

**The RW Interview**

***Running With the Red Guards***  
***Memories of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution***



*On August 18, 1966 Mao Tsetung greeted a rally of a million Red Guards in Peking's Heavenly Peace Square. At the high school and the university intense class struggle had broken out — tens of thousands of wall posters (ta-tzu-paos) had gone up in the midst of hot debate. These wall posters had quickly become a lively form of struggle among the youth. Ta-tzu-paos crammed with criticism, analysis, and quotations from Mao appeared in corridors, classrooms, and on every wall. Huge clusters of people gathered at all hours to discuss and debate the political and ideological questions facing socialist society. Early in the month Mao himself had issued his own ta-tzu-pao, urging the youth to "Bombard the Headquarters" — to criticize those revisionists sabotaging the struggle and to oppose especially those in positions of power taking the capitalist road.*

#### The RW Interview

A feature of the *Revolutionary Worker* to acquaint our readers with the views of significant figures in the various spheres of art, music and literature, science, sports, and politics. The views expressed by those we interview are, of course, their own; and they are not responsible for the views published elsewhere in our paper.

*In age the Red Guards varied from twelve to thirty, with high school students, twelve to seventeen years old, in the majority. These revolutionary youth, in their millions, played a catalytic role in the Cultural Revolution. Suspending their "regular education," they traversed throughout China's vast countryside in order to carry out the class struggle among the masses. The youth, with their spontaneity and daring spirit, had been called upon as a mighty force to bring millions of others in society into the crucial struggle to prevent the restoration of capitalism — to carry on the revolution within the revolution.*

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*Such episodes in history must not be forgotten. Imagine a whole country where the masses are truly becoming masters of society, where sacred and reactionary customs and traditions are put on trial before the court of mass struggle. Imagine a society where those who have been oppressed and exploited — those who have been on the bottom of society — dare to stand up and criticize even those in powerful positions of authority. Imagine the masses daring to run society. This is a part of the international proletariat's history that must not be forgotten — these are times and lessons that must be cherished, that must be spread.*

*Recently the RW had an opportunity to interview Yi Wang,\* who was a Red Guard in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This week, part one of this interview covers Yi Wang's early experiences as a Red Guard. In the next issue of the RW, part two of this interview will cover Yi Wang's later experiences as a "Barefoot Doctor" among the peasants.*

**RW:** You were a student in the high school in Peking where the Red Guards were first formed. Could you talk a little bit about how you first got involved, the activities of the Red Guards, and what they were trying to do? For instance, what was the role of the big character posters in the beginning and how did the youth in the Red Guards view the launching of this class struggle?

**Yi Wang:** Actually the Red Guard originated from a high school affiliated with a major university in Peking which is Tsinghua University. The Red Guard was organized kind of spontaneously initially, and originally the Red Guards were organized to criticize the old educational system. The system was actually producing quite a lot of students who did not know how to participate in revolutionary activities, did not know industry, did not know the peasants, did not know agricultural activities, did not know the problems the country was facing — but just study. This is an old tradition in China, to study hard and to become a well-off intellectual. And, at the beginning of the revolution, the target of the revolution was initially the cultural and educational problems that existed in that particular period of time in society. But certainly, from this point of view, if we talk about this today, we certainly know that the cultural aspects and the educational aspects were only reflections of the overall class struggles in the party and in society.

The Red Guard originated from Tsinghua University high school and then after a couple of months of the organization of that, after the initiation of the Cultural Revolution in I think the later part of 1966, Mao wrote to the Red Guard in Tsinghua University high school and provided a strong supporting statement. And then, after this, the Red Guard organization grew very, very fast — developed very, very fast and eventually reached every corner of the whole country.

The Red Guard in Tsinghua High School actually had quite a few people who did very good theoretical analysis of the old educational system. There were three major big character posters about "Zao fan you li," published by Tsinghua High School Red Guards, which Mao appreciated and praised a lot. "Zao fan you li" literally means there is a good reason to turnover... It's right to rebel. There were also publications which were very, very inspiring at that particular time and also written by very young persons, one by a high school student about sixteen years old.

I think, to me, prior to the Cultural Revolution, the students, high school students, had basically no idea of the class struggle, how keen this class struggle is within the party, and had no idea that

\*In Chinese the characters for "Yi Wang" mean "memories of the past."

the whole country can be led onto a capitalist road, a revisionist road — which was a very, very dangerous trend. When we actually participated in the Cultural Revolution we finally realized this. Actually the targets of the Cultural Revolution initially were some bad plays, or some movies, or some articles — all in the ideological field. And also, pretty soon, Red Guards and masses as a whole gradually realized that those bad movies, those revisionist movies or capitalist bourgeois movies were not isolated incidences. They really reflected the ideology of the capitalist roaders, and how they were going to use these as tools to educate the people, to penetrate the minds of people in order to accept the ideology of capitalism — of converting the system gradually into a revisionist-socialist way. And so the first experience, which was very, very important, was that the initiation of the Cultural Revolution gave us young people at that period of time an opportunity and a chance to look into ourselves — what was really going on. And to raise our class struggle consciousness. We would not be able to understand this otherwise without participating in this movement. So, actually at the very beginning everybody was studying political questions very hard. There was a real motivation for everybody to study, to learn, to study Mao's works, to study major articles in the newspaper. In the newspaper, there were new articles every day — very, very inspiring, something really very, very new to everybody. For example, yesterday you might have seen a particular movie and didn't realize anything, but when it was analyzed in the newspaper you realized that there was something really there and this thing could be very dangerous to the build-up of your ideology. You may gradually accept the idea and then the whole mind of you might just be changed. So I would say at that point we were very young, very energetic, and very flexible in terms of accepting different theories. So, without the Cultural Revolution we would probably have just gone along with whatever the leadership said at that particular point. And so the first important impact to the young generation was the call from Mao to participate in political struggles, to understand thoroughly what was really going on in the society. The immediate aspect we were talking about at that time were those issues relating to the educational system. As I said, if education were to have gone like that, the educated youth, the graduating students would not be able to do any hard work, any manual work, any agricultural or industrial work, any common people's work. They would just know how to read books. They were trained to be a superior person, not a common working-class member. So, in

other words, if this kind of education was to produce a great number of students, those students would only expand the three differences: the difference between manual and mental, the difference between rural and urban, and the difference between peasants and workers. So this was the immediate impact which we all understood immediately. In other words, at that point, if we kept going like this, we would certainly be the generation which would take over revisionist ideas instead of proletarian ideas. So the color of the country would turn from red into some other color. That kind of talk went on, by which we really saw the real danger of coloration of the whole country. At that time we also learned a lot about how the new China was established. What kind of hardship the older generation of revolutionaries underwent. There were a great deal of difficulties, struggles performed by the older generation of revolutionaries. In our generation, the task is how to inherit the revolutionary spirit of the older generation and then carry on the class struggle. And also at that point we were educated by the Maoist movement that the Soviet Union is an example of how a Lenin-founded country, a revolutionary country, gradually turned into a revisionist country — without any word, without very sharp conflict, very apparent conflict. There was a real danger that China would go in the same direction. So in terms of raising this kind of consciousness, I think the Red Guard played a good role in propagating those real dangers, to point out this kind of trend to the young generation, to the common masses as a whole.

And actually soon after the initiation of the Cultural Revolution, we stopped going to regular classes. We realized that the first important thing was to really know what we were doing, instead of just studying. Knowledge, scientific knowledge can be used by any class. It could be used by bourgeois classes. For example they may use technology to build atomic bombs. And if used by the proletarian class the knowledge can be used to improve the working class's well being. So studying the sciences would make no sense if they were to be used by capitalist roaders. So we really had a chance to learn some theories, to discuss it, and to actually participate in the real conflict that had gone on in the different levels of leaders under the directionship of the Liu Shao-chi group.

*RW:* What were Liu Shao-chi's group and some of these type of forces promoting at this time that the students were rebelling against?

*Yi Wang:* Liu Shao-chi's problem was not revealed until the later part of 1966. In the early part of 1966 the main target was the educational system. There was detailed, concrete analysis of how the older educational system affected our daily life as students — and especially our ideology — why the educational system was the one which could lead, which could educate students into a "Jie-ban-ren" — a kind of generation which can accept the revisionist ideology. So the conflict was primarily between the "Dang-qian-pai" (which is people in power in the schools and in the local government) and the Red Guards. And also what happened at that particular time was the struggle to wipe out four older aspects, the four olds — old and out-dated culture, ideas, customs and habits. So the whole theory at that point in time was that there were capitalist roaders in the party, in the government, and they had a network of agents in different leadership levels whose role was to guarantee the carrying out of the policy, the ideology of the capitalist roaders within the party. So the conflict I would say at that point in time was between some local Red Guards and local government officials regarding different issues, concrete issues. At that point in time we did not realize immediately that Liu Shao-chi, who was actually the president of the country, was actually the president who was promoting revisionist ideology. We had no idea that there were even struggles at such a high level of party officials, because we were educated that party members are kind of super men, super individuals — they should always be correct. Actually, they are not. Actually, there is a continuing struggle from the very moment of the founding of the party until now and this will last until classes diminish, until the elimination of classes.

So in the later part, the struggle expanded from the educational and cultural aspects into all aspects of political life, all aspects of society. Actually, people say that even Mao did not anticipate that the initiation of the Cultural Revolution would lead to such a mass movement which actually penetrated into every aspect of society. Everyone's mind was touched — a mind touching revolution — is that a right expression? So actually, not only the Red Guards participated. Even peasants, workers, different levels of government officials, and later on the PLA, the People's Liberation Army, participated. So it was converted into a nationwide, everybody's involved, revolutionary movement, which is really incredible. In other countries it would be impossible.

*RW:* Mao put out the call for the Red Guard to play kind of a catalyst role, of going out, traveling, going out

throughout the country to take the class struggle out, both into the factories and among the peasants. Maybe you could talk a bit about your own experience here. You didn't stay in Peking, right?

**Yi Wang:** No.

**RW:** What was it like for the Red Guard to go out among the masses? How did they receive you? What did you learn from them and what did you do when you went out among the masses?

**Yi Wang:** OK, that was the most exciting phase of the Cultural Revolution. We called it "Da-chuan-lien." It means "big communicating" — "big linkup." I think this was the greatest idea — actually, the greatest experience for young people. Basically, the structure of the entire country changed. What happened is the Red Guards were encouraged to go all over China. Wherever you felt there was a need for revolutionary propaganda, revolutionary linkup, you could go there and participate in the local struggle in that particular place. The train fare was basically free. And the Red Guards were very well received anywhere. Lodging and food were provided and the documents of local struggle were available to you. And then when you went there, you just went out to view the big character posters and you could also go to factories, go to the countryside, to talk to peasants. Your role was to explain what is going on in the country, what is the significance of the revolution, and to raise the consciousness of the common masses. And another task was to actually participate in the local struggles and to communicate the methodology — to introduce the experiences from your own city, or your own school, what the Red Guards were doing there, and to introduce this to the common masses. And then there were other advantages of this "big linkup" — most of the Red Guards were educated in big cities and had never been outside of the city until then.

**RW:** Was this your first experience outside the city?

**Yi Wang:** It was my first experience. Most of us had never gone outside the big cities. So we actually saw a lot of realities of our society. For example, in the countryside we saw how the "four olds" were still prevailing. How the superstitions were still going on there. How backward were the living conditions, how backward technology was used. And then we realized that this country was by far not a well balanced country. There are so many problems to be solved. If we do not understand the real problems of the society, of the country, we will not be able to carry out any revolutionary tasks. So, this led to the later go-to-the-countryside

movement — the educated youth movement — in other words, a lot of people went to the countryside.

**RW:** Where did you go and what did you do?

**Yi Wang:** The "big linkup" I did was I went to about six provinces in China with a group of four people, four Red Guards in our school. We stayed about two months in a city in the far south, a remote place where agriculture was the main economy. And basically, what we primarily did was public publications. We published, we printed, we typeset and printed major documents we brought from Peking and distributed those to the local masses. And actually, we worked very, very hard. Four of us worked day and night. Certainly in terms of enthusiasm, we didn't feel tired, we just went on and on which was a very, very good experience. We were extremely energetic and we did quite a lot of jobs which we can't imagine at this particular point. Four of us — someone was responsible for collecting all the information from China, someone typeset, and other people did the printing. Certainly the printing was the oldstyle printing machinery. And then we went straight to the big character poster areas and we distributed literature and we discussed major revolutionary issues contained in this literature. A lot of this literature was the latest talks of leaders in the party Central Committee. We primarily published those kind of things.

Also we went to the countryside and lived with peasants here for two days, there for three days. We just experienced how the country living looked like, how the peasant's daily life was. And certainly in that particular area peasants were very, very poor, certainly, and there were still substantial problems in getting fed sufficiently. Sometimes there were still beggars on the street. And so these things we hadn't realized. Because in Peking there were essentially no beggars, but in the countryside there were still people who could not feed themselves. Very little attention was really given to them. So these kind of experiences . . . it's really hard to memorize details, but when your mind goes back to that period of time you really feel a great deal of excitement. You really saw something really different, something very, very new. And you had a new mind every day almost. And then you learned a great, great deal you would not be able to learn otherwise — you would have no idea if you were retained in the classroom. In other words, after this great "big linkup" you basically had a good picture of how the entire country looked like: the general condition of

peasants, workers, what their problems were, what the major concerns of the basic masses were. This gradually led us to think what we should do afterwards. In other words, that led us to a willingness to reeducate ourselves. That came out in the later movement of educated youth going into the countryside . . . which was a very natural consequence of this kind of revolution. The normal classroom education would have led us to . . . would have taken us nowhere. We realized this. We had had absolutely no knowledge about the real conditions of China. We would have had no real feeling of people's real needs. What we would probably be able to know is just very dry knowledge from the books which certainly is not going to do us too much good.

**RW:** So when you were taking these documents out to peasants, I assume you called meetings and held discussions with the masses. As a result of this, what kind of response was there, and what kind of struggle actually went down among the peasantry in terms of changing the way things were done in the villages, for instance in terms of the social relations between people, how they carried out their daily work, relations between men and women? In other words, what kind of class struggle happened to change both the living conditions as well as the social relations between people?

**Yi Wang:** I think that in the most remote places, local masses had basically very limited access to the latest information in the headquarters which was in Peking, Shanghai, Wu Han, and where the Red Guards accumulated a great deal of experience in how to deal with different problems encountered, concrete problems. So disseminating this information was all practical and had instructional value to the local masses. Actually, you can imagine such a movement — everybody, everyone basically, even the very poorly educated peasants, . . . every one of them, almost every one of them was very enthusiastic, was very willing to participate. But they needed a revolutionary theory, some guidelines, some basic experiences — to learn from other people's experiences, in order to put their struggle onto the right track. For example, in the countryside, at that particular point, the main issue was that in the leadership circle, for example, the communal leadership, there were leaders who actually were acting as agents of capitalist roaders. In other words, they were carrying out a political line which was not beneficial to the poor peasants.

**RW:** What kind of policies were they carrying out?

**Yi Wang:** They were carrying out policies like what is happening in China today,

actually. Liu Shao-chi called for individualization of production, instead of collective production. The peasants were encouraged somehow to organize individualized production, to become... there was a polarization between peasants. In other words, some peasants through this kind of a scheme will become rich. But some peasants, for example, who have little labor, who have many children, and who have little financial resources to buy, to purchase machinery, technology, or animals to do the farmwork, they will become poor. Under the collective work scheme, people will help each other, and then the harvest will be distributed according to need somehow, certainly according to your work, but also there is a bent, a trend of distributing things according to need. In other words, if you are disabled, if you are unable to work somehow, or if you have many children, even if you cannot work too much, you will get your share in order to support your family. And older people can get support from this collective work scheme. But if you were to divide them and to make the collective groups smaller, eventually it goes to an individualized production organization. Actually, what you are doing here is that the family which has more laborers, five sons, can do well, but on the other hand, other people without these kind of conditions will do poorly, and gradually you are creating... even though those peasants were all poor peasants initially, they will differentiate, and then you are creating bourgeois... you were creating eventually landlords. There was also the idea of Liu Shao-chi of giving peasants more monetary incentives. Temporarily this might raise the harvest. It might raise somehow the total outcome of production. But in the long run it is definitely a capitalist way of doing things. It is not... nowhere close to communist ideas. There is alienation between people. There is no collective spirit involved. People will tend to become selfish. So this was the main, major issue involved in agriculture in the rural places. But however, something has to be realized — quite a population of peasants would tend to accept this kind of scheme.

**RW:** Along these lines, What kind of struggle did your group of Red Guards help lead in the provinces where you went?

**Yi Wang:** What we did — the principle was we were not supposed to be a superpower. We were supposed to become a mass ourselves as well. Our role was to propagate, to disseminate the information, to propagate the theories, to let the peasants know what's supposed to be right, what's supposed to be wrong. To give them analysis, to raise the consciousness, awareness of the existence of

class struggle. We were not cadres or the party secretaries to lead the struggle.

**RW:** But did the Red Guards also participate in some of these struggles like what you were saying about the struggle over collective production and distribution? What role did the Red Guards play in these struggles?

**Yi Wang:** Yes, certainly, we all participated. The ultimate goal is to realize the communist goal. But at that point our slogan was to increase the communist element and decrease the older feudal and capitalist elements. So in other words, this is not an overnight event. This is a process by which you gradually reach the consciousness — in practice you gradually eliminate those elements which can lead to the establishment of the capitalist bourgeois scheme. So our role was to lay out the outlook, the long-term goal of our struggle, to point out according to the Marxist theories that our long-term goal is not just to feed ourselves, is not just to live, to be better off ourselves. Our goal is for the entire human being to be well off — to eliminate bourgeois right and eventually get rid of class society. To achieve this goal the only way is to do things collectively, to do things according to the communist way instead of capitalist way, eliminate selfishness and raise the consciousness of collectiveness. As high school students we had some education, and this education could help us present this theory to the peasants in a plain language, which was very, very important... Some of them had never learned any revolutionary theory, had never read any books, some of them could not read or write at all, they were just illiterate. A major impact of such a big mass movement was to penetrate, to give those ideas to the average cell of the society, to the masses. We were one of those groups doing this kind of work and there were other people who were doing this sort of work, and the result was that the level of proletarian consciousness was actually raised. This would not otherwise have been possible, because to educate such a big population, you cannot imagine using any other means. Publications won't reach there, newspaper won't reach there, they don't read. The only power was the common leadership. And if the common leadership said you should work individually, you can make more, you can be well off, the peasants might have just gone with this. And then by doing so,

the entire social structure might just change gradually — the peasants may not realize they were actually destroying themselves. They were actually creating the phenomena of polarization, we call it the separation of extremes... you are actually creating, you're expanding those differences between rich and poor. You're producing a new type of bourgeois class. So in that regard, I think the movement, the "great linkup," was great. Everybody was involved, and this was a great army, the Red Guard was a great army to actually do this kind of job, and it penetrated to the very end of society, to every corner of society. □



## Part 2: The Barefoot Doctors

*RW:* Could you describe how and why, after being a Red Guard, you became a barefoot doctor. Also, what was the role of the barefoot doctor in the countryside and how did practicing medicine interpenetrate with the political education and class struggle that was going on?

*Yi Wang:* The concept of the barefoot doctors, first of all, came from the fact that there were not enough doctors because of uneven distribution. Under the older system doctors were principally in the big cities, and medical care in the countryside was very poor. The term barefoot doctor mainly referred to those who were originally peasants and then after brief training became knowledgeable in primary medical care. A very important point here is that they were still peasants, and the image of "barefoot" comes from this. On the one hand the barefoot doctors still did manual work (they worked barefoot in the fields), and on the other hand they were trained to provide medical care. This was a good example of combining mental and manual work — of creating a new generation of the people's servants. Because of the "barefootness" they were able to maintain closeness with the patients — there was no class difference between the doctor and the patient, and this was very important.

The barefoot doctors provided major manpower for preventive medicine. There was a very large number of barefoot doctors and they lived with the peasants. Therefore, they knew very well the medical needs of the patients and they were able to deliver preventive care. The barefoot doctors were trained very quickly and didn't require a real long-term education. Then they learned more on the job and also with later short courses. Previously doctors became no longer "barefoot" when they just learned book knowledge, so "on the job training" among the peasants was very good. Prior to this, doctors were considered superior instead of part of the masses.

The emergence of barefoot doctors was a natural consequence. First of all, we realized the need to reform the society.

\* In Chinese the characters for "Yi Wang" mean "memories of the past."

We understood through the revolution that the older scheme was not doing good for the society, for the country. And through the great linkup,\* through the real experiences in the remote places, we also understood there was a great need in the countryside. In other words, we wanted to do something concrete to actually change the current status of the society. So in going to the countryside, those educated youth, the former Red Guards who went to the countryside, their primary task was to participate as a member in the process of reforming society, to change the standard, change the way people use technology to promote science, to apply knowledge in reality. And in the meantime, which is very important, to get a chance of reeducation. We realized through the earlier phase of the Cultural Revolution that the "formal" class struggle is not going to be good for you, because first of all knowledge learned can be applied, can be used for the bourgeois class, and can also be used for the proletarian class. But the way you were educated, it was very likely that you will be a member of the bourgeois class instead of the proletarian class. That's number one thing. Number two thing is, studying pure knowledge will not make it applicable to the reality of society. In other words, previously studying was not initiated according to need. But then, after being involved in real life in the countryside, we youth realized the real needs of the people and this provided the incentive for us to study knowledge. Study was done according to the natural learning process of first practice and then theory and then back to practice. In the older system people just studied with no real idea of what to do with the knowledge, so again it could be used by the bourgeois class or the proletarian class.

There were so many former students who later on became agricultural technicians, agricultural scientists, mechanics, barefoot doctors, school teachers, and this sort of thing. This kind of education and studying was initiated according to need. They had no idea when they first went to the countryside. They just felt that there was a great need for educated youth, both politically and practically. Practically — meaning daily production, daily life. Politically — for the educated youth to get reeducation and to disseminate knowledge and information of political struggle to the peasants and to make them aware of the entire revolutionary situation in the country, to clear up the outlook of everybody. The motivation was not monetary but to "serve the people" and apply our knowledge to the real problems of the masses.

\* This refers to the "linkups" that the revolutionary youth made by going out to the masses in the countryside in order to spread and participate in the class struggle. See part one of this interview, *RW* No. 386. — *RW*.

And then in regard to my experience, how I became a barefoot doctor was because in the countryside where I went, it was a very remote place. There was essentially no transportation. All the transportation was by foot. And there was one hospital about 50 kilometers (about 30 miles) away from our village. If you had a patient with a serious disease, it was really very hard to transport the patient to the hospital just by foot. And so then, as a result, superstition and witchdoctors prevailed. For example, if you got pneumonia and you ran a high fever, what the witchdoctor would do was say something nobody can understand and then just spray cold water onto your body. Take off all your clothes and spray cold water onto you and say this cold water was medicine given by the gods. This kind of practice would certainly lead to the deterioration of the patient instead of curing the problem. But people still went to those witchdoctors because there were no other doctors available.

So when I first went there, we came with a team of fifteen or twenty Red Guards and when we went there, the first thing we realized was that about half of the village's population was actually sick. There was an epidemic prevailing there. We later on found out it was typhoid fever. This typhoid fever was transmitted by small parasites, insects, small bugs. Typhoid fever, according to the literature, was supposed to be eliminated, but it still existed in remote places. And then half of the production laborers were actually sick. And how could they participate in class struggle? How could they participate in daily production? How could they support themselves?

And so, now we bring up the issue of studying according to need. So first of all, we encountered this kind of a need — the medical need. The basic human need to be healthy in order to do other things. If you are sick you can't do anything, that's basic. And then, certainly none of us in the Red Guard team knew anything about medicine, we were just high school graduates. So what happened is, we realized that this is an emergency and there were not any doctors available. This is the kind of thing we had to try to resolve ourselves. There were no other forces or power we could rely on. So what happened is that three of us organized a small clinic. We called it a small clinic, but there were no real doctors. We gathered all the medicine we had for ourselves. In China you can buy a lot of medicine without prescription, including antibiotics. So we gathered all these antibiotics and ran a free clinic. And also we had a barefoot doctor handbook and we would look into it and then compare the description in the book with what symptoms we saw. And then finally we realized

that this was an infectious disease — typhoid fever.

There is a medicine, tetracycline — antibiotics are very effective and we had this kind of antibiotics in our possession. We used this and also chloromycetin and distributed them to the sick peasants for about a week or so. The normal, natural course of the disease runs six weeks, but when we applied this medicine people got well in a week or so. So it was very effective, and usually after two or three days of medication the high fever went down and people felt well.

We didn't realize that we were doing medical treatment, we just wanted to help people. We didn't have prior education in medicine, but the need required us to do this. Based on the basic knowledge, and because the symptoms were very obvious, we figured it out and then eventually cured the problem. But after this episode what happened is, the local peasants believed that we were doctors. They thought, you have medicine, you treated our disease, you're doctors. We explained to them we didn't have any medical education, certainly no licensing, no anything [laughs]. So not only did we treat the peasants with typhoid fever, but we did baby delivering, treated injuries, other diseases, other internal medical problems — even eventually surgery — so this is a long story.

What was really happening is that there was a need and then we tried to meet the need and the need expanded so we had to expand our knowledge. The initial education was through self-teaching, self-studying. We would discuss and then encounter a new problem, then we discussed again and then solved the problem, and through this kind of practical process we really got experienced. And I think this kind of education was actually the tradition of Chinese medicine.

Chinese medicine was really something based on experience. Based on this kind of daily practice, instead of just theories. Prior to the introduction of Western medicine there were thousands and thousands of Chinese medical doctors. They did not go to school. They didn't have any books. What they had is some herbal medicine and some acupuncture needles. How did they learn? They learned through the experience of their ancestors, they learned through other people. They gathered information from self-treatment, self-remedies from the masses. We actually experienced the same kind of process and eventually we were able to deliver babies, cure other problems like gastric ulcer, infectious problems, and eventually we also did some surgery. And during this period of time we had a chance to get some formal training through mobile PLA (People's

Liberation Army) medical teams. We also approached hospitals and learned more, and we practiced on animals, and eventually in quite a few years we did quite a lot.

One thing very interesting is that Mao, in 1965 or 1964, said that the stress of medical care should be put into the rural areas. In other words, prior to that the stress of medical care was concentrated in the cities. In the rural areas the availability of medical care was very limited. And then even a very, very small number of doctors were available, but the demand was tremendous. What happened is, the available doctors were very reluctant to handle the problems in the countryside. So service was very, very poor. And, for example, sometimes in order to get prompt medical care you had to present gifts to the doctor, in order to have him come over to your place to give treatment. So there was a lot of corruption... bourgeois right. And then came the existence of barefoot doctors — in reality the growing of our ability presented a real challenge to them. They had formal education, they were medical graduates, but the local peasants gradually lost their confidence in them, but built up a great deal of confidence in the barefoot doctors. The good thing about the barefoot doctors — the barefoot doctor on the one hand is a doctor, and on the other hand, the barefoot doctor also does manual work, field work. So in reality they are the same class, they are in the same field, they have contact every day, they know the masses. The barefoot doctors know the details of every family, know the problems of every family. They have the medical history of almost everyone in mind. And also they are available immediately, because they just live in the same village. They were mobile to a degree, but every village had their own barefoot doctors. Most of the barefoot doctors were peasants themselves, and they may have had a high school education or they may have had an elementary, primary school education. Then normally they would be trained from six to twelve months to get started — to be able to do some acupuncture, to be able to handle some herbal medicines, to give shots, to give immunizations, and gradually their ability would increase and then they would be able to do more.

The barefoot doctor was an example of how the manual and the mental work come into one body. By doing manual work you have a close relationship with the peasants. You belong to the same class which is very important. You are not something which is superior, which is in a higher rank as other doctors were, which is a very good idea and I think it's still an

important element in medical delivery in the countryside, even now. But the practice *now* in China is that some barefoot doctors now wear shoes. [laughs]

**RW:** I thought the present government in China had gotten rid of the barefoot doctors.

**Yi Wang:** No, in reality they cannot get rid of them. But now there is a trend in barefoot doctors, they are not very much encouraged. They are encouraged to wear shoes, in other words to become professionals, to run a private clinic, to become rich. So that's something entirely different, but the initial idea of barefoot doctors was very exciting. It was very good.

**RW:** When you were a barefoot doctor, what was your role in the overall class struggle that was going on in the villages, for instance in the struggle against remnants of feudalism and superstition? How was there interpenetration between the medical role and the political role?

**Yi Wang:** Certainly everybody in the village had to participate in the class struggle, in political movements. But in daily life everybody has their own role. For example, in our team we had people who raised cattle, some people who did agricultural experiments, experimental field work, and some were teachers.

Everybody in their life had a concrete aspect in terms of political reform.

In other words, as I said, as barefoot doctors our role was to fight against superstition, fight against witches, fight against the older method. We considered all those aspects as political. Political is not only theories, not only struggles, not only face-to-face conflicts. The political struggle in a sense can be specified as concrete work. Every bit of concrete work has political significance. For example, our existence challenged those formal doctors which pushed them to reform themselves in order to be well-received, in order to be accepted in the society. They had to behave better and eventually — actually — there was a scheme to have them reeducated. To have *them* participate in manual work.

**RW:** Did they resist this?

**Yi Wang:** There was a great deal of resistance certainly, but they had to do it. For example, in our commune, the practice of the reeducation of the doctors was to put them into a special village to do half-time manual work and half-time be barefoot doctors. They were not purely doctors. By doing so, they had to take off their shoes and go to the fields and then they had to be on call to see patients. This was a very good idea to do this. . . . They

had to experience the hardship of manual labor, so they understood better how it felt to be a sick peasant and so on. So all this had significance in the political sense. It was not a pure medical practice.

Actually nothing is a pure natural thing without political impact. So, as a whole everybody in our team participated in the whole movement in the village and in the commune. For example if there was a criticism meeting, we all had to participate. If there was something real political, certainly we had to participate. In our concrete job, our concrete work, we were actually participating in a real process of reforming society. □