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Out-Sourcing the Inquisition: "Mass Dictatorship" in China's Cultural Revolution

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Postscript

Historians of events like those cantered on Case Group 28 rarely get to meet the individuals we study, read, and write about. At best, we may be able to locate one or two of the prominent public figures our research touches upon such as—in this case—the Peking University Red Guard leader Nie Yuanzi or Qinghua University’s feisty Kuai Dafu. But, curiously perhaps, for us to have a conversation decades later with an ordinary “member of the revolutionary masses” personally involved in the attempt by Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolutionary leadership to build a case against PRC President Liu Shaoqi is unusual. I, for one, never expected I would one day be sitting face to face with “Fan Chunzhen” (whose real name, I can now divulge, is Fang Chunzheng), but that is just what I did in the summer of 2011. More or less for fun, I had entered his name in my computer’s search engine and to my surprise found a picture of him in the blogosphere, an informal recent snapshot showing him in the company of friends in Beijing. With little hope of success, I asked fellow Cultural Revolution historian Tang Shaojie (translator of Ludwig Wittgenstein into Chinese and member of the Qinghua University faculty of philosophy) if perhaps he could locate Fang for me. Not only did he manage to, but Tang also managed to convince Fang to talk to me.

On a stifling hot day in the first week of July 2011 I arrived by taxi on Qinghua’s vast (3.95 km²) campus in northwest Beijing. I had brought with me a stack of photocopies of the kind of archival texts I had used when writing my article, to give to Fang. He turned out to be very much interested in finding out when and where I had gotten hold of these texts: he had himself been totally unaware of their existence, but was looking forward to reading them. He believed they had in all probability somehow been “liberated” (my word - the equivalent in late sixties Abbie Hoffmanesque English of “stolen”) from an archive by the man who, he said, had been behind the accusations against him and the other members of Case Group 28 of having “opposed Premier Zhou” etc. Fang knew full well who it was: and as it happened, he said, “just to show there is some justice,” he had died suddenly and unexpectedly in the late 1990s, the very week he retired.

I explained to Fang that I had picked up the documents in the late 1990s in Beijing’s Panjiayuan flea market, and Fang said it may well have been the man’s children who just got rid of the papers after their father had died. Fang’s own “case” (the events that the file on him documented) had taken a full ten years to be cleared up: from the summer of 1967 to 1978. During all that time his membership in the CCP remained on hold as he was being “investigated again and again,” and even though every other person involved insisted he was “OK,” that one man kept “blocking a formal rehabilitation” every time.

For the better part of an afternoon, Fang talked to me about “his” Cultural Revolution and what he could remember of Case Group 28, which turned out to be little. Near the end, pointing at the photocopies I had brought along, I said to him “Once you read these things, maybe you will want to write your own version of events?”—but Fang showed no real interest in doing so. He had had a good professional career, he explained, after 1978 and been a good communist party member. The only thing he might now want to try to do, after reading the documents, was get hold of some of the other persons involved in the work of Case Group 28 “to find out what had happened to them.”

The late Bernard S. Cohn once observed—in “An Anthropologist among the Historians: A Field Study” (*The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Winter 1962)—how, in loose terms, “research in history is based on finding data” while “research in anthropology is based on creating data.” By anthropological standards, lacking any kind of training as indeed I do, I found myself wanting in creativity: informative as it was to me, my conversation with Fang created very little that I now would feel comfortable labelling “data.” Talking to him was a pleasant experience, a nice way of spending an afternoon. He struck me as a decent man, a *Mensch*, who had just ended up becoming embroiled in a political mass movement very much by accident.

Michael Schoenhals
Lund, September 2011