the 4th in a six-child family. His 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. But her family had cultural capital, she was deeply committed to education, and a crucial force in Yao's upbringing.

In Mao's China there were five class labels - landlord, rich peasants, middle peasants ("old", "new", and "well-to-do"), poor peasants and workers (Mao, 1933). Yao's parents were middle "well-to-do" peasants and thus worse off than Mao's "rich peasant" parents

In 1940, at age 15 years, Yao was called home from school because his father was dying from heart disease. With the father gone, there were more chores and Yao's mother had an even bigger influence on her son.

Joys of School

Yao's mother gave the children an option - school or farming? At age eight years, Zhongda ambled over to the communist primary school less than 500 metres from their home. Teacher Wang darted back and forth between two classrooms – each containing 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. Nobody had a book, map or magazine. Rumours were plentiful and dangerous.

Yao had no idea the Communist Party was a special organization. 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. Yao was 11 years old on 12 December 1936, when Chiang Kaishek was kidnapped by his own men. He also recalls the July 7th, 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident which launched the Japanese invasion of China. But, even as a boy he felt Japanese would not have the resources to subdue a large country like China. Yet having to run into hills when Japanese soldiers approached meant schooling was a haphazard process.

Warlord army

In 1936 his 18 year brother (Yao Zhongxuan) left home and joined the warlord army of Yan Xishan. In 1938 the Japanese army passed through Yao's village en route to battles in Wutai mountains. Villagers removed animals, grain and themselves to the mountains and watched armies marching through valleys below. Communist militia men told them when it was safe to go home. The Wutai mountains were the place where famed Jin-Cha-Ji army commander Nie Rongzhen built his reputation for elusiveness.

Jin-Cha-Ji Revolutionary Middle School

Behind Japanese lines, communists established schools and organs of government. After primary school, Yao Zhongda sat an exam and was admitted to the Jin-Cha-Ji middle (secondary) school. 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 and liked breaking-down and reassembling the Hanyang rifle. Classes were held in village homes or on the ground. Pupils carried their belongings in a blanket. "It was a half-military life We would put down our packages, sit and classes began" (Yao, 2009, 10 December).

Northern China United University

In 1944 Yao was 19 years old and assigned to work a mimeograph machine at a half work/half study university created by the Communist Party. His job was to prepare and run stencils. When proof copies arrived he had to correct errors. He took courses on Marxist logic and feels his adult education career started in the mimeograph shop at North China United University.

After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrendered on August 14th, 1945. Mimeographed sheets spread the news. At the time Yao was aware of secret meetings to which he was not invited. Because North China United University was a communist university, he assumed he was automatically a Party member. But he was not in the Party and now a decision was needed.

People's Liberation Army and Road to Beijing

On 28 August, 1945, Mao climbed into an aircraft for his first ever flight. The Chairman was leaving Yan'an bound for Chongqing and negotiations to end the conflict between nationalists and communists. After 46 days, negotiations failed and Chinese would now fight each other.

Yao joined the Communist Party and People's Liberation Army (PLA). 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 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, 65 years after these events, Yao (2009) chuckles at

consternation created by the uniform. Yet, it was congruent with his fast-developing duties in the PLA and Communist Party.

Beijing Bound

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

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 she died 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. The task was to persuade illiterate officials to learn something. At this time most Beijing cadres were much older than Yao.

Chief of the Bureau

Yao was critical of the way Mao attacked intellectuals and found the Chairman's stress on struggle not congruent with the utopian purposes of communist revolution. Like many others, Yao identified with more humanistic forms of communism. Even so, 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 Beijing 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 are forbidden to go there. Few people (Chinese or foreign) have seen inside. Farms throughout China produced food for those living inside and hired tasters screened what Mao ate.

Inside the leadership compound Yao and his wife were not living like emperors. They were assigned 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 only rudimentary furniture. There were dining halls for meals.

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 4th 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 away energy and talent. 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.

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 of China. Peasants were required to learn 500 and workers 2000

Chinese characters.

Between 1949 and 1956 adult education was a fundamental pillar of government policy. Thousands of sparetime middle (secondary) schools were built, factories created study centres and mimeograph machines churned out materials. What most distinguished Chinese from adult education elsewhere, was the widespread embrace of learning in farms, factories and other nonformal settings. Yao needed to study the situation and often left Beijing to do sociological investigations (e.g. Yao, 1981).

Catastrophic Great Leap

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. During the Great Leap private land was collectivized. Instead of tending land, citizens were required to build (more than 600,000) steel furnaces producing mostly useless lumps of metal.

Anhui was in crisis and eventually discarded the central tenet of the Great Leap – the complete public ownership of land. Yao had gone to Anhui to investigate adult education and literacy. “But the masses needed food and had no interest in education” (Yao, 2010, 8 April). Returning to Beijing, he was convinced it was important to see things with his own eyes. But he would soon face additional challenges and worries.

Cultural Revolution

During the 1966 to 1976 Cultural Revolution Yao’s bosses at the State Council were denounced as capitalist roaders. On August 16th, 1966 Chen Boda urged students to come to Beijing in the prelude to eight massive Nuremburg-style rallies at Tiananmen.

On August 31st, 1966 there was a million-person rally at Tiananmen where Yao took “red scarf young pioneers” upstairs to meet Mao on Tiananmen gate. At the top of the stairs Zhou Enlai shook hands and welcomed each Red Guard. Despite having lived in Zhongnanhai, Yao had not met the Chairman face-to-face until August 31st at Tiananmen. “I was just doing my job,” said Yao (2010) who stood within one metre of Mao and acidly noted Lin Biao and the Chairman took the elevator (lift) while Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Red Guards climbed the stairs!

In December, 1968, Yao and other State Council employees were sent to Ningxia for reeducation. 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) – described in the extraordinary autobiography by Ma Bo (1995). The Yao family was fractured and, for Zhongda, it would be four years before he would see the city again.

While Yao was in Ningxia there were big changes in Beijing. On 13th September 1971, Lin Biao allegedly died in a plane crash. He had alienated too many people and, when news of the death reached Ningxia, “we drank wine to celebrate” (Yao, 2009). On 21 February, 1972 when Richard Nixon swooped into the vastness of foggy 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.

During the four years in Ningxia, Zhongda saw his wife and children only three times. Finally, in late 1972, he was told to return to an assignment in the National Museum at Tiananmen. Untold millions of Chinese citizens were killed or committed suicide because of the Cultural Revolution. There has never been an explanation or apology from the Party. In the mid-1970s Mao was suffering from motor neuron disease. On 9 September, 1976, Yao was in Shijiazhuang when news of the Chairman's death arrived. Like many others, Yao did not cry when he heard Mao had died.

Foreign Devils Looking Over the Wall

In 1977 Deng 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 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. In 1978 Yao felt there were too many people with “empty” diplomas and observed a “pent-up” desire for learning.

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 health-care almost non-existent. Too many books were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution.

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! In March, 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. The Adult Education Association (USA) arrived in 1978 with a delegation led by Herb Hunsacker. Capitalist running dogs were waiting in Yao's outer office!

Foreign delegations would typically call on the Minister, be taken to Yao and then to farms, factories, a TV university or community centre. Having lived through too many campaigns and movements, Yao was reluctant to say much to foreigners. “At first, I was conservative and careful” he said (Yao, 2009). But, after seeing 40 delegations, friendships developed, there were frank exchanges and Yao enjoyed himself.

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 reengage with China. What was needed was the ability to turn pleasantries into commitments and Yao was a crucial part of this process. The 1984 Shanghai symposium was a resounding success and opened doors for participants on both sides.

Not a Prophet In His Own Land

Yao left the civil service in 1987. He lives on the 9th floor of an apartment building for retired cadres and has five albums of adult education photographs. He has ten volumes of a diary he started writing in 1959. It lists everything he has bought and the amount paid. His writing is as neat now as it was at school. He does not have a computer and is astonished to learn a foreigner would endure a Beijing winter just to talk to him.

Yao is an outstanding figure in 20th century Chinese adult education who believes in the transformative power of learning. But the current inhabitants of Zhongnanhai and Chinese university scholars have been slow to manifest interest in Yao Zhongda. He is the Norman Bethune of China - better known abroad than at home. Near his apartment building, pile drivers hammer at the pillars of China's modernization. As the old soldier ambles up dusty lanes to reach his favourite he sees friends and acquaintances but is mostly ignored by university scholars. Why?

There are three social systems inside China. First, there is *third world* China which depends upon family ties built 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 former work units where status depended upon rank. Third, there is *newly-industrializing China* obsessed with markets, exports, money and progress through competition.

University scholars, particularly in Beijing, are more affiliated with the third than either of the other two systems. Yao well understands life in *third world* China. He also has links to the other two but no strong affiliation with any.

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 and Kentucky Fried Chicken, the theatrics of Chinese adult education are not a priority. Hence Yao is far removed from the technocratic preoccupations of business-oriented professors and their students.

Chinese now enjoy more openness and personal freedom than in the Mao era. Even so, there will be no truly modern China until more people find their voices and 21st century scholar-officials could learn a lot from adult educators like Yao Zhongda.

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