

Xujun Eberlein
from *Swimming with Mao*

By the time I left China, I had either thrown away or lost my childhood collection of memorabilia from the Cultural Revolution— Chairman Mao buttons in various sizes and shapes, embroideries of Mao’s poems in his flying calligraphy, albums full of photographs of Mao at various stages of his revolutionary career. Nonetheless, a newspaper clipping of a black-and-white photograph of Mao found its way into a drawer in my American home.

The photograph was taken on July 16, 1966, and features Mao in a bathrobe waving from a boat. As a child I first saw this photo on the front page of China’s official newspaper, the *People’s Daily*, under the headline “Chairman Mao Enjoys a Swim in Yangtze.” At Wuhan, the seventy-two-year-old Mao had allegedly swum fifteen kilometres in China’s longest river. Like all the other kids in my fourth-grade class, I applauded our Great Leader’s superior health and strength, unaware that this action sent a powerful message to his political enemies and signalled the high tide of the Cultural Revolution. Nor did I have the slightest idea what this event would mean to my family.

In my family photo album was a picture taken almost exactly two years after Mao’s famous swim. Mao is again waving, this time as a life-size statue in the background. In front, a teenage girl wearing a Red Guard arm band and paramilitary uniform is holding a volume of the Great Leader’s writings, her braided pigtails stretching out like paintbrushes. The teenage Red Guard is my big sister, Ruo-Dan. She was sixteen.

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At the height of the Cultural Revolution in Chongqing, an industrial city in southwest China at the confluence of the Jialing and Yangtze rivers where we grew up, the Red Guards split into two factions, both sides pledging to fight to the death to defend Chairman Mao. Ruo-Dan's faction was called "8.15" because it was started by a group of students at Chongqing University on August 15, 1966. 8.15 was the first and most radical Red Guard faction in the city; it was also the faction that controlled the government institute my father headed. Each day, he went to his office and received denunciations from his ex-subordinates. Unlike Ruo-Dan, who was rarely home those days, I had the misfortune of witnessing the 8.15 faction members humiliating my father by placing dunce caps on his head or forcing him to kneel on high tables. Once an opposing faction, "Crusher," was established, it was natural for my parents and me to join.

By the summer of 1967, ruthless fighting had broken out under a scorching sun in Chongqing, one of China's four "oven cities." Each faction had obtained weapons from one or another of the city's many large military factories. Machine guns, artillery pieces, and tanks were no longer part of surreal scenes from war movies. The noise would keep me awake at night.

Until then, my family had been living on the south bank of the Yangtze, in a western-style two-storey building at my father's institute. From my bedroom window, I often contemplated the river during the day and the lights on the distant bank in the night—until one night in August 1967. I was leaning out the window excitedly watching a

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Crusher gunboat chugging up the Yangtze, when a bright red line streaked past my eyes. A shell from the gunboat ricocheted off our building and another hit the institute's thick iron gate, leaving a huge dent. We were not killed only because the shells lacked detonators and therefore did not explode—they had been made in factories controlled by competing factions.

From that night on, my mother forbade us to even approach the window facing the river. Soon after, an 8.15 Red Guard group took a fancy to our scenic institute and occupied it, forcing all the residents to move to a compound in the Central District across the Yangtze.

A week before this narrow escape, Ai Shu-Quan, my sister's close comrade, was killed. He was a leader of the armed fighting group "Fishing Boat" in Ruo-Dan's troop. Ruo-Dan and her friends buried him in the Red Guard Martyrs Cemetery in Sha-Ping Park. They vowed to carry forward his unfulfilled wish, to see the Cultural Revolution through to the end. Each of them scooped up a handful of earth to cover his coffin.

On August 10, 1967, Ruo-Dan wrote in her diary:

Armed fights intensified, whatever weapons are all used: automatic rifles! Cannons! Tanks! Even the military supplies for aiding Vietnam! I've always disliked and objected to armed fights. Now the death of Ai Shu-Quan has made me hate the fights even more. But the fights have started, if we don't carry on, I'm afraid our Sha-Ping District will be lost. I feel I must do some work in the rear.

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The hot wind of July 1968 blew the smell of blood across Chongqing. After a brief break, the factional warfare escalated to a new height. With all the schools closed, Mother, an elementary school principal, spent most of her time at home. Worried by the armed fights, Mother sent my two other sisters to hide in Grandma's home village more than four hundred kilometres down the Yangtze, and prohibited me from wandering the streets. She was, however, at a loss as to how to protect her oldest daughter, Ruo-Dan, a Red Guard in the Third Middle School.

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