Classwork Assignment: To The Storm

Answer each question in complete sentences. Be sure to explain your answers.

1. Why did the author think about the killing of the water buffalo?

2. How did she feel about the five people she helped to condemn?

3. How does she explain Lao Lin’s betrayal of her?

4. What was the significance of the verse from “My Old Kentucky Home?”

5. How does this excerpt help us understand what took place in China during this time?
To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman

by Yue Daiyun and Carolyn Wakeman

Review - Excerpt

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Book Review

To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman.
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In the spring of 1957, Yue Daiyun, a young, vibrant and leading member of the literature department of Beida University wrote a poem entitled "To the Storm" in which she welcomed the coming political campaigns as a means of acquiring "new levels of awareness" and renewing her "commitment to the revolution and the country's socialist future." Busy in her research, teaching and Party activities, surrounded by supportive colleagues and family, with a young husband and two small children and residing in privilege on the Beida campus within the household of her husband's father, a vice-president of the university, it seemed that she had little to fear personally. Indeed with her impeccable revolutionary record and with few personal or professional worries, her future seemed secure and full of promise. Within a year, however, she had been publicly criticized and labelled a "rightist," ostracized and scorned by colleagues and friends alike and separated from her family including her infant son of a few months and sent to the countryside for re-education. This sudden transformation was to be the first in a relentless cycle of events in which either Yue Daiyun or her philosophy-lecturer husband was criticized, ostracized and rehabilitated as part of the successive political movements which swept Beida and the country for the next 20 years.

This account of the revolution from within is almost entirely based on the personal observations and reflections of an articulate and well-informed young woman intellectual. She told her story to Carolyn Wakeman, and both authors are to be congratulated on producing a very interesting, well written book. Covering a time span of more than 20 years and embracing a range of political movements from the 100 Flowers, the anti-rightist campaign and the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s, through the Socialist Education Movement and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s to the anti-Confucian and Lin Biao campaign and the death of Mao Zedong in the 1970s, there is something of interest in this book for both the specialist and general reader.

At the centre of Yue Daiyun's account is the influence of events on both her intimate and extended
family embracing divergent generational experiences, backgrounds and political interests. A constant factor pre-occupying both herself and her husband is the gradual and acutely painful realization that they have bestowed a negative revolutionary inheritance on their own children, and there are some interesting insights into the working of the political system in the 1970s when Yue Daiyun battles to have her daughter returned from the countryside and her children enter university. In this respect the book has some parallels with *Son of the Revolution* written by Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, but in this case it is the political activist herself who documents her own public and domestic story.

One of the most interesting of the many themes running through the book is the recurring dichotomy between the private and public responses of intellectuals to new policies and campaigns. In public they aligned themselves with the prevailing political will, bowed their heads and accepted their counter-revolutionary status. In private they had many private doubts and misgivings and what is interesting about these doubts and misgivings is that even in times of severe harassment and extreme hardship their interior debates seem to have centered on the correctness or not of their individual behavior or the foolhardiness or not of individual political activism drawing exaggerated public attention, rather than on the political system itself.

It is perhaps the greatest indictment of the political system itself that so many like Yue Daiyun had to wait until this decade publicly to express their own private doubts and misgivings. However the book is by no means a catalogue of doubts and misgivings latterly expressed and vindicated by hindsight, for what also characterizes this personal account is the underlying hope, idealism and dedication to the long-term future which survives albeit sometimes battered so that temporary aberrations can be tolerated in its interests.

Elizabeth Croll


Excerpts from *To the Storm*

A Chain of Judgment

Outside the classroom building, wall posters attacking our magazine greeted me. Some proclaimed that Lao Lu and I advocated individual heroism and opposed Chairman Mao's thought; others announced, "The Traitor Yue Daiyun must be expelled," or urged people to "See the true face of Contemporary Heroes." Inside the door a poster declared this a "Meeting to denounce the reactionary gang of Contemporary Heroes," while an even more threatening banner warned: "If the rightists don't surrender we will smash them." In 1956 I had walked happily and confidently into this same lecture hall many times to deliver my course on the history of modern Chinese literature to perhaps a hundred eager students. Now I saw twice that many expectant faces, almost all of the teachers in the department and many students, but this time they looked at me suspiciously, condemningly, as I slid into an empty seat in the second row, feeling like a criminal about to be sentenced.

Recalling a scene from my childhood, I saw again the crowd that had gathered one summer's day in a small Guizhou town to watch a water buffalo being killed. The farmer, unable to feed his draft animal once it was too old to work in the fields, had no choice but to sell its hide for leather. We had heard that when a buffalo was about to be slaughtered tears welled up in its eyes, as if in anticipation of its fate, and I had joined the group of onlookers waiting curiously to learn whether this rumor was true.

Watching the buffalo kneel down, its eyes indeed brimming with tears, its expression suggesting that somehow it knew its destiny, I had felt enormous pity. Now as I glanced around the lecture room and saw the look of cold curiosity on the faces of those assembled to watch my own fate decided, I remembered that distant scene. Nobody spoke to me; some even seemed to wear looks of distinct satisfaction, perhaps thinking that now I would be judged, I who had been responsible for the condemnation of five other department members. The crowd seemed to be saying accusingly that now it was my turn.

Outside the window the snow kept falling, but everyone's attention was directed toward the drama about to be enacted inside those walls. Some eyes had sympathy, I could feel it, while others were merely detached, grateful that the proceedings would not concern them personally. Some were simply curious to see what would happen to such a woman, a person who had been sent to the Soviet Union and to Czechoslovakia as a representative of Beijing's students, a person who had been asked to report on her studies as a model for others, a person who had progressed so smoothly to be a high-ranking Party cadre, a person who had fallen so low.

My mind continued to race in the moments remaining before the meeting began. Again I remembered those five people I had helped to judge. Even when I had not understood the Party's decisions, even when I had disagreed, I had felt obligated to carry out official policy. A person in my position should always act with confidence to convince others, be worthy of the Party's trust, stifle any doubts or confusion, remembering always that the Party has greater wisdom than any individual, that it liberated all of China, that its judgment was therefore above question. Obedience to higher authority was pledged by everyone who joined the Party, and I had accepted this strict discipline willingly. Trusting in Chairman Mao and the Beida Party Committee, believing that they knew more than I, that their decisions must be necessary and correct, I had collected material that would be used to accuse five of my colleagues. Now I questioned those judgments.

Perhaps the others were just like me, never intending to do or say anything to harm the Party. Throughout my maternity leave, I had tried not to think about my role in that process, but now I saw a chain of involvement and accusation, with people meting out judgment and then being judged in turn. As I sat in the lecture hall, I too thought that now it was my turn...

When Lao Lin stood up in the criticism meeting and claimed that I had used poetry like opium to harm the younger generation, I felt a stab of pain that my trust and confidence could be so betrayed. In a cold voice this young man asserted that while my poem "To the Storm" had spoken of renewing my soul, it was obvious that a person with a soul would not have tried to harm the youth of China. Then he became irate, shouting. "Stand up, stand up; you must take responsibility for poisoning so many students!" In Lao Lin's words, facts had become totally distorted, meaning falsified, intentions belied.

This student had just graduated. He hoped to stay at the university as a teacher, and knew that the competition for those coveted positions was keen. Future teachers would be chosen partly because of their academic achievements, but more importantly, because of their political reliability. I understood why he was speaking against me...

The audience grew aroused, thinking all of us greedy for power. After those last charges everyone began to shout, "Stand up, you must stand up!" Finally I stood, but just for a short time, as the vice-secretary soon said, "Let her sit down and listen to the judgment of the people."

The accusations reverberated in my head. Since the facts are nothing like what I have heard, how can I
know what is right or what my future will be, I thought despairingly...

My mind struggled to absorb my new circumstances, but I couldn’t believe what had taken place. After the lecture hall emptied, I remained behind, plagued by self-doubts. Was I really a counter-revolutionary, I queried, recalling how deeply committed I had been to revolutionary ideals.

As I recalled the intensity of my commitment to the ideals of the Party, I heard footsteps approaching from the back of the deserted lecture hall. My brother, then twenty-one and a student of physics at Qinghua University, had been sitting somewhere behind me all this time. Since I was now an enemy, he dared not speak and instead slipped a sheet of paper onto my knee as he walked past. All I saw was his back as he headed toward the door. On the paper was written one verse of the Stephen Foster folk song, "My Old Kentucky Home."

Weep no more, my lady,
Oh, weep no more today!
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,
For the old Kentucky home, far away.

We had always been very close, especially after 1940 when I would carry my brother on my back as we sought refuge from the Japanese air raids...

Guiyang was only bombed six or seven times, but nearly every day the tall signal pole in the center of the city, just visible from our house, would raise one yellow ball of woven bamboo, meaning enemy planes were near and we must prepare for an attack. When two red balls appeared, we knew the planes were very close and we must immediately take shelter. Many times we sought refuge in a village outside the old city walls, fearing that we might be buried alive in the crowded bomb shelters. We never knew if our home would be destroyed while we were gone, so my mother would carry a bag containing food, money, and valuables, and my baby sister as well. I was nine and strong enough to hoist my brother onto my back for the half hour walk to the village. My father, then an English teacher in a Guiyang middle school that had moved outside of the city to Wudang because of the danger of enemy bombs, came home only on weekends and missed most of those hurried treks...

After dinner we children would chase away our fear of the darkness by singing the Western folk songs I had learned in my middle school. I taught my brother one about San Francisco and one about hibiscus flowers in Hawaii, but our favorite was "My Old Kentucky Home." Sitting on the porch overlooking the river, we would sing this simple two-part harmony. Thus the folded paper my brother dropped into my lap evoked all the memories of our childhood together, and the closeness we had shared in that peaceful time now so far away. I understood that he hoped to ease my present pain by reminding me of our country home, reassuring me that such good times would come again.

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