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# CULTURAL REVIEWS

## Bian Zhongyun: A Revolution's First Blood

By Wang Youqin

*The senseless death of a school teacher set the tone for Mao Zedong's 10-year reign of terror, the Cultural Revolution.*

Bian Zhongyun was born in 1916 in Wuwei, Anhe Province. Her father worked his way up from a struggling apprentice in a private bank to the wealthy and socially prominent owner of his own private bank. After Bian Zhongyun graduated from high school in 1937, her plans to enter college were interrupted by China's war with Japan, and she participated in the resistance effort in Changsha. She was finally able to attend college in 1941, and became a member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the same year. She graduated in 1945 and then joined her husband, Wang Jingyao (who had studied with her in college), in the Party-controlled area of China. In 1949, Bian began work at the Beijing Normal University Attached Girls' Middle School (hereinafter Attached Girls' School), first as a teacher, then gradually rising through the ranks to become vice principal. By the time of her death at the age of 50, Bian had been working at the Attached Girls' School for 17 years. She was the mother of four children. Her husband was a historian in the faculty of philosophy and sociology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The Attached Girls' School was established in 1917, one of the oldest secondary schools in Beijing. When the CPC came to power in 1949, all of the school's administrators were replaced with Party members. The school was located in Beijing's Xicheng District, only a kilometer away from Tiananmen Square and Zhongnanhai, where Mao Zedong and the rest of China's top leaders

lived. Given its proximity to the central government and State Council, as well as its long-standing reputation for excellence, the Attached Girls' School was inevitably attended by many daughters of China's top leaders.

At that time, entry to all secondary schools required passing city-wide examinations for both middle and high school. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, however, examination results were not the sole criteria for entry. In the autumn of 1965, shortly before the Cultural Revolution began, half of the students at the Attached Girls' School were the daughters or relatives of senior government officials. This element became an important factor leading to Bian Zhongyun's death.

The sequence of events resulting in Bian Zhongyun's death began on June 1, 1966. On that evening, the China Central People's Broadcasting Network broadcasted the contents of what Mao Zedong referred to as "China's first Marxist-Leninist big-character poster," which had been plastered to a wall at Peking University. Apart from attacking the administrators of Peking University, the poster also called for the "determined and thorough eradication of all cow ghosts and snake spirits" (the labels applied to those considered enemies of the state). At noon the next day, three students from the Attached Girls' School, led by upperclassman Song Binbin, put up that school's first big-character poster, which called for students to "pledge your lives to the Party central, pledge your lives to Chairman Mao," and attacked the school administration.

In fact, this student protest was not responding merely to the Peking University poster. On May 16, the Party's central leadership had issued a comprehensive, 10,000-word notice that launched the Cultural Revolution and explicitly called for a "thorough criticism of academia, educators, journalists, artists, publishers and other representatives of the capitalist class, and seizing the leaders of the cultural sector." One day earlier, the Party had published a letter that Mao had written to his lieutenant, Lin Biao, on May 7, in which Mao stated that "the phenomenon of capitalist intellectuals controlling our schools cannot be allowed to continue."

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**This article is an edited excerpt from a book chapter: Wang Youqin, *Wenge Shounanzhe* [Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment and Murder] (Hong Kong: Open Magazine Publishing, 2004).**

Under Bian Zhongyun's administration, the Attached Girls' School gave special attention to the daughters of senior officials. Many, but not all, class monitors and leaders of the student council were daughters of top leaders. However, girls from ordinary backgrounds were also included among the student leaders, and class monitors, who enjoyed potentially considerable influence, were elected by the students themselves. Thus, even though not all students enjoyed equal status, the school administrators clearly did not believe that the daughters of top leaders should monopolize leadership positions within the student body. This policy embodied one of the traditional principles educators brought with them; during imperial times, the exam system was largely independent of the power structure. The first month of the Cultural Revolution's full-scale launch provided the first opportunity for the children of top leaders to make a grab for power within the schools. What started out as an attack on school leadership was eventually depicted as a romanticized revolt. But any objective examination of the facts reveals that this was no rebellion against the power structure, but rather an extension of totalitarian power.

After students posted the first big-character poster at the Attached Girls' School, the Communist Youth League sent a "working group" to the school on June 3, 1966. The working group immediately voiced enthusiastic support for the efforts of Song Binbin and other revolutionary students to "expose and criticize" the errors of the school administrators.

The working group pushed aside the school's administrators and took over school supervision. It also established a Revolutionary Teachers and Students Committee, with the leader of the working group as its head and Song Binbin as vice chairman. Each class had a representative on the committee, and all but one of those representatives were daughters of the most senior officials, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. These committees and their particular composition were replicated throughout Beijing's other secondary schools.

The big-character posters at the Attached Girls' School accused Bian Zhongyun of a number of "crimes." First among them was participation in a "counterrevolutionary coup d'état" by the previous Beijing Party Commit-

## CULTURAL REVOLUTION: CHRONOLOGY

**May 16, 1966:** Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong issues the "May 16 notice" proclaiming the start of a "Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution."

**May 29, 1966:** First group of Red Guards forms at Tsinghua University Middle School.

**August 18, 1966:** First Red Guard rally in Tiananmen Square. Mao stands at peak of Tiananmen Square Gate as millions of Red Guards gather and cheer.

**January 1967:** Rebel organizations snatch power from local government officials in Shanghai, with the encouragement of Mao. This scenario repeats itself across the nation.

**December 1968:** Mao begins the "Down to the Countryside" Reeducation Movement. Hundreds of thousands of youths, intellectuals and cadres are forced from cities into rural areas.

**April 1, 1969:** The 9th Party Congress begins, where Minister of Defense Lin Biao is designated as Mao's successor.

**September 13, 1971:** Lin Biao dies in a plane crash en route to the Soviet Union. Afterwards he is denounced by the government as a counterrevolutionary.

**1974:** Mao initiates the "Criticize Lin (Biao), Criticize Confucius" political campaign.

**April 5, 1976:** Thousands congregate in Tiananmen Square to pay last respects to the late Zhou Enlai and to protest government policies and the Gang of Four (consisting of Mao's wife Jiang Qing and Shanghai Party leaders Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen). The government orders the military to disperse the protestors.

**September 9, 1976:** Mao Zedong dies. Hua Guofeng becomes Party Chairman.

**October 6, 1976:** All members of the Gang of Four arrested as the Cultural Revolution draws to a close.

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tee.” Even allowing that any such plot existed, a secondary school student could not possibly have known about it. However, no one voiced any doubts about the accusation, nor was Bian allowed a chance to deny it. Another of Bian’s alleged crimes was “opposing the Party’s class road.” The main supporting evidence cited was President Liu Shaoqi’s daughter’s denied admission to the Attached Girls’ School in 1962 because her exam score fell short by two points. In fact, the city’s key schools used admission criteria at the time, but gave preference to the children of top leaders. Even with this advantage, Liu Shaoqi’s daughter had fallen short of the mark. The school made a point to consult Beijing’s Party Committee and the Education Ministry, and on the basis of their advice had not admitted Liu’s daughter.

Bian was also accused of “opposing Chairman Mao.” The students cited as supporting evidence an incident in March 1966, just after an earthquake had hit a suburb of Beijing. As a precaution, administrators of the Attached Girls’ School told students that if an earthquake should hit the school, they should quickly leave the classrooms. A student asked if anyone should take the trouble to remove the portraits of Chairman Mao that hung above the blackboards in each classroom. Bian Zhongyun did not answer directly, but told the students to move as quickly as possible out of the classrooms and into open areas outside of the school.

One big-character poster was posted on the door of Bian’s home in June 1966:

You Rightist who slipped through the net, you black element conspiring with the former municipal Party committee, vanguard of opposition to the Party, you bastard implementing bourgeois dictatorship over revolutionary students and teachers, you damned petty despot, come clean or face the unsparing consequences!

Another poster was affixed to her bedroom door:

Despotic dog, poisonous snake Bian, you’d damn well better listen: if you dare to continue to run roughshod over the working people, we’ll whip your dog’s hide, rip out your dog’s heart, lop off your dog’s head. You’d damned well better not place any

hopes in a comeback! We’ll cut you off without descendants and smash you to smithereens!

On June 23, 1966, the school’s student working group held a “struggle session” against Bian Zhongyun, which all students and teachers were required to attend. At the beginning of the session, several students dragged Bian onto the stage of the assembly hall, and escorted the school’s four other administrators to the front of the stage to face the assembly. The targets were forced to bend 90 degrees at the waist to show they were “bowing under their guilt.” The students responsible for exposing and criticizing the offenders mounted the stage and furiously screamed accusations at them, beating and kicking them at the same time. The exaggerated self-regard of many participants, coupled with the demands of this kind of political performance, make it difficult to imagine what the experience was like for their targets. During the struggle session, students ran onto the stage to strike at Bian with iron-clad wooden training rifles. Each time Bian fell to the floor, someone would douse her with cold water and drag her upright again by the hair to endure further criticism.

After the struggle session, Bian wrote a letter to Party officials criticizing her own “errors,” including some she had never committed, and expressing her support for the Cultural Revolution. She then requested that no violence be used against her:

During the public criticism, I was shackled and tormented for more than four hours: I had to wear a dunce cap and bow in a kneeling position while I was struck and kicked. My hands were tied behind me, and two dummy rifles used for militia training were jabbed into my back. Mud was stuffed into my mouth and smeared all over my face and body.

She never received a reply to her letter. The quotation above comes from a draft that she saved. After Bian died, her family worried that Red Guards would search their home and discover the draft, so Bian’s husband hid it in a space behind a wall until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, the working group divided the school’s administrators into four types according to the severity

of their “errors,” ranging from “relatively good” to “bourgeois rightist.”

In mid-July, the Beijing student working groups sent the majority of the city’s secondary school students to a military base for training, while those students regarded

as “problematic” were sent out to labor in the countryside. Students who qualified as “leftists” remained at the schools to deal with the teachers and administrators, whom they rounded up and divided into separate groups for “debriefing” or “self-criticism.” Teachers from the Attached Girls’ School were sent to Mashen-

## SILENCING THE DEBATE, SUPPRESSING NATIONAL MEMORY: RECENT CENSORSHIP OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

**Academic Research** In August 1999, Song Yongyi, an expert on the Cultural Revolution, was detained in China and charged with “the purchase and illegal provision of intelligence to foreigners.” Song, who is based in the U.S., had been in China collecting information on the Cultural Revolution. Despite the fact that the materials he gathered had been widely available in Chinese markets, Song was held for five months. He was released in January 2000 after growing international pressure on China.

**Film** Hu Jie’s 2006 Cultural Revolution documentary, *Though I Am Gone*, is currently banned in China. In March 2007, the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival was suspended after the film was included. Hu himself had stated in a 2005 interview, “I feel we could and should have numerous films only about the Cultural Revolution . . . because the Chinese official authority does not want us to remember the history, we non-official people should remember on our own.”

China has also banned fictional films partially set in the years of the Cultural Revolution, notable examples being Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (1994), and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).

**Textbooks** To this day, details about the Cultural Revolution are routinely left out of Chinese textbooks. In September 2006, John Pomfret of the Washington Post published an article describing the experiences of Wu Xiaoqing, whose parents were killed by Red Guards. Wu later joined the Communist Party, and in recent years was asked to write a chapter on the Cultural Revolution for a high school history textbook. Wu said that he had tried to include a critique of the Cultural Revolution in his chapter, but that this part was eventually removed.

**Commemorations** The forty-year anniversary of the Cultural Revolution in 2006 was met with silence in the state media and continued censorship efforts by the government:

- In March 2006, Culture Minister Sun Jiazheng stated in response to reporters’ questions that there would be no special events observing the anniversary, saying that China should “look to the future.”
- Top Cultural Revolution scholars in China were barred from participating in a May 2006 conference in New York commemorating the start of the revolution. The conference was organized by Song Yongyi.

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miao Primary School, where the working groups required each teacher to write a self-criticism before being processed individually. All over China, even in the border regions, educators were being handled in this same way.

At the end of July, Mao Zedong ordered all Cultural Revolution Working Group leaders to withdraw from the schools where they had been deployed. On July 31, the schools announced the establishment of their own Red Guard units. After the working group members left, schools fell under the control of these Red Guard units and the Revolutionary Teacher and Student Committees that the working groups had established. Most of the members of the Teacher and Student Committees were in fact students, and these students were also Red Guard leaders.

Members of the Red Guard unit at the Attached Girls' School enjoyed three major privileges: (1) they were allowed to conduct struggle sessions against students designated as "degenerates" based on their "bad family backgrounds"; (2) they could conduct struggle sessions against teachers and administrators without obtaining prior permission; (3) they were allowed to use violence in their attacks on students and teachers.

On August 4, 1966, the day before Bian Zhongyun was beaten to death, the Red Guard unit at the Attached Girls' School carried out a struggle session against students with "bad family backgrounds." During a struggle session in one of the classes, Red Guard members bound ten students with ropes and forced them to "explain" their "reactionary thoughts" and the "crimes" of their parents. At the end of the session, they were forced to repeat three times, "I am a son-of-a-bitch, I am a scoundrel, I deserve to die." Similar sessions took place in the other classes.

That afternoon, a group of Red Guards chanting, "No reactionary gangs allowed," burst into a classroom where school administrators were being held and beat them with wooden training rifles and leather belts. That night at home, Bian Zhongyun said to her husband, "To beat someone in my position to death is the same as killing a dog." She knew she was in mortal danger, but could think of no way out. She and her husband discussed whether it would be better to send another letter to the leadership pleading for help, or simply to make a run for it. But they did neither. The next morning, Bian's elderly housekeeper pleaded with her, "Don't go to school." But Bian Zhongyun, resigned to her fate, went to school at her usual time.

The reality in Beijing at that time was that there was no place to hide or seek refuge, much less any opportunity to resist. Knowing that the school had reached a crisis point, another vice principal, Hu Zhitao, rose at dawn on August 5 and went to the Beijing Municipal Party Secretariat seeking the official responsible for education and culture. Hoping to find some sympathy and support, she told the official that people at the school were in danger for their lives. But the only reply she received was, "Go back to the school." And so Hu returned to the Attached Girls' School in despair, and that same afternoon witnessed the murder of her colleague of many years, beaten to death before her very eyes, while she herself was seriously injured.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

To see Wang's virtual memorial to the victims of the Cultural Revolution, see [www.chinese-memorial.org](http://www.chinese-memorial.org).