HANDOUT 4

The Attack on the Arts

Music and other performing and visual arts were a major focus during the Destroy the Four Olds campaign and throughout the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao's wife, who had been an actress during her younger years, used her influence to shape a new style of drama, music, dance, and visual arts that reflected the ideals of Maoist China and rejected traditional Chinese styles. All Western music was banned, since it was linked with "bourgeois capitalism." Classical musicians, because of their expertise and appreciation of music that originated in Europe, were detained and persecuted by unruly mobs. The following excerpts are the recollections of a famous violinist from China, Ma Sitson, who had escaped only months before and who shared this account with the readers of *Life Magazine*.

In May last year I had no idea how far this new movement would go, nor did anyone else. Conditions were tense, but in the past they had been even more tense . . . . I was used to it. You had to get used to it. In early June, however, I got word that tatzepao *(big character posters) attacking me had been put up at the Music Academy. Such posters are the hallmark of the Great Cultural Revolution. Scrawled on newspaper or butcher paper, they carry news, accusations, confessions, announcements, or simply praise for Chairman Mao.*

A friend suggested that my wisest move would be to write a self-criticism before things went any further. My wife and daughter Celia agreed. I hesitated; I had nothing to confess, and besides I didn't like the idea of putting myself forward. Finally my daughter wrote a statement for me. It said that I supported the Cultural Revolution enthusiastically and, though I did not admit to specific wrongdoing, that I was willing to accept reform.

Ma Sitson's efforts to insulate himself from criticism and punishment were futile. He was detained by authorities for fifty days, and then he and a few others were loaded onto a truck and returned to the Central Music Academy where he had formerly been the president.

As we entered the big gate we saw a great crowd of people—students, workers, soldiers, even children. We were prodded off (the truck) and no sooner had I set foot on the ground than someone dumped a bucket of paste over my head. Others stuck tatsepao on my body and rammed a tall dunce cap labeled "Cow Demon" on my head. A cardboard plaque around my neck said, "Ma Sitson, agent of the bourgeois opposition." Later another sign calling me "vampire" was added. Finally they gave each of us a copper basin—a "death bell"—and a stick to beat it with. . . . It was a wild scene. Our assailants acted as if they had gone crazy. We were paraded across the campus to the din of shouted slogans. All the way people hit out at us and spit upon us, especially the children. I recognized the distorted faces of some of my own students. . . . This was only the beginning of months of degradation and harassment.

Every morning and evening we had to sing together—and sometimes alone—a disgusting song composed by the son of the professor of conducting. It was called The Howl of the Black Gangsters *and it went:*

I am a cow-headed monster
I have sinned, I have sinned
I must come under the people's dictatorship
Because I am an enemy of the people.
I must be very frank,
If I am not, smash me to bits!

It ended on the seventh note with a crescendo to make it sound ugly.

None of this was pleasant, but the most nerve-wracking thing was the random harassment. At any time revolutionary students, who by the middle of August were calling themselves Red Guards, could order us out of our rooms. "Come out!" they would say. "Bow your head!" Then, because I had been labeled "vampire" for ill-treating workers (namely my ex-chauffeur) they would force me to recite my "crimes" over and over. The children were the fiercest of all. They made me crawl on my hands and knees. On several occasions they tore up my room, pulled the bedding apart and scattered my books. One boy took my quilt and threw it up on the roof, remarking, "So long as it is revolutionary, no action is a crime."

These Red Guards had no leaders, and we were fair game for any of them. It was anarchy.

Be able to . . .

1. Why were the arts a target of the government during the Cultural Revolution? What types of art and music did this campaign seek to wipe out? How?
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing his name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about his life.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this man.

The excerpts are from Ma Sitson's "In the Hands of the Red Guard," *Life Magazine*, June 2, 1967 (28–29).

1st Fold Here

2nd Fold Here

Ma Sitson