

Science During the Cultural Revolution in China: The Story of Wang Ying-Lai

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Description

The story of Chinese scientist Wang Ying-Lai, inventor of synthetic insulin, who was caught in the anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution in China, a time when scientific research stalled and scientists were oppressed.

Keywords

Science, China, Cultural Revolution, Inventor, Insulin, Synthetic, Synthesize, Diabetes, Nobel Prize, Nomination, Decadent, Western, Mao Zedong, Gang of Four, Jiang Qing, Communism, Intellectuals, Oppression, Communes, Manual Labor, Reign of Terror, Biochemistry, Research, Occupation, Japan, Shanghai, Institute, Cambridge University

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Transcript

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BOYD MATSON, reporting:

This is People's Square in Shanghai. It's rather calm and empty right now. Earlier this year, thousands of students were out here demonstrating for more personal freedom. During the Cultural Revolution, hundreds of thousands of students came here to demonstrate for more control. Shanghai's seen some rather turbulent times in this century. Many people here still carry the scars of those political ups and downs. Dr. Wong Li Hi turns 80 in November. In his prime, he was one of the most famous scientists in all of China, a man many believe should have won the Nobel Prize, but politics and fate intervened. The histories and Shanghai and Professor Wong have intertwined during much of the 20th century. His story is a personal reflection of the general rising and falling fortunes of the city. There's a saying here – the cleverest people come from Shanghai. Professor Wong is certainly clever, but he was born in Quemoy, confirming what would be a truer statement – the cleverest people come to Shanghai. British, French, and American forces started running the city in the 1800's, giving Shanghai a mixture of East and West cultural values that have proved irresistible to China's intellectuals. It was the Western concept of Marxism, which appealed to Mao Zedong and others in 1921 when they held the first meeting of the Communist Party in this building in Shanghai.

Unidentified man: First Japanese regular army troops to arrive in Shanghai...

MATSON: When Japan marched through the streets of Shanghai in the 1930's, life here changed dramatically. Eventually, Japan would occupy much of China. People fled the cities. Professor Wong left the country.

Unidentified man: ...chasing the Chinese with tanks.

MATSON: After fleeing China, Professor Wong became the first Chinese citizen to gain acceptance to

Cambridge University's biochemistry school in England. At the end of World War II, Dr. Wong returned home to find Shanghai was a devastated city in the midst of civil war and chaos. After chairman Mao and the Communists took over in 1949, they set out to return China and Shanghai to greatness. Dr. Wong was asked by the new leaders to help rebuild biochemistry in China. Professor Wong set what seemed like an impossible goal to make the Shanghai Institute the first place to synthesize insulin for diabetics.

DR. LI HI WONG (Shanghai Institute): It would mean great encouragement to our fellow countrymen to tell people that the Chinese are not inferior to any of the other people.

MATSON: And you did it. You developed a synthetic insulin for that. The world recognized it and wanted to give a Nobel Prize or at least wanted to nominate you for one.

DR. WONG: It was during the Cultural Revolution and the Communists thought it was better not to apply for Nobel Prize.

MATSON: A Nobel Prize was considered too decadent and Western during the Cultural Revolution. The only things worth celebrating were the ideas of Chairman Mao. Professor Wong went from being a potential Nobel Prize winner to a virtual prisoner. He was stripped of his leadership at the institute. For 2 months, he was forced to live away from his wife and stay in this building on campus and study the thoughts of Chairman Mao. For 10 years, he was forced to abandon most of his research.

DR. WONG: There was a great calamity for the whole country, not just science alone.

MATSON: Thousands of Chinese were uprooted from Shanghai and other cities and forced to labor in communes in the countryside, but it went on for 10 years. Shanghai was the birthplace of this radical movement. Shanghai is where the Cultural Revolution really got going.

DR. WONG: The home of the gang of four.

MATSON: Toward the end, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who was part of the gang of four, actually ran the Cultural Revolution from the top of the Peace Hotel in Shanghai. The reign of terror came to an end when Mao died and the gang of four were arrested. Professor Wong and other intellectuals have been allowed to return to their work. Ironically, under the new economic freedom in China, if Professor Wong had invented synthetic insulin today, he'd be allowed to sell it and probably earn a small fortune. Whenever we ask people if any good came out of the Cultural Revolution, they would immediately say no and then they would add, "At least, it taught us never to let that happen again."