

Confronting the past

After two decades in Europe, Chinese artist Ma Hui returned to the site of her childhood in China's Ningxia province. She grew up during Mao's Cultural Revolution and spent eight years in the countryside, where she was 'reformed through labour.' Her husband, Dutch journalist Willem Offenbergh, accompanied her back to her hometown.

She poses hesitantly in front of a mural with The Great Helmsman portrayed as the rising sun over the People's Republic. Next to her is a dummy in a Mao-suit, a banner around his neck reads 'punish the contras.' "My father Ma Xin was humiliated in exactly the same way, with a jester's hood over his head full of accusations," says Ma. "He was supposed to have been part of a conspiracy of bourgeois landowners, taken downtown with other so called counterrevolutionaries and displayed to a cheering crowd. Denounced as a capitalist-roader, accused by Rebel Red Guards of implementing policies directed against Chairman Mao, he was ultimately prosecuted and publicly beaten."

As she speaks, Ma uncomfortably rubs sudden goose bumps on her arm. She shivers as if to shake off bad memories, hiding true hurt with laughter, the Asian way to deal with pain or embarrassment. During a recent visit to a replica reeducation camp in Zhang Jia Kou, in northwestern China, Ma relives a once-familiar nightmare of humiliation, great uncertainty and a total loss of identity.

There, the revolutionary song *Long Live Chairman Mao Zedong* plays continuously over the loudspeakers, and red posters and banners hang on every wall. A vendor sells Mao suits, Mao caps and other regalia, next to an original copy of director Zhang Yimou's first successful film *Red Sorghum*, filmed in a village tavern with walls of mud, adorned with red lanterns that hang above enormous rice wine vessels. Gong Li, darling of the Chinese cinema, and whose face can be seen advertising perfumes on every bus stop wall and billboard around

the country, starred in this film as a reluctant widow kidnapped by a peasant boy. Yellowed photographs remind visitors that *Red Sorghum* was her first big break. Further on, tourists wander through remains of cardboard décorations, sets of popular past TV soaps and art house productions-turned-contemporary cult films. Ma smiles when she recognizes some of the scenery, but shivers again when passing a line of mud houses plastered with revolutionary banners.



Facing up to an old foe: Ma Hui with a picture of Mao Zedong

What made her decide to come back to Ningxia, to the people that interned her without pity when she was just a child? Why, after 20 years abroad, did she leave her comfortable surroundings, her charming house in Amsterdam and a spacious atelier in Amstelveen, the Netherlands? Was it only to dig up a cruel past?

"I feel it is the right time for it," she says soberly. At 50, Ma is a well-established artist in Europe, with exhibitions in Switzerland, Belgium and Denmark; her son and daughter are almost grown up and she feels sufficiently self-assured to face past ghosts. Perhaps, also, a collective Chinese self consciousness that emerged during the successful Olympic Games may have stimulated her curiosity about the Motherland.

Over the years sketchy details of her childhood during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) have surfaced from time to time. But the complete picture was always hard to assemble. She remembers bits and

pieces, inconsistent details of an untold story. Consciously or unconsciously, her mind retrieves only scattered pieces of a larger puzzle. She was just eight or nine at the time. Ma has repressed most of the ghastly details of what happened during this dreadful era. But this rudimentary reconstruction of a village under revolutionary siege triggers new memories for Ma, of herself as a six-year-old witnessing her first execution. She remembers it in great detail as we are driving back to Yinchuan. "I

joined classmates not knowing what it entailed," she says. "A public execution. There was a huge crowd. The convicted, gagged and hooded, were put on a truck and paraded through town. At the execution site their crimes were read out aloud. Including the death sentence — a bullet in the chest from a soldier's gun, and after that a shot of mercy at close range in the neck with a pistol."

She points to an open field near the banks of the Yellow River. "It was right on this spot. After the execution the crowd pressed forward to get a closer look at the victims. I

had the misfortune to be the smallest child, and I was standing right in front. In the melee I almost fell on one of the bodies, that of a middle-aged man. My face was pushed very close to his. It was bloody. The colour of fresh blood, I will never forget it." She mimics how she tried to ward off the obtrusive and the curious, to no avail. Again she shivers. "Witnessing executions was a sort of routine, it was part of school education. Somebody had to be made an example of, clearly with the intention to show you that those who refused to obey the law had it coming to them. According to a well known saying in those days, it paid to 'kill the chicken to scare the monkey'."

Ma's later childhood may have been traumatic, but her early years were not. Before the Cultural Revolution her family enjoyed a privileged position. Their home in Yinchuan had many bedrooms and two bathrooms. Her parents counted an au-pair, a cook, a driver and a secretary among their employees, and their walled garden, full of flowers and fruit trees, was well-

maintained by several gardeners. Across the street an ancient western pagoda called Xi Ta, stood out as a famous landmark. Their house was razed to the ground during the Cultural Revolution and now a uniform set of apartment blocks with shops on the ground floor stands in its place. But the temple is still intact. Ma shows how she used to play hop-sotch, right in front of it. The entrance gate's fully-decorated roof has curled ends and leads to a lush green court with benches, hidden from the city's clamour. It is "as if time has been frozen," she sighs. But a closer inspection of the premises reveals that inside the temple a massive, gold leaved Buddha-statue has been replaced with a fake copy of Edgar Degas' masterpiece *Ballet at the Paris Opera*.

However the pagoda tower is untouched. It rises 11 stories high above the temple complex. "As a child I had to take great leaps to climb the steep stairs. It all looks so much smaller to me now. Some of the floors were without windows or lighting. It used to be scary and exciting at the same time. The view over the city made for a real climax," says Ma.

The old guard remembers Ma's father's time in office as a party vice-chairman. "Ma Xin was not corrupt like the others," he says. "If you brought him a bunch of apples for services rendered, he would get angry."

Suddenly Ma Hui sees images of the past flash by — of when an angry crowd gathered in front of Xi Ta demanding her father come out. Rumor had it that he was hiding in the tower. In reality friends in the country had offered him shelter.

Not much later, in 1967, Ma Xin, of Muslim background, vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party in Ningxia, and her mother, a Catholic medical doctor, were imprisoned. They were part of the old administration that was replaced by Revolutionary Committees. Ma Hui, her two sisters and three brothers, were separated to take part in Mao's Thought Reform through Labour movement. Ma, the second youngest in her family at nine years old, was sent to the countryside in Youai, a village 15 kilometers from the provincial capital Yinchuan.

She shows her weathered hands. "I had to help cut weed and plant rice, starting at

five o'clock in the morning, standing ankle-deep in icy water. Carrying heavy stones to a building site was also part of the job. The support straps on my back caused deep bloody scratches."

Anyone in China would have known that hard labour had nothing to do with reform. The family's denunciation as 'contaminated' was strictly a punishment. But most of the population colluded with this brutality, driven by fear of Red Guards or rival factions, by devotion to Mao, or a desire to settle personal scores. Students reported their teachers to the authorities, children reported their parents. "It was a time of collective madness," says Ma.



Modern-day Yinchuan, capital of Ma Hui's native Ningxia province

The village of Youai was once surrounded by vast fields of maize. They have gone forever. Today concrete roads connect modern housing estates. Ma used to use the sun shining upon a splendid open view of the faraway horizon over the fields as inspiration for her graphic artwork, but the unbroken view has disappeared. The city has swallowed the entire village, and part of the Yellow River. Most of the peasants she knew sold their land to project developers. They were moved en masse in 1997 to a modern housing block, and Ma causes a small riot when she visits farmer Wang Ren and his wife who took care of her in 1967. He has just turned 87 and his wife must be in her nineties. Others join the merry gathering, including village chief Peng Li who once forced her to carry heavy stones on her back. He shakes her hand smiling, and she laughs her Asian laugh.

Chinese prefer not to remember the Cultural Revolution. Most tend to look ahead to the future. There is no use reminiscing on a dreadful past, a time of severe poverty and naked repression. A final judgment

of the Cultural Revolution is blurred by present-day contradicting sentiments. Pain and feelings of loss of ideology persist, as does unease with how material wealth often trumps the value of human life. The peasants of Youai prefer to suppress memories of hardship and brutality and choose to remember a sense of solidarity among the common people with a common goal. An 'iron rice bowl' job for life in one of the many state-owned factories ensured the elderly would be cared for in their twilight years, and to many of them, Mao still represents a father figure, or a deity — a substitute emperor in green uniform, harsh but just. According to them, life may have been full of injustices but Mao was not to blame. It was the fault of party leaders. Mao himself had only the best of intentions. Nowadays it is commonly acknowledged that Mao was 70 percent good and 30 percent bad — in spite of famine, civil war and his disastrous economic reforms. To these peasants, Mao's touch guaranteed nothing less than paradise. The myth of Mao remains alive to this day.

At least it is to the villagers of Youai. During dinner later that evening, they brag about their modern apartments and quality of life. But something is missing. "It is a pity that this day and age has nothing to offer spiritually," complains a man with a weathered face. "It was totally different in Mao's era, wasn't it? Those were the days!" His statement results in gestures of approval from everyone in attendance, except for Ma. In September 1976, she was the only one in her circle of friends who did not cry at Mao's funeral.

To Ma, the Ningxia reunion is a double-edged sword, and she takes leave of her hosts with mixed emotions. In many ways they have remained the same. They still hold many of the same opinions and live together in the same spot. Though the distance between herself and them rapidly dawns on Ma, she does not appear disappointed. "For me the positive experiences of this trip are most important. They will help me digest a painful past," she says. But then she suddenly exclaims, "I do not want to return. Never ever!" And in the silence of her hotel room, she begins to sob quietly.

By Willem Offenbergh. Printed with permission.