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IT'S RIGHT TO REBEL: 
THE STORY OF CHINA’S RED GUARDS, 
1966-1968

BY
JOHN KNIGHT
B.A., OBERLIN COLLEGE
OBERLIN, OH 2000

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS 
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN THE DEPARTMENT 
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SOUTH ORANGE, NEW JERSEY
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IT'S RIGHT TO REBEL:  
THE STORY OF CHINA'S RED GUARDS, 1966-1968  
THESIS TITLE

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THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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UNIVERSITY, SOUTH ORANGE, NEW JERSEY.
To my Parents
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an analysis of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the Red Guards that helps to explain the rationale behind the students' participation and sheds light on why the movement failed. The thesis argues that while radical elites, at least in the beginning, clearly set the Cultural Revolution's agenda, this agenda was sincerely believed in and welcomed by most students. This enthusiasm was owed in part to their years of political indoctrination, but students were also exhilarated because they saw, in the Red Guards, a chance to either expand or defend their positions or power within the overall hierarchy of the People's Republic of China. Students, as Red Guards, were therefore fighting not only for the abstract cause of Maoism, but, perhaps more importantly, also for real, concrete goals that would affect their daily lives. This is perhaps why, although elites first set the agenda of the Cultural Revolution and then encouraged students to meet that agenda, students eventually surpassed this agenda to such a degree that elites found themselves forced to quell the very movement they had initiated.

The Cultural Revolution, despite its stated aims and the possibly noble intentions of its participants, ended in carnage. This thesis seeks reasons for this bloodshed. Problems within the medium of dazibao, the lack of any oversight committee to settle Red Guard disputes, Communist China's possible idealization of her violent past, and the clear intellectual immaturity of many participants, are all offered as contributing factors to the movement's violence. Ultimately, though, what may have been the principal reason behind the horrific failure of the Cultural Revolution was Maoism. Maoist concepts such as "trust the masses," "one divides into two," the cycle of dow-di-gai, and its claim of global significance, likely all played a role in the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution.
INTRODUCTION

Chinese student organizations, known as Red Guards, first appeared in the summer of 1966, near the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Although it seems Red Guards arose spontaneously, they clearly benefited from elite encouragement, and it is probably fair to say that Red Guards would not have thrived, let alone survived, without this elite backing. It thus seems there was a twin dynamic of prodding from above and below that continued throughout the entirety of the Red Guard movement, frequently blurring the distinctions between China’s leaders and the led. Understandably, this blurriness has caused some observers to question whether Red Guards were acting from their inner-convictions or were simply overly responsive to elite manipulation; indeed, this question is a central source of tension found in this thesis. A possible way to alleviate this tension comes from examining the Maoist concept of the “mass line.” While the mass line is not explicitly dealt with in this thesis, it nonetheless may be a useful tool to understand the top to bottom dynamic of the Cultural Revolution.

The mass line served as the conceptual framework by which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interacted and led the Chinese people. It operated through a process known as “from the masses, to the masses.” The idea was that the scattered, unsystematic, and perhaps unrealized ideas of the “masses” would be gathered, concentrated, and correctly understood by the Chinese Communist Party whose members would then take these concentrated ideas back to the “masses” and promote them, whereupon the masses would embrace these ideas as their own and act accordingly. The mass line was a way in which a vanguard party could first unleash the spontaneous
revolutionary energy of the masses, and then guide this energy toward its proper
revolutionary goal. To many Westerners, this theory will likely seem elitist since it
involves those with power first setting an agenda and then encouraging participants to act
according to that agenda. Yet, while this argument is certainly valid, it is important to
note that it was likely not from this angle that Maoist practitioners saw the mass line. As
will be explained in chapter 1, Maoism to Maoists was an objective truth; if all
participants had their latent "Maoist" tendencies, then the duty of a vanguard party was to
show them the proper way to express these tendencies. Consequently, the mass line, in
its ideal, was a process of guiding, not a process of manipulation. Therefore, although it
was certainly party elites who set the agenda and encouraged mass participation, what
ultimately made the mass line work was the enthusiasm of the Cultural Revolution's
participants. And similarly, as this thesis shall argue, what primarily motivated the Red
Guards was the fervor of its members.

Tens of millions of Red Guards actively participated during the early years of
China's Cultural Revolution, and understanding why is one objective of this thesis.
Chapter 1 examines the stated goals of the Cultural Revolution and the way in which
Maoist ideology influenced these ends. It also examines dazibao, or big character
posters. The chapter suggests that, given the intended goals of the struggle, dazibao were
perhaps an unsuitable method for the large-scale debate of the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter 2 traces the beginning of student unrest, from the time of Professor Nieh
Yuanzi's first big character poster until the dismissal of the work teams. It argues that by
ignoring standard channels of party hierarchy, choosing instead to appeal directly to the
student "masses," Nieh, through her big character poster, initiated a new process that
challenged students to think for themselves, all the while ensuring that such
“independent” thought remained within the confines of China’s dominant Maoist
paradigm. Next, chapter 3 describes radical elites’ intentions for the Red Guards, seeing
them as “revolutionary successors” who would gain revolutionary experience from
making revolution. Radical elites wished that students would challenge conservative
elements within the party; however, at this time, conservative elites, by encouraging
students to direct their energy at destroying the “four olds,” were able to temporarily
safeguard their positions of power. Chapter 4 then recounts the radicalization of the Red
Guard movement, through elite-sponsored activities such as mass rallies and chuan lian.
During this time, radical Red Guards became increasingly aligned with Maoism, seeing
in this theory a way to challenge the hierarchical nature of the Chinese Communist Party.
This chapter argues that the end of 1966 was when leftist Red Guards came closest to
fulfilling the role radical elites had assigned to them. Yet, it would not be fair to say that
Red Guards were mere pawns of an elite-driven game. Further motivation behind student
behavior is shown in chapter 5, which looks at the class make-up of the Red Guards.
This chapter maintains that students, to a large degree, formed competing Red Guard
organizations based upon the “class” to which they belonged, and it was within
competing definitions of “class” that each organization sought to either defend or expand
its position of power within the class-based society of the People’s Republic.

This thesis, having thus examined some of the factors that undoubtedly motivated
the Red Guards, then presents possible reasons behind the horrible violence that engulfed
the movement. Chapter 6 shows how, after the January Storm, Red Guards became
bogged down in factional strife. This strife may have risen in part from students’
understanding of Maoism, specifically its claim that “one divides into two.” Chapter 7 searches for more causes behind this violence. In addition to looking at Communist China’s possible idealization of her violent past, the chapter makes further study of the theory of Maoism, explaining the cycle of *dou-di-gai*. Finally, chapter 8 sketches the end of the Red Guard movement, from the entrance of the People’s Liberation Army until the advent of *shang shan xia xiang*. It suggests that, ironically, Red Guards were criticized and their movement was crushed for behaving in the very way that Maoism encouraged. Perhaps then it is Maoism, itself, that bears much of the responsibility for the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution.
CHAPTER 1

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

This chapter attempts an argument uniting some of the ideological underpinnings of the Cultural Revolution with the process of writing big character posters. It asserts that the struggle against revisionism took place within a framework conceived as proletarian democracy, a forum which allowed the free dissemination of Maoist opinion. Participants in this “democracy” had previously received the ideological training Maoists thought necessary to ensure the expression of acceptable views. The chief means for this expression was to be through the writing of big character posters, or dazibao. However, in spite of prior ideological training of participants, and despite the intentions of Maoist elites, dazibao were often of such poor quality that they did little to promote China’s socialist progress.

Against Revisionism

The Chinese Cultural Revolution’s three stated aims were to rid China of its feudal and bourgeois past, to reenergize the world communist movement, and to create a new type of proletarian democracy in accord with Maoist conceptions of freedom.¹

Accomplishing these three goals was believed possible through battling revisionism. Lin Biao expressed the perceived importance of this battle when he described the Cultural Revolution as being “aimed precisely at eliminating bourgeois ideology, establishing proletarian ideology, remolding people’s souls, revolutionizing their ideology, digging

¹ Chin Szu-kai asserted, “The declared objective of the Chinese communist Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution... is to push socialism to a new stage, to create a new era in the international communist movement and to mold an example that is permanently resistant to any erosive force of revisionism.” See Chin Szu-kai, “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” in Communist China 1966, vol.2 (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1968), pp.7-8.
out the roots of revisionism and consolidating and developing the socialist system.”

Battling against revisionism was seen as a process by which old ideas were discarded so that new, superior ideas could surface. By warding off revisionism, the other goals of the Cultural Revolution, such as proletarian democracy, would come into focus. Fighting revisionism was both a common thread linking the goals of the Cultural Revolution together, as well as fertilizer from which these goals would grow.

Revisionism can be described as the remnants of bourgeois ideas within a socialist society. It is important to note the emphasis on bourgeois ideas, thereby making “revisionism” a difficult subject to eradicate since anything residing within the realm of abstraction is by nature hard to define. The necessarily broad definition favored by the Chinese government, according to Julia Kwong, was that “anything that did not accommodate communist ideals was considered bourgeois, including advocating the pursuit of individual happiness, attacking Mao’s attempts to implement socialist policies, or promoting compromise within traditional society.”

Bourgeois ideas were seen as running away from, instead of toward, the goals of China’s dominant, Maoist vision. Hence, there was a perceived dichotomy between the concepts of Maoism and revisionism.

The Cultural Revolution aimed to unite Chinese people behind Maoism and against revisionism. Similar to a metaphysical “truth” by which society naturally abides, it was assumed that Maoism represented the ultimate goal for a rational humanity.

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Maoism was seen by Maoists as the scientifically qualified next step in China's ladder of progress. Preventing China from taking this necessary next step was the shadowy, nebulous entity of "revisionism." Proletarian democracy was seen as the medium by which the masses would argue, debate, and ultimately agree upon the best way to rid China of this revisionism. Maoism, as a perceived objective truth, would naturally use its hegemonic quality to guide and shape this debate. This process is elucidated by Chen, who wrote, "Mao has attempted, by means of the Cultural Revolution, to achieve the desired results of overcoming revisionism... and maintaining socialist legality and democracy while preserving the dictatorship of the worker-peasant alliance." In other words, proletarian democracy would not conflict with proletarian dictatorship. This was because Maoism, as a "natural truth," would be spontaneously expressed through the actions of the broad masses of Chinese people.

Maoists believed the lifting or lessening of coercive restraints would automatically enable the masses to express their inherently Maoist tendencies. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution, for this reason, saw the encouragement from high officials regarding free expression of opinion. Livio Maitan described a campus meeting soon after the withdrawal of the work teams in late July 1966:

At the same time as the work teams were being withdrawn, renewed appeals were made to students to elect committees and hold democratic debates which respected the opinions and rights of minorities. T'ao Chu, for instance, took his solicitude for the minority so far that in a speech at Peking University he even suggested that minority speakers should be given a round of encouraging applause.

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5 Chen, p. 380.
7 Maitan, p.97.
This “lifting of the lid” allowed a large and previously ignored constituency access to public participation. David and Nancy Milton, two people sympathetic with the communist regime, wrote, “By the spring of 1967, after one year of uninterrupted revolution, millions of ordinary citizens had entered a realm of power which for thousands of years had been restricted to the elites.” It seems the admittedly limited room for debate provided by the Cultural Revolution was nonetheless an enlargement of the public sphere. Perhaps the Cultural Revolution even gave millions of Chinese entrance into a kind of proto-democratic civil society. Shaorong Huang affirmed, “Everybody participated in the movement to a certain degree, and everybody held a share in the reversible role of power holder and power subject.”

**Proletarian Democracy**

The mass participatory aspect of the Cultural Revolution led some foreign observers, especially those already sympathetic to Maoism, to stress the movement’s “democratic” character. Chen maintained,

Democracy rests finally on the vigilance and political activity of the people, however that activity is expressed. The creation of a socialist democracy has in a sense been a main aim of all the mass movements leading up to the Cultural Revolution. This was the high point of mass action in China. It brought more of the nation into meaningful political action than any movement in Chinese history. 

Sidney Rittenberg, an American G.I. who chose to stay in China after World War II, saw parallels between the professed aims of the Cultural Revolution and the revolution of his

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10 Chen, p.438.
native country.\textsuperscript{11} While the scope of debate was limited, millions of Chinese did participate, and this participation in some ways shaped the movement. Byung-joon Ahn wrote, “A form of radical mass polity indeed held sway at the height of the Red Guard movement.”\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, perhaps an early form of civil society can be ascertained. As Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle optimistically described,

\begin{quote}
All the hundreds of millions of Chinese are on the move, consciously discussing the future of their country, themselves making decisions, keeping a watchful eye on their leaders, shaping their own development through ceaseless general criticism and discussion.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

While there may be doubt concerning to what degree such activities were truly separate from the government, as well as skepticism over how genuine the feelings were that the activists expressed,\textsuperscript{14} there cannot be doubt that millions of people actively participated in the initial years of the Cultural Revolution. Chen maintained, “Everybody who could felt compelled to write posters, draw cartoons, or compose poems, songs, dances, or skits to propel the Cultural Revolution forward.”\textsuperscript{15} Methods of participation varied, but the most popular form was public display of big character posters. Their status as the favored means of public expression hastened their spread from first covering college campuses to eventually saturating entire cities, thereby giving the burgeoning movement a carnival-like atmosphere.\textsuperscript{16} Within this carnival of public expression, one

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Rittenberg maintained, “Mao’s guidelines for the Cultural Revolution... to my ears... sounded like the guidelines for the American Revolution: elect your own leaders, assemble your own organizations, print your own posters, publish your own newspapers.” See Sidney Rittenberg and Amanda Bennett, \textit{The Man Who Stayed Behind} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 315.
\item \textsuperscript{14} This paper, however, will argue that such feelings were genuine.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Chen, pp. 232-233.
\item \textsuperscript{16} See Milton and Milton’s description of the Peking First Institute for Foreign Languages campus, August 1966 — “A dramatic and colorful world that had become a political festival of the masses.” Milton and Milton, p. 147.
\end{itemize}
could find a variety of opinions all claiming allegiance to Maoism. For example, while all were Maoist, not all big character posters adopted a radical tone; some "openly voiced the fear of chaos."\(^{17}\)

Most participants saw big character posters as viable forms of expression, perhaps because of the freedom they offered. The Miltons wrote of a routine they witnessed on Beijing’s college campuses:

Students, teachers, and a few cadres would work late into the night, either individually or in groups, writing the posters which would then be posted up the next morning. After breakfast, a great quite reigned over this city of universities as the student population, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, silently read the posters of the previous night.... Late in the morning and in the afternoon, the students and teachers would break up into study or strategy sessions, participate in demonstrations, or visit other organizations throughout the city to learn the latest news and read their posters.... In the evenings, thousands of mass meetings occurred simultaneously throughout the capital.\(^{18}\)

It seems that these big character posters allowed a relatively high degree of freedom, at least more so than previous publications during the People’s Republic. Maitan said that dazibao were “not subject to any form of censorship,”\(^{19}\) and Chen wrote that, in Beijing, there was “unprecedented freedom of the press.”\(^{20}\) This claim of freedom is partially substantiated by teachers, previously humiliated and/or tortured by their students, putting up big character posters to protest their former treatment.\(^{21}\) This freedom to present opinion without prior government approval was a unique event in the history of the People’s Republic; not even during the Hundred Flowers Movement was anything

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\(^{17}\) Maitan, p.96.
\(^{18}\) Milton and Milton, pp. 148-149.
\(^{19}\) Maitan, p.113.
\(^{20}\) Chen, p. 234.
allowed to be published without elite permission. Furthermore, freedom of speech was publicly proclaimed by the government in September 1966, when it issued two decrees upholding “freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, freedom to demonstrate, freedom to give out leaflets, freedom to make caricatures... and freedom to put up tatzupao.”

This opportunity to publicly display conflicting opinions was no doubt a big part of the dazibao's appeal, especially considering that the regime usually silenced non-party voices. Also, once a big character poster was displayed, it was typically allowed to remain posted for two weeks, during which time it “could not be tampered with. For a poster to be damaged or torn down was a crime that called for instant censure. At most you might attach a small slip alongside in agreement or rebuttal or put up your own poster in reply.” If this policy was indeed followed, it seems opposing views were tolerated among big character posters, bringing a semblance of “democracy” to the Cultural Revolution.

Maoist Criticism

These democratic tendencies can also be seen by public criticism of CCP officials. Lin Biao promoted this criticism at a rally for two million Red Guards:

By this extensive democracy, the Party is fearlessly permitting the broad masses to use the media for the free airing of views, big character posters, great debates, and extensive exchange of revolutionary experience to criticize and supervise the Party and government leading institutions and leaders at all levels.

Through mounting big character posters, Chinese people were able to criticize most of their leaders in earnest. Ch’in Ti wrote that, “With the exception of Mao Tse-tung, all the

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23 Maitan, pp.107-108.
24 Milton and Milton, p.149.
important persons of the Party and government have been criticized in varying
degrees.27 However, some criticism of Mao also may have been allowed. Liu Shaoqi’s
daughter reported seeing big character posters directed against Mao Zedong himself,28
and D. W. Fokkema explained indirect ways by which Mao was criticized, such as
through “satire and covert allusions, sometimes pretending to be printing errors in both
the official and unofficial press.”29

Criticism of elites was allowed because criticism and debate were seen as tools to
bring forth a higher Maoist truth.30 Throughout the movement, Maoism’s overriding
validity was always taken for granted; it was assumed that criticism and debate would
only strengthen this validity. A Red Guard poster from Shanghai, dated June 13, 1966,
read in part, “At this stage of the movement, it is still not clear which people in our
institute should be criticized and which should not. But the more we debate, the clearer
the issues become.”31 Another poster read, “If the Party committee is free from error, it
should not be afraid of criticism. On the contrary, it should protect and encourage its
critics. And if a few counterrevolutionary posters appear, what harm is there in that?”32
These comments expose a central non-democratic aspect of “debate” during the Cultural
Revolution: one could debate the worthiness of individual leaders, but unless one was
willing to be labeled a counterrevolutionary, one could not debate the worthiness of the

27 Ch‘in Ti, “Communist China’s Youth Movement in 1966,” in Communist China 1966, vol.2 (Hong
28 Maitan, p.110.
29 D. W. Fokkema, Report from Peking: Observations of a Western Diplomat on the Cultural Revolution
30 See Neale Hunter’s comment on big character posters: “One over written piece would be followed by an
equally overwritten reply, and the ‘truth’ was supposed to emerge from this ‘dialectic’ of opposites.”
Neale Hunter, Shanghai Journal: An Eyewitness Account of the Cultural Revolution (Hong Kong: Oxford
31 Ibid., p.48.
32 Ibid., p. 54.
system itself. Debate was seen as a way to increase one’s loyalty to the communist ideal, not as a forum to suggest alternative modes of government. “Proletarian democracy” was intended to make the participants better communists.

This “reddening” function of proletarian democracy was understood and supported by at least some members of the student population. Tan Houlan, a twenty-six-year-old Red Guard, provided a clear understanding of proletarian democracy. She wrote,

Chairman Mao has taught us that democracy is a means and not an end in itself. We use this means to reach our great goal of making a success of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, of consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat, and of promoting the socialist cause.  

A Western democratic ideal is that, through debate, competing groups can reach consensus on the overriding agenda. This agenda is not predetermined, but arises out of the process of debate itself. Proletarian democracy, on the other hand, begins with a set agenda; debate is a process by which participants conform to that agenda. This aspect of proletarian democracy may cause some observers to question whether this form of debate warrants the term “democratic.” To this Tan replied,

…the democracy you have in mind is bourgeois democracy. Such ‘democracy,’ dear sirs, is indeed what we intend to sabotage…. A has to eliminate B. This is what has to happen and there can be no compromise. By eliminating bourgeois democracy to a greater extent and with greater thoroughness, proletarian democracy will greatly expand. As the bourgeoisie sees it, this means that in our country there is no democracy or that democracy is being sabotaged. Actually, this is eradicating what is bourgeois and promoting what is proletarian, and the promotion of proletarian democracy means the eradication of bourgeois democracy.  

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34 Ibid., p.153.
Thus, proletarian democracy is perceived as being in opposition to bourgeois democracy. By promoting proletarian democracy, one weakens bourgeois democracy, since proletarian democracy partially serves as a means to rid individuals of their bourgeois tendencies through debate and group pressure. Then, upon revisionism’s final farewell, China would enter the Maoist “promised land.” In this sense, proletarian democracy was indeed a means to an end, as Tan forcefully claimed. Furthermore, since Maoism conceives itself to be an objective truth, a Maoist could argue that mass participation during the Cultural Revolution represented genuine democracy, since it enabled people to act according to their objective needs. It is this argument that Tan now made, stressing the participatory aspects of the Cultural Revolution:

In this thunderous and heroic Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, millions of revolutionary masses in our great country have for the first time come to enjoy an extensive democracy without precedent in human history. The revolutionary people enjoy the democracy of free speech, of being able to organize demonstrations, of being able to put out their own publications, of being able to put up big character posters, and of being able to exchange revolutionary experience. Looking back at the history of human civilization over several thousand years, in which dynasty or in which country was there ever such extensive democracy? None, absolutely none.

Therefore, Maoists view the Cultural Revolution as being democratic because Chinese, in the tens of millions, could freely express their belief in Maoism.

Maoism was seen as an ideal by which participants could criticize Chinese Communist Party members while still maintaining loyalty to the communist system. If the party as it existed seemed to represent “revisionism,” Maoism represented an alternative to this revisionism. Similar to conservative politicians in the West who gain public support by presenting themselves as “rebels,” Maoism was able to present itself as

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35 One wonders if, at this time, there was any “bourgeois democracy” in China to weaken!  
36 Tan, pp.150-151.
opposition to the status quo. This meant that participants with prior dissatisfactions
would likely be attracted to Maoism as both they and Maoism challenged similar
institutions. This does not mean, however, that participants were simply using Maoism as
a form of “protest vote” due to lack of options available. Participants instead turned to
Maoism because they were both unsatisfied with the existing party regime and because
they were sympathetic to the Maoist ideal. Hong Yung Lee wrote,

The revolt of the Chinese students against the Party organization was a
revolt against its norms and operational codes, and in confirmation of the values
defined by the official Maoist ideology. Confronted with the discrepancy
between ideology and policy, the students resolved the dissonance in favor of the
official ideology.37

I ideological Molding

Public belief in Maoism partially rose from state propaganda and extensive
promotion of the “Little Red Book.” Saying something is true does not make it true, but
repeating something often enough does increase its credibility. Nei Jiang, the mayor of
Sichuan Province, affirmed,

Chairman Mao is truth. His thoughts can solve all of your problems.
Chairman Mao’s quotations are the doctor’s prescriptions that can cure diseases
of the mind. Set the doctor beside your pillow so you can see him every morning
and every evening. In this way you will never be sick with bourgeois diseases.38

Continual praise of Mao in terms such as this “increased his image of omnipotence and
omniscience.”39 Similarly, continued readings of the Little Red Book would increase
Maoism’s perceived relevance. In this way, “the Little Red Book was a unique and
brilliant invention, which did for the Chinese people what Tom Paine’s Common Sense

37 Hong Yung Lee, The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study (Berkeley, CA:
38 Fulang Lo, p.20.
39 Kwong, p.39.
had done for the Americans in the eighteenth century.”

Ruth Earnshaw Lo described the way in which Maoism became ingrained into the Chinese psyche:

No one was supposed to spend revolutionary time studying ordinary classroom subjects. The only book to read was the Little Red Book of Quotations from Chairman Mao. Everyone carried his own copy with him all the time, as if to be ready to refer to it in an emergency for guidance, or to be able to use every leisure moment in absorbing its wisdom. Every day in the dormitory began with what presently became almost a devotional ritual of reading the Red Book and “exchanging experiences” of the enlightenment it had brought. Among teachers and students alike it was an indication of political virtue to be able to quote long passages from memory, and capping quotations was a popular leisure-time practice.

Memorization of the Little Red Book gave participants the ideological basis to engage in proletarian democracy. Moravia pointed out, “One does not memorize the works of Marx and Lenin, because their works were not designed as guides to conduct. Mao’s book was.” The process of memorization legitimized what were appropriate beliefs and what were not. Memory “holds and preserves what is not and should not be subject to criticism and hence to change. In other words, memory is a mental process that serves to confer authority, to embalm something that should not decay.” In this way, the Little Red Book played a vital role in making the Chinese people sympathetic to Maoism.

Another factor leading to the broad acceptance of Maoism was the prestige of the theory’s creator. Ann Thurston, someone hostile toward Maoism, admitted that “Many Chinese... people who were intelligent, well educated, and good – seemed genuinely to have loved Chairman Mao.” This love of Mao was partially fostered through state propaganda begun at an early age. Jai a Sun Childers recalled learning of Chairman Mao

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40 Milton and Milton, p.146.
43 Ibid., p. 40.
as “the greatest, most powerful being in the world, a hero-savior, the source of all good
and happiness, an immortal who would live ten thousand years.”\textsuperscript{45} Her kindergarten
class began every day in 1966 with the following ritual invocation:

\begin{quote}
I will always be loyal to you Chairman Mao, until the last drop of my
blood! I will always do whatever you say until my last breath! I want to be your
best kid! Please guide me throughout the day! Ten thousand years alive,
Chairman Mao! Ten thousand years!\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This childhood indoctrination also focused upon the theme of being revolutionary
successors. A children’s song popular before the Cultural Revolution went in part, “Be
prepared, be prepared, be constantly prepared / to be the successor of the revolution. / Be
prepared, be prepared, be constantly prepared / to fight for communism….”\textsuperscript{47} Mao’s call
for student participation during the Cultural Revolution therefore culminated years of
ideological preparation. As Aiping Mu recalled, “Inspired by our historic mission as
Chairman Mao’s revolutionary path-breakers, I felt that my life was full of hope and
pride.”\textsuperscript{48}

Prior ideological indoctrination meant that a majority of China’s youth were eager
to participate in the Cultural Revolution, and to do so in accordance with Maoist
objectives. Peter Seybolt maintained,

\begin{quote}
It is probably fair to say that the great majority of students who
participated in the Cultural Revolution acted out of idealism.... They were
convinced that they were in the vanguard of a movement to purge China of
corrupt officials and ‘feudal’ ideas and move a step closer to the ideal egalitarian
society.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p.10.
\textsuperscript{48} Aiping Mu, Vermillion Gate (London: Abacus, 2002), p.323.
This opinion is shared by a participant in the Cultural Revolution who claims that most Red Guards "were sincerely and piously following our Great Leader both to carry out a revolution against revisionism and to preempt any further revisionism."\(^{50}\) Li, another Red Guard participant, explained the movement by saying that "the youth of the country is communist in the strictest possible way. And in addition, we are purists."\(^{51}\) Red Guards therefore possessed the required ideological conviction Maoists deemed necessary for participation in proletarian democracy. The approved way to participate in this newly expanded "democracy" was through the use of big character posters.

**Problems of *Dazibao***

However, despite the ideological "correctness" of participants, and despite, or perhaps because of, the predefined aims of the Cultural Revolution, the analytical quality of big character posters were often of poor quality. Although there were exceptions, it seems that most big character posters focused on trivial matters instead of debating state policy. An anonymous "foreign expert" living in Beijing wrote, "Among the many posters we read, a large number were either impractical or completely irrelevant, and often amusing."\(^{52}\) This attitude is shared by Zhai Zhenhua, who commented on the quality of *dazibao* produced by her classmates this way: "I found most posters trivial. Many were full of empty phrases.... I never saw one that provided concrete forceful evidence that our school system had really been revisionist."\(^{53}\) This lack of quality can be explained by a number of factors, one being that the initiation of the process of writing

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\(^{53}\) Zhai, p.64.
dazibao was frequently not from the masses, but from those in authority. Power holders invited / pressured those from below to participate in criticizing elites by writing big character posters. Once again there was prior goal setting by the CCP, followed by encouragement of the masses to fulfill this goal.

However, at least in the case of writing big character posters, not all participants were clear what the party meant when it asked them to criticize revisionism. Zhai wrote, “After scouring every nook and cranny of our minds, we couldn’t recall anything our leaders or teachers said that was anti-party or anti-socialist.”54 Despite finding a lack of revisionism to criticize, Zhai and her classmates still faced pressure from above to show results. Therefore, her classmates eventually decided that giving boring lectures was “teaching in a capitalist way.”55 Ken Ling gave another example of this often trivial basis of dazibao: “If a teacher had said that life was hard or that there was not enough food, this could be construed as ‘anti-communist’ and ‘hostile to the dictatorship of the proletariat.’”56 Also criticized were those seen as practicing “luxurious living” or displaying “lordly airs.”57 Another popular topic was criticism of sexual lifestyles; those in authority known to have had affairs often were the first targets of the movement.58 Given the regime’s ban on pornography, dazibao dealing with sexual escapades of the elite were quite popular. Zhu Xiao Di recalled,

At that time, posters were the best sources of news… they carried gossip and rumors about public figures’ private lives. For example, on posters one might read about an alleged relationship between a mayor and his maid. Pornography

54 Ibid., p.63.  
55 Ibid., pp.63-64.  
58 Zhu Xiao Di, Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p.43.
and any literature of that kind had been strictly banned in China since the Communist take over in 1949. Now, in the form of ‘Big-Character-Posters,’ many lewd stories were produced. They immediately attracted a huge audience.\textsuperscript{59}

In general, then, it seems that many, perhaps most, big character posters focused on trivial topics. A reason for this can perhaps be found within the medium of \textit{dazibao} itself. Fokkema made an interesting point by writing,

> Of course, there is an essential difference between arguments in big characters which inevitably convey little more than slogans, and statements in normal size writing or print. It is the same difference that exists between shouting or speaking, or between emotion and reason. Big-character posters are the weapons of the emotionalized masses – of people who have learned their letters but who cannot write an essay.\textsuperscript{60}

The mass appeal of big character posters may have played a part in the “dumbing down” of their content. In the situation of the Cultural Revolution, it is to be expected that a great many big character posters would do little to aid China’s socialist development.

In addition to commenting on trivial matters, many participants would see the campaign as an opportunity to settle preexisting feuds by writing big character posters devoid of factual basis. Once participants became aware of the correlation between big character poster attacks and physical attacks, some would be willing to write dishonest posters if it meant either avoiding an attack or revenging a perceived wrong. We see here another problem of \textit{dazibao} – no overseeing committee to guarantee the truth of what was being written. Hindsight makes it obvious that big character posters were not reliable sources of information; yet at the time, trusting participants report being shocked when they realized \textit{dazibao} could lie. Rae Yang wrote that, while reading a poster that slandered her Red Guard organization,

> This was the first time I realized that \textit{dazibao} did not always reveal the

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p.53.
\textsuperscript{60} Fokkema, p.7.
truth. It could tell lies and spread rumors too! It might be used by people to make a revolution. It might also be used by some to make personal attacks. Often it was impossible for readers to tell which was which.61

"Freedom of expression" meant there was no filtering device separating quality from quantity; the proper ideological orientation of a poster's writers was obviously not enough to guarantee a dazibao's worth. It thus seems dazibao, the chief forum for proletarian democracy, was questionable from the beginning, surrendering its integrity quite easily in favor of trivial denouncements and lies.

Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution was conceived as a process by which China would rid itself of feudal and bourgeois tendencies, reenergize the world communist movement, and achieve a level of Maoist-defined freedom, all through a struggle against revisionism. Uniting the Chinese people in their struggle against revisionism was the ideological construct of Maoism, an ideology supported by many, perhaps most, participants. This mass acceptance of Maoism was seen as a necessary prerequisite for the practicing of proletarian democracy. Since Maoism enabled one to criticize the party while maintaining allegiance to communism, proletarian democracy would ensure government accountability without threatening Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. In this way, not only would the nation grow but also so would the ideological conviction of the masses. Therefore, proletarian democracy was encouraged by the elites, specifically through the process of writing big character posters. Yet, in spite of the ideological training of participants and the predefined aims of the movement, most dazibao fell far short of the intended ideal. Rather than being sources of constructive criticism and

debate, *dazibao* instead focused upon slander and sensationalism. Big character posters, in hindsight, appear an unsuited medium for China’s proletarian democracy.
CHAPTER 2
PRECEPTS SHAPING STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Quite a few of the conceptual precepts that governed Red Guards throughout the Cultural Revolution were perhaps solidified during the student movement’s initial stage. Right from the beginning we see tension between radical and conservative students, those daring to think and those content to follow learned behavior. We see radicals’ embodiment of Mao as an ultimate source of authority above the Chinese Communist Party, a belief enabling radicals to challenge the party but preventing them from basing their opposition outside the framework of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. We also see radicals’ passionate conviction that Mao was “on their side,” giving them the determination to persevere past the realm of logic and into the realm of faith, ever hoping for that miraculous change of fortune that would validate their struggle. This chapter looks at the initial stage of the student movement – from Nieh Yuanzi’s first big character poster to the dismissal of the work teams – with the aim to reveal some of the precepts later shaping Red Guard thought and behavior.

Beginning of the Student Upheaval

The very first big character poster of the Cultural Revolution was posted by Nieh Yuanzi, a philosophy professor, on May 25, 1966, at Peking University. In this poster, Professor Nieh and six of her colleagues accused Lu Ping, the university president, of stifling students’ and teachers’ revolutionary desires by confining the burgeoning Cultural Revolution to the realm of academic debate. What was bold and unique about Nieh’s poster was not that it criticized the university president, but that it ignored
standard hierarchical procedure for channeling grievances, relying instead upon direct appeal to the university "masses." Nieh Yuanzi's poster represented a daringly new form of public expression, and as such, her intended audience was initially unsure how to react. Possibly fearing party reprisals, instead of following their true convictions, most students and teachers chose at first to align themselves behind Lu Ping and the school authorities. Nieh did not receive the popular campus support she had hoped for until June 2, the day her poster was surprisingly published by *The People's Daily*. This official blessing, coupled with Lu Ping's dismissal the very next day, unleashed a storm of big character posters that continued to rage throughout much of the Cultural Revolution.

Publication of Nieh's poster quickly inspired students from other universities to question their own campus leaders. Students began to judge their local school officials guilty of hampering the Cultural Revolution by accusing them of perpetuating conservative traditions and spreading Khrushchev-style revisionism. If school authorities were indeed "revisionist," students could claim an obligation to remove them. Because of the relatively limited number of students allowed to pursue higher education, it was essential that those chosen receive skills and beliefs suitable for China's socialist development. However, students committed to socialism felt what they were being

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1 Karol, p.176.
3 At first glance, it would appear as though Peking University's student population were merely adept at discerning the political tide and adjusting its behavior accordingly. Without doubt, student response took into account elite opinion. Yet it would be an overstatement to affirm that members of the Peking University community were simply acting out of political convenience and not from genuinely felt desires. See Ahn, p.216, "The publication of Nieh's poster baffled every sector of the Chinese population, particularly the students, who reacted as if they had encountered a 'spring thunder.' Once they confirmed it had Mao's blessings, the news took the lid off the students in their struggle against their school authorities." Participation arose from elite blessing, but flourished due to prior student grievances.
4 Maitam, p.89.
5 Hong, p.27.
6 Karol stated that 600,000 Chinese students had access to higher education. Karol, pp.17-18.
taught was at odds with this goal. A specific complaint was that not enough class time
was devoted to the study of Mao Zedong Thought. They feared an education stressing
academic achievement and high professional standards at the expense of political
awareness would create students more concerned with individual advancement than the
public good. As a big character poster from Shanghai argued, school authorities
seemingly aimed

...to ensure that the successors to the revolution would be bourgeois. They
planned to stuff the students with the literary heritage of eighteenth and
nineteenth century Europe, so that after graduation they would go out with their
minds thoroughly poisoned and preach the values of the bourgeoisie.

Removing revisionist school authorities was thus seen as a way to ensure the promotion
of revolutionary ideals, as well as to produce citizens suitable for a socialist society.

Students putting up big character posters were, as Karnow wrote, in revolt “against a
system that threatened to turn them into ‘revisionists,’ into a class distinct from the
masses, and that moreover did not correspond to the technical needs of the country.”

This widespread popular revolt led to an environment in which successive school
authorities began to collapse one after the other. So as to prevent greater chaos, as well
as to protect their threatened legitimacy, school administrators and conservative
members of the Young Communist League frantically petitioned the party hierarchy to
resolve the sudden turmoil. Responding to these demands, Liu Shaoqi authorized work

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7 Maitan, p.90.
8 Victor Nee with Don Layman, The Cultural Revolution at Peking University (London: Modern Reader,
9 Hunter, p.61.
10 Karol, p.200.
11 Ahn, p.216
12 Kwong, p.19.
13 Ahn, p.216.
teams to investigate the student upheaval and reestablish revolutionary order. Work
teams entered Peking University on June 7, presenting themselves as the new leaders of
the Cultural Revolution. The chaos unleashed by the publication of Nieh Yuanzi’s poster
was to be channeled under elite guidance.

Work teams quickly established themselves throughout China’s schools and
universities. Initially, in many schools, their arrival was welcomed. Aiping Mu asserted
that at her middle school, work teams “were greeted with joy. Some of the staff and
pupils even wept.” The frightening uproar of the previous weeks caused many to crave
a return to stability. Also, because work team arrival arose from a decision made by the
CCP Central Committee, work teams were seen as representative of the party itself. State
propaganda fostered a perceived reliance upon the party; at this point in the movement,
the subservient relationship between the party and the masses was not yet questioned.
Students, as Kwong mentioned, were still politically naïve. That is why most of those
previously rebelling unhesitantly welcomed the work teams. Perhaps they erroneously
assumed that work teams would operate as an independent force, thereby allowing the
Cultural Revolution to maintain its natural course, albeit less chaotically.

**Work Teams’ Conservative Stance**

Unsurprisingly, neutrality was not pursued; instead work teams played a
conservative role in the movement. Their immediate aim was to “keep the development
of the movement within manageable boundaries and inhibit student mobilization.” A
principle way in which work teams accomplished this goal was through reliance upon

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14 Ibid.
15 Mu, p.313.
16 Kwong, p.29.
17 Hong, p.37.
conservative students while monitoring those who were more radical. Zhai Zhenhua recalled, “To ordinary people like me, working groups were necessary and helpful; without them I could never have figured out what was going on. But to the radicals, the working groups were obstructions.” Stanley Rosen wrote that, upon their arrival, work teams received administrative aid from conservative students of good class backgrounds. Radical students, however, were forced to scrape big character posters off the walls. Students thought to be politically reliable were rewarded when Cultural Revolution committees were set up in the various schools; all children of cadres were assigned high positions. The work teams’ conservative influence was further felt by assigning one team member to each academic class. This was compounded by a “news blackout,” essentially isolating schools from one another. Students curious about the movement in other schools were told that what was happening elsewhere was irrelevant for their campus. In ways such as this, the arrival of work teams effectively limited the movement.

Another way work teams influenced the movement was by redirecting student accusations away from administrators and toward teachers. While some teachers had been targeted for criticism before work teams arrived, it seems the main focus of criticism was against school authorities. This ratio was inverted by work teams who put pressure upon students to criticize their teachers. Students complied, although not always enthusiastically. Some privately wrote to their teachers, explained that they had been

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18 Zhai, p.66.
20 Nee, p.61.
21 Hong, p.57.
22 Ibid., p.37.
23 Ibid.
forced to make accusations, and apologized.\textsuperscript{24} Less scrupulous students, however, welcomed the opportunity to get back at teachers they disliked.\textsuperscript{25} This criticism against teachers was legitimized by preexisting beliefs. Many students naturally distrusted their teachers, seeing them as former members of the elite who had received their training under the "old society."\textsuperscript{26} Administrators and work team leaders capitalized on this distrust, thereby avoiding accusations that may otherwise have been leveled against them. For example, the party secretary at Shanghai Foreign Language Institute enflamed student anger against teachers by asserting,

For thousands of years, the culture of the exploiting classes has produced 'scholars,' 'authorities,' and 'academics.' Among the present crop are leaders of groups that have contacts abroad, loyal ministers to the throne of foreign interests. Our country has been liberated for 16 years, yet these bourgeois 'gentlemen' refuse to surrender to the people. They go on dreaming that the old world will come back.\textsuperscript{27}

Promoting Communist China's constant fear of a "bourgeois comeback" was a sure way to redirect students' anger.

Therefore, under work team influence, denunciations against teachers greatly intensified. At Peking University, "The evening mass meetings, now little more than hysterical denunciations of an increasing number of people and equally hysterical protestations of loyalty to Mao, lengthened into all-night sessions."\textsuperscript{28} Most students saw teachers as legitimate targets and supported the tactics of the work team. A few, however, felt otherwise. Observant students saw how those within the inner circle of power remained safe while low-ranking teachers were often falsely or unnecessarily

\textsuperscript{24} Ling, p.16.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Maitan, p.106.
\textsuperscript{27} Hunter, p.45.
\textsuperscript{28} A "Foreign Expert," p.3.
accused. Some began to view work teams as deceptive, appearing to radicalize the movement on the surface while in actuality regulating the movement into manageable bounds. A Cantonese student explained this view:

The work teams claimed to support the Cultural Revolution, but in fact they suppressed us and warned us not to fight against the Party section. Instead, they attempted to divert our wrath towards the non-Party teachers and it was on their instructions that many ordinary teachers were insulted and humiliated.

Radical students began to wonder if work teams were not going after those who should be the Cultural Revolution’s principle targets.

These concerns were vocalized on July 12, when five students of Peking University’s geophysics department put up a big character poster criticizing the work teams. In response, work teams advanced the slogan to “sweep out all obstacles to the Cultural Revolution,” i.e., to remove all obstacles hindering the work team’s rule. Those students critical of the work teams were placed under surveillance, while students supportive of the work teams were encouraged to mobilize. Secret meetings of pro-work team students were held where conservative students received “black materials” on their radical schoolmates. Every student was publicly classified as right, left, or middle of the road, with classification based upon the student’s opinion of the work teams. Those opposing the work teams were denounced in struggle sessions as “monsters and

29 Kwong, p.22.
30 Hunter, p.27.
32 Maitan, p.96.
33 Hong, p.29.
34 Ibid., p.28.
35 Ibid., p.57.
36 Ibid., p.38.
freaks," a process similar to the diversionary tactics already used against teachers. It became clear that criticism of the work teams brought with it palpable forms of intimidation. In addition to direct repression, criticism of work teams also meant possible future problems. Students considering joining the radical side would first wonder, “But if I should fail in the struggle, would that not affect my Party membership application, the assignment of work to me after graduation, my personal future, and so on?” Obviously, a simple cost-benefit analysis would show it to be more advantageous for students to remain silent than to oppose the work teams.

**Radicals’ Perseverance and Victory**

Considering these obstacles, it is indeed remarkable that student resistance actually increased. Rather than bringing about student compliance, the strong-arm tactics of the work teams only solidified radical opposition. Maitan wrote that, following the July 12 poster, “work teams often clashed headlong with groups of students who... disliked the actions and the authoritarianism of the work teams’ members.” Perhaps ironically, numerous radical students gained motivation for continuing their struggle by reading the works of Chairman Mao. Kiang Shu-ying explained,

> No one came and told us how we were to act. There were no orders. No one was our responsible leader. But we had got hold of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* and we read Chairman Mao and discussed in detail what he had said, and how right and wrong are not questions to be decided by word of command. We knew we were doing right in rebelling against the working group from the Party, for they were not acting in accordance with Mao Tse-tung Thought. Anyone could see that for himself, by studying Chairman Mao. We knew we were doing the right thing and that Chairman Mao was with us.\(^40\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid, p.29.  
\(^{38}\) Nee, p.65.  
\(^{39}\) Maitan, p.95.  
\(^{40}\) Myrdal and Kessle, p.175.
The “Little Red Book” caused radical students to see a breach between Maoist ideology and party reality. This disjuncture was made even clearer by the work teams’ strategy of equating criticism of it with criticism of the CCP. Huang Ch’ih-po, a work team leader in Shanghai, responded to criticisms this way:

You still insist on disobeying the Party! Chiang Kai-shek had 8 million men in his army, and he could not defeat us.... What chance have you got? .... The work team is the Party. If you try to take power here, we will see that you lose that power.... Exactly how far do you intend to go? .... Has the Communist Party become an object of hatred in your eyes? If so, you are in grave danger....

Work teams thus claimed recourse to state-sanctioned repression in order to consolidate their rule over the growing opposition. This tactic undoubtedly brought increased fear to those daring to rebel; yet it may also have laid the seeds for some radicals’ future realization that their struggle was actually against the party itself.

At this stage of the movement, however, radicals were probably not wondering how to overthrow the CCP; instead, their chief concern likely was survival. Undoubtedly, the days leading up to the work teams’ dismissal were when radicals suffered most. Work teams began arresting radical leaders, forcing them to stay in “cow sheds.” Jiang Xinren described such an experience:

I was put into my own private cattle pen. It was about five feet by five feet. There were no windows, and the door was always locked, with someone always, twenty-four hours a day, standing guard outside. There was no light either, so it was always dark, and I could never even tell whether it was night or day. I simply assumed that when they gave me food to eat, it must be day. They fed me once, sometimes twice a day.

There was nothing in the room at all, no bed, no furniture, just a bucket which I used to go to the toilet. The bucket, literally, was the only thing in the room with me. Once a week, I got to empty the bucket, to take it to the latrine to empty. This was the only time I got to see the sunshine. Otherwise, I remained in complete darkness, except that sometimes, at the bottom of the door, in the small gap between the door and the floor, I could see a little bit of light.

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41 Hunter, p.40.
42 Thurston, pp.212-213.
Once imprisoned in such conditions, radicals were often coerced into admitting “anti-Party crimes.” The determination that had stayed with radicals thus far was understandably beginning to break, and had it not been for the sudden dismissal of the work teams, student opposition perhaps would have been squelched.

Just as radicals began to give up hope, Chairman Mao surprised the nation with a claimed sixty-five minute, nine mile swim in the Yangtze River on July 16. Having clearly shown all of China his vigor, Mao then returned to Beijing on July 18, initiating a sudden and momentous change of policy. The work teams had been dispatched in Mao’s absence, and the Chairman was clearly displeased. Sensing a political shift, work teams immediately began scaling back their repressive capabilities. On July 22, those confined to cow sheds were finally released. Then, five days later, the Cultural Revolution Small Group held a mass rally at Peking University in which the excesses of the work teams were denounced. Kang Sheng lamented, “Many work teams had been sent out in great haste and confusion, without proper instructions and in response to requests from schools whose Party committees had been smashed.” The original dispatch of the work teams was now admitted to have been a mistake and they were officially ordered to withdraw on July 28.

The radicals’ probable fate was thus completely reversed in less than two weeks. Radicals saw this fortunate change as a blessing from Mao. Previously, they had gained inspiration for their struggle against the work teams from the “Little Red Book,” thereby linking their vision of Mao with a conception of justice. Later in their struggle, when

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43 Hong, p.38.
44 See Kwong, p.44, “The withdrawal of the work teams saved the student movement at a critical stage.”
45 Hong, pp. 30-31.
46 Maitan, p.94.
ideological determination was no longer enough, Mao personally intervened on their behalf, thus confirming to the radicals that they had indeed been right all along. Radicals’ perceived affinity with Mao was now cemented. As Hunter wrote, “They were truly brought out, like Jonah, from the jaws of death, and their gratitude to ‘the great leader, Chairman Mao’ was not feigned.”

Radical victors now created the official history of their movement, referring to work team rule as “50 days of white terror.” This became the accepted classification everywhere, even in schools where radicals had been a minority and work teams received popular support. Aiping Mu described,

Although the work team in our school was not unpopular, large slogans had sprouted all over the campus, demanding ‘Work team, get out of our school!’ and ‘Down with the slaughter of revolutionary path-breakers!’ After that, the rebel pupils took over the school.

The first major battle of the Cultural Revolution was thus a triumph for the radicals. Giddy from their victory and more importantly, free from all restraint, radical and conservative students alike now began to form the independent organizations known as Red Guards, eager to make revolution any way they pleased.

**Conclusion**

The beginning stage of the student movement played an important role in setting future Red Guard behavior. Most significant to arise was the divide between conservative and radical students. In some ways, this divide was based on students’ response to Nieh Yuanzi’s original poster and its implicit challenge to think independently. By ignoring standard channels of party hierarchy, Nieh’s poster spoke

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47 Hunter, p.41.
48 Maitan, p.94.
49 Mu, p.319.
directly to the campus “masses.” This brought into question the supposed guiding role of the party, a belief held by many who saw the party as their “vanguard.” Initially, students were unable to respond to this change of status quo and they threw their support behind Lu Ping and his campus administrators. Once it became clear that Nieh’s poster had the backing of Mao, however, students switched sides. The immediate and thorough spread of big character posters that followed suggests that, once students were given the green light, they began to voice prior grievances. For perhaps the first time in the People’s Republic, a movement was allowed to spontaneously develop. This spontaneity did not last long, however, as work teams were soon dispatched to regain control. Despite the conservative nature of the work teams, their presence was welcomed by most of the students who saw in the work teams the promise of party-imposed stability. The conservative tendency of most students to accept a subservient role vis-à-vis the party may have been challenged by Nieh Yuanzi’s poster, but apparently it was too ingrained for quick discard. This belief in party authority, along with prior student suspicion of teachers, allowed work teams to redirect the movement away from administrators and toward low ranking non-party instructors. This tactic served as a splitting point between radicals and conservatives. Following the path of Professor Nieh, radical students decided to trust their own convictions by publicly questioning authority through big character posters, thereby creating a divide between radicals and conservatives that was to last throughout the Cultural Revolution.50

50 This is not meant to imply that conservative students were passive, unthinking sheep. An opportunist may join the side deemed “radical” if that is the more powerful side, just as a committed activist may join with “conservatives” if that is where her convictions lie. The point is that, in this particular case, it seems “radicals” were following their convictions, in accordance with Nieh Yuanzi’s original poster. Once “radicals” did so, the student movement split into two sides, “conservative” and “radical,” i.e., those who supported the work teams and those who did not. Although work teams quickly became a non-issue, this conceptual split between “radicals” and “conservatives” remained, despite the fact that students often
Radicals were able to criticize work teams by referencing Maoism as their ultimate source of authority. Reliance on Maoism as a tool to criticize the party was another development that governed the soon-to-be-formed Red Guards throughout the Cultural Revolution. At this early stage in the movement, radical students gained inspiration for their struggle by contrasting the message of the “Little Red Book” against the behavior of the work teams. Maoism therefore served a duel role during the Cultural Revolution: a liberating role, in that it provided a means by which one could criticize the Communist Party, and a confining role, in that it kept such criticism within the realms of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This duality helps to explain why, despite the great intellectual strides taken by some radicals during the Cultural Revolution, there was never any debate concerning the value of a socialist China. Viewing Maoism as the alternative ideal meant that the Cultural Revolution would never be more than a revolution within socialism.

A final aspect of future Red Guard behavior, first shown by students during this early stage, was the willingness to persevere against overwhelming odds. This may have arisen from an internalized belief that Mao was “on their side.” As has already been shown, when work teams began to vigorously suppress radicals and all was seemingly lost, Mao intervened. This intervention, as well as Mao’s previous intervention on behalf of Nieh Yuanzi (publishing her poster in The People’s Daily), could conceivably lead embattled students to think Mao would again intervene in their time of need. Therefore, even a minority should persevere. Belief in the probability of Mao’s intervention thus sheds light on why so many Red Guard factions were willing to fight each other, as well

drifted back and forth between the two sides, and the sides themselves fragmented as the movement progressed.
as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), long past the stage of reason. "Hope in Mao," it seems, can partly explain the eventual tragedy of the Cultural Revolution.
CHAPTER 3

BIRTH OF THE RED GUARDS

Red Guards, from their organizational birth until their death, faced conflicting visions vying to influence their movement. Seemingly, the vanguard role of the party was now brought into question by radical elites within the party itself, and out of this questioning arose the possibility of a new student-led vanguard that, through practice, would eventually replace revisionist elements within the party, thereby re-revolutionizing the CCP.¹ Thus, radical elites envisioned Red Guards as possible successors to the revolutionary first generation of communist leadership. It stands as given that conservative elites did not share this vision, since it was precisely their positions that were threatened. Consequently, conservatives sought to redirect the movement along lines less threatening to their interests, emphasizing educational and cultural reform as the Cultural Revolution’s true aims. Students themselves, however, were not simply passive vehicles for the whims of elites, and their desires and beliefs form yet another factor of our equation. Chinese youth joined the Red Guards following their own convictions, passionately believing in the aims of the movement as well as seeing in the Red Guards a chance for personal advancement. Once they formed the Red Guards, however, students seemed unclear what to do and came under conservative influence; hence, they first devoted their attention to eliminating revisionism within their schools and communities. But despite this conservative guidance, student goals continued to shape the movement, and it is this twin pressure from top and bottom that is the focus of

¹ See Chin Szu-kai, p.98. He wrote that it seemed Red Guards were “being tempered and tested to become new cadres and new blood of the Chinese Communist Party.”
this chapter. We see in the early actions of the Red Guards a confused movement trying to find its voice; from the beginning of the Red Guards until the official banning of house searches, we see a mass movement struggling to find its identity.

Start of the Red Guards

The formation of the Red Guards began what was to become the largest student movement in China's history, and perhaps, the world. Drawing its ranks from colleges, high schools, and middle schools, the Red Guard movement at its height comprised twenty million students. Responding to the call of Chairman Mao's August 5, 1966, big character poster to "bombard the headquarters," Red Guards, or Hong Wei Bing, appeared to position themselves as the defenders and successors of China's socialist revolution. This new student movement received its official launch on August 18, but in reality, unofficial student organizations were already in formation during late June and July, as radical opposition to the work teams had led to the development of spontaneous student alliances. When these alliances received official approval, millions more students began forming their own loosely defined "organizations," creating the first independent mass movement of the People's Republic.

Perhaps a unique feature of this movement was the lack of experience of most participants. However, in somewhat typical Maoist fashion, this lack of experience was not considered detrimental, since it was assumed that most Red Guards would learn as they went along. Chin Szu-kai wrote,

The Red Guards were young and inexperienced, and Mao Tse-tung naturally was fully aware of the situation. Thus, in order to bolster the younsters’

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2 Thurston, p.xvii.
3 Maitan, p.105. The first known Red Guard organization appeared at Qinghua middle school, which was announced in its big character poster, "Long Live the Rebellious Proletarian Spirit!" on June 24. See Zhai, p.73.
morale and their self-confidence, Mao Tse-tung told them that 'it is through swimming that one learns how to swim,' and it is through revolution that one learns how to make revolution.\(^4\)

Thus, it was believed that the Red Guards' initial inexperience would not inhibit them in becoming successors to the revolution. Also, as students, they were part of the "masses," a social category deemed by Maoists as inherently revolutionary and therefore right. This point was explained to students through an elite-driven campaign espousing student initiative. Following Nieh Yuanzi's initial big character poster, and during the subsequent campus occupations by the work teams, the official press encouraged mass participation in the movement while also promoting elite refrain via the slogan "trust the masses."\(^5\)

This theme of "trust the masses" was also publicly expressed. When the Cultural Revolution Small Group visited Peking University on July 25, after the work teams' defeat, Kang Sheng told the victorious students, "Neither we, nor the work team, but you are the masters of the great Cultural Revolution. This is precisely the important point which Chairman Mao has sent us to tell you in the first place."\(^6\) Chen Boda made the same affirmation, albeit in a more dramatic way, during a rally at Beijing's Broadcast Institute University, described by Sidney Rittenberg:

'Who are the masters of the Cultural Revolution?' Chen Boda cried out. 'The Party!' The students roared back in one voice. 'No!' he cried. 'No, not the Party. It's you! You, the people, are the masters of the Cultural Revolution. You have to do it. You have to arouse yourselves, organize yourselves, take revolutionary action, educate yourselves as you go along.'\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Matian, p.91.
\(^6\) Ne, p.66.
\(^7\) Rittenberg and Bennett, p.310.
Affirmation of students' spontaneity became official policy with the publication of the 16 Points on August 8. As a document intended to guide the then-forming Red Guards, it stressed the

...key role of the masses, the need for the masses to take in hand the affairs of the state, maximum democracy with full minority rights, freedom of criticism, the need to eliminate everything that is conservative and reactionary, especially in people's minds, and the principle that it is right to rebel.\(^8\)

With the publication of the 16 Points, even apolitical students would likely be eager to participate, enticed by the freedoms it offered. An understandable sense of euphoria therefore gripped many Chinese schools after the publication of the 16 Points. In the words of one elated student, "Now that we dare to speak, dare to act, it's wonderful! We've never felt like this before."\(^9\) Victor Nee described the exciting, optimistic environment then present at Peking University:

> During these days, Peking University was transformed. Students who had been afraid to talk to one another began to express their deep feelings; they began to think about their education, the quality of their lives, and the futures that controlled them. A new sense of student solidarity began to grow.\(^{10}\)

Their new solidarity and sudden confidence led many students to see the Red Guards as a means to fulfill their dreams. It was this hope that influenced so many to join the movement.

**Joining the Red Guards**

Maoism had decreed politics the most important realm of all,\(^{11}\) and now, at least seemingly, this realm was being fully opened for participation, a marked change from prior student life. As a Cantonese student said, before the Cultural Revolution,

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\(^1\) Maitan, p.107.
\(^2\) Nee, p.68.
\(^{10}\) Ibid, p.60.
We felt suppressed and uninvolved in the country's politics. Our life was
dull, routinist, and pedestrian. Before the Cultural Revolution I was very
interested in reading political texts – Marx, Lenin, Mao – and was regarded as
being strange since we were not supposed to show any independent interest in
politics. In school, politics meant being taught what the Party line was on this or
that subject. The... Red Guards represented a trend to think independently.12

Students were now given the chance for apparently meaningful political participation.

This participation was offered not only to university students, but to middle-school
students as well. The Cultural Revolution, Rosen affirmed, was for middle-school
students an "opportunity to demonstrate their activism in an important, rather than a
petty, context."13 Explaining further, he wrote,

Students generally felt liberated from the confines of petty activism. Here,
finally, was a national movement which called for heroic behavior reminiscent of
the kind they had been reading about since primary school. A chance for direct
participation in the struggle against the class enemy was heady wine indeed.14

Participation in the Cultural Revolution was a chance for Red Guards, ranging in
age from the early teens to the mid-twenties, to prove their self-worth in the political
field, the field most likely to bring an individual success in Maoist China. In this sense,
personal self-interest played a motivating role in leading some to join the Red Guards,
but this alone cannot be the defining factor. An Wenjiang felt that, "I can't deny there
was a selfish element, a desire to show off, in my becoming a rebel leader, but it was
mostly a conviction that the son of a working-class man should be allowed to participate
in revolution."15 It appears that, coupled with the hope of personal recognition, students
harbored an ingrained belief in socialist values. The years of political indoctrination

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11 Dai Hsiao-ai maintained, "It is not an exaggeration to say that politics was the center of our lives."
Gordon A. Bennett and Ronald N. Montaperto, Red Guard: The Political Biography of Dai Hsiao-ai
12 Tariq Ali, p.359.
13 Rosen, p.95.
14 Ibid., p.105.
15 An Wenjiang, "Shanghai Rebel," in China Remembers, Zhang Lijia and Calum MacLeod, eds. (Hong
Kong: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.120.
guaranteed that a majority would view joining the Red Guards as the natural culmination of a long process. Joining the Red Guards, Zhu Xiao Di recalled, "was an honor that most youths desired."\textsuperscript{16} Although there were certainly other contributing factors, it seems that inner conviction was the primary factor compelling students to become Red Guards. Students' successful indoctrination into a socialist value system therefore meant that, "At least in the beginning... the students did not join the movement simply because they saw something to be gained."\textsuperscript{17} The first Red Guards arose spontaneously and it took very little prodding from elites to motivate the rest of the student body into following suit.

**Revisionism in the Schools**

Desiring to help their country by safeguarding the revolution's perceived gains, Red Guards began to make their own value judgments about the world around them in a hunt for that sinister enemy, "revisionism." Unfortunately, because "revisionism" existed as only a conceptual idea with little definitional clarity, a subjective view of the world could easily render almost anything "revisionist."\textsuperscript{18} Bringing into question the revolutionary worth of what was encountered every day was perhaps too daunting a task for many Red Guards, and so a strategy was soon agreed upon where it became possible to deduce "revisionism" based upon a suspect's official ranking. Bai Meihua, a middle-school Red Guard, elucidated this process: "The first boss of any unit was the capitalist roader... then the vice director, and then his immediate subordinate, and so on down the line."\textsuperscript{19} Another predictable tactic was finding "revisionism" among individuals the Red

\textsuperscript{16} Zhu, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{17} Kwong, p.13.
\textsuperscript{18} Zhai described, "I was astonished to learn that our country was in such bad shape. Until then, I hadn't suspected that the songs I sang, the movies I watched, and the books I read were unhealthy." Zhai, p.62.
\textsuperscript{19} Bai Meihua, quoted in Thurston, p.93.
Guards previously disliked. These methods in hindsight appear questionable, but at the time seem to have been accepted by most Red Guards. Liang Heng said,

It seemed that every day good people were exposed as evil ones lurking behind revolutionary masks. Friendly people were hidden serpents, revolutionaries became counter-revolutionaries, and officials who rode cars to meetings might actually be murderers. It was confusing because the changes came so fast.... Still, most people thought that the Cultural Revolution was a wonderful thing, because when our enemies were uncovered China would be much more secure. So I felt excited and happy, and wished I could do something to help. Students may have been surprised at the level of "revisionism" uncovered in their schools and communities, but this surprise apparently did not lead many to question the means by which this "revisionism" was found. Rather, the sudden and drastic uncovering of "revisionism" encouraged most students to imagine a more secure China on the horizon; these students then sought to speed the process along by finding "revisionists" on their own, easily creating what would be a self-perpetuating cycle.

Once revisionists were found, they were usually exposed to public humiliation, first though struggle sessions and later through rehabilitative labor. The typical path from being accused to performing manual labor is described by Ruth Lo:

...first, presumably, would come a series of secret meetings of Red Guards and activists, 'investigating' the record of the potential monster, then a great outcry over the public-address system announcing what crimes had been uncovered, what plots and conspiracies exposed. Everyone would be bidden to a meeting where the accused would have to stand before the masses, head bowed, hands on his knees, like an accused criminal, while denunciations and accusations were shouted at him. Sometimes the accused would be pushed about and man handled. The next one saw of him, he would be in the monster herd, going off to manual labor.

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20 Zhu, p.51.
22 Ruth Lo made an interesting comment, stating, “Traditionally in China, public shame has been the lot of anyone accused of any kind of crime; political or criminal, whether innocent or guilty.” Ruth Lo and Kinderman, p.47.
23 Ibid., p.52.
Zhu Xiao Di provided another example of "reform through labor" by writing of a math teacher, accused of being a KMT spy, who was made to clean the school's restrooms.\textsuperscript{24}

The Cultural Revolution's hunt against revisionism brought with it a reversal of social-hierarchical positions. For those students formally at the bottom, the sudden thrust to the top was an exhilarating experience.\textsuperscript{25} Hence, Rae Yang wrote that the Cultural Revolution "gave me a feeling of superiority and confidence that I had never experienced before."\textsuperscript{26} This superiority was not illusionary but a genuine reflection of the new power hierarchy, as Yang explained: "Now those who had made decisions for us -- teachers, parents, administrators -- were swept aside by the storm. We were in charge. We could do things on our own initiative. We made plans. We carried them out."\textsuperscript{27} In several months, Red Guards had quickly seen their group power rise higher than that of any other authority previously regulating their lives.

Red Guards, now technically more powerful than other groups, were nevertheless still heavily influenced by the CCP, perhaps because of their youth and inexperience. This influence was exerted at least two ways. On the one hand, Red Guard radicalism was encouraged via the slogan, "Put daring above everything else,"\textsuperscript{28} while on the other hand, this radicalism was channeled against relatively minor targets. The same diversionary tactics previously used by the work teams were now employed by conservative elements within the CCP, again to great success. As had happened before,

\textsuperscript{24} Zhu, p.42.
\textsuperscript{25} Zhang Lijia and Calum MacLeod, eds. \textit{China Remembers} (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.113.
\textsuperscript{26} Yang, p.118.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.120.
the most common targets of the movement became teachers and other intellectuals.

Explaining why, Hunter wrote,

...the students were an enthusiastic and excitable lot, with a highly developed sense of moral and political purity. The slightest suggestion that anyone was working against the common good or the teachings of Chairman Mao would provoke a flurry of indignant posters.29

Shanghai party leaders cleverly encouraged students to direct their anger against “bourgeois reactionary intellectuals,”30 while at other schools Red Guards received the personal records of “revisionist” teachers from school authorities,31 and then humiliated these teachers at public struggle sessions. Hunter described an August 11 rally at Shanghai Foreign Language Institute, where eighty-one people, mostly teachers

...were held up to ridicule. They were all led around the grounds wearing dunce caps, and some were pushed or hit as they went.... The Party authorities did nothing to curb the students. In fact, they probably encouraged them. As long as the teachers were being attacked, the Party itself was unlikely to come under fire.32

Another example of public humiliation is provided by Liang Heng, who wrote that, during some struggle sessions, intellectuals were told to recite one of Mao’s famous “Three Essays”;33 if a mistake was made, the intellectual was made to kneel in apology before a picture of the Chairman for the rest of the meeting.34 Spectacles such as this arose, in part, from the natural dislike many Red Guards held for the educated elite,35 but this type of behavior cannot be explained by student feelings alone. Also to blame are party authorities who sought to redirect the Cultural Revolution, for, as Maitan wrote, a

29 Hunter, p.46.
30 Ibid., p.33.
31 Zhu, p.42
32 Hunter, p.67.
33 The “Three Essays” are “On Serving the People,” “In Memory of Norman Bethune,” and “The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain.”
34 Liang and Shapiro, p.78.
35 See Kornow, p.198. “Many youths of peasant or worker organ, consumed with hatred for the educated elite, derived a perverse pleasure from venting their frustrations on the Chinese academic community.”
predominant feature of the Red Guard movement was "an extraordinary combination of prompting from above in the interests of a struggle at the top and a movement from below which tended little by little to acquire a dynamic of its own."36 This dual pressure was to continue throughout the next stage of the Red Guard movement, commonly known as "destroy the four olds."

Revisionism in the Cities

Already mentioned has been how Red Guard radicalism was encouraged by the elite through slogans such as "dare to rebel." Red Guards, having first responded to this "dare" within their own schools, now began to look at the world beyond their campuses. Unclear about the goals of the movement, but still enthusiastic, Red Guards began a mission to destroy the "four olds" – old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits.37 As the Red Guards of Beijing No. 2 Middle School triumphantly exclaimed, "We are the critics of the old world.... We want to rebel against the old world!"38 Theoretically, this was to be a movement aimed at removing the revisionism within Chinese culture at large, a perceived necessary stage of "remodeling" before the nation's eventual transition to communism. Myrdal and Kessle explained, "If socialism was to be made secure, a struggle had to be fought in people's minds. It was imperative that people become conscious of the entire tradition inherited from dead generations which, like a nightmare, was oppressing their minds."39 "Destroy the four olds" was envisioned as a

36 Maitan, p.105.
37 See Huang, p.40. Huang affirmed Red Guards knew "that Mao wanted them to do battle, and to create disorder. However, they were not actually clear about the targets.... But they must fight! They eventually found a battle ground on the streets to give vent to their revolutionary passions."
39 Myrdal and Kessle, p.190.
battle within China’s superstructure on behalf of the nation’s socialist base, thereby reversing the previously accepted mode of socialist development.\(^40\)

However, ideological justification was perhaps not the most compelling factor motivating Red Guards to destroy the “four olds.” Instead, it seems that, once again, Red Guards followed the lead dictated to them by party authorities. “Aparatchiks,” Karnow wrote, “worked to divert and dissipate the energies of the youths by encouraging them to assault trivial symbols of the past.”\(^41\) They encouraged conservative Red Guards to associate the movement with cultural, as opposed to political, change. In this sense, Hong wrote, “It was the Party organization, not the Red Guards, that initiated the campaign against the ‘four olds.’”\(^42\) Once Red Guards again began behaving in the way elites encouraged, they received even further encouragement. In Guangzhou, Zhao Ziyang, the first secretary of Guangdong Province, congratulated Red Guards on their vandalism.\(^43\) This is because party leaders, as Karnow maintained, “were relieved to see Red Guards direct their fury against innocent citizens rather than against the municipal authorities.”\(^44\)

Red Guards may have been encouraged by party elites, but once they began to “destroy the four olds,” Red Guards certainly enjoyed themselves. Ken Ling remembered, “We felt this was the one chance in our lives to enjoy anything, whatever other people had and more. If we could not enjoy something, then we would destroy it so

\(^{40}\) Traditionally, the Soviet Union and other Marxist-Leninist countries pursued socialism through economic development via “Five Year Plans,” etc. Maoism argued that socialism could not be brought about by economic progress alone, but needed cultural change as well. This cultural change would then lead to further socialist economic improvement.

\(^{41}\) Karnow, p.191.

\(^{42}\) Hong, p.87.

\(^{43}\) Karnow, p.193.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
that everyone would be equal."\textsuperscript{45} This stress upon "equality" manifested itself as forced conformity. Members of the public were no longer allowed to dress in Western clothes or wear jewelry; non-compliance meant violent confrontation between Red Guards and the errant individual.\textsuperscript{46} Red Guards thoroughly "attacked anything even slightly related to bourgeois culture: they cut off long hair on the street, burned books which they considered to be at odds with Mao's thought, destroyed art treasures, and so forth."\textsuperscript{47} An extreme example of book burning occurred at Guangzhou's Zhongshan University, where "first the Red Guards burned all the books from the collection of Western classics, then they burned all the books that were not obviously Marxist-Leninist/Mao Zedong Thought, and then they burned the library to the ground."\textsuperscript{48} The amount of destruction caused by Red Guards suggests they probably did not need much elite encouragement to carry out their rampage.

Yet, not all Red Guards were focused only on destruction. Ken Ling recalled, "While I had gone about smashing the old world, I had worried frequently how we could introduce a new, rational, and progressive ideology to replace the old."\textsuperscript{49} One way Red Guards did attempt to build a revolutionary new culture was by giving "revisionist" buildings and streets names more in line with a socialist society. Unimpressed, Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao wrote,

Even though buildings, structures, commodities, and human beings themselves had not changed, the Red Guards, seeing the surface world take on a colorful 'revolutionary' atmosphere and chanting incessantly the 'Song of Rebellious Revolution,' felt an indescribable sense of victory. With the speed of

\textsuperscript{45} Ling, p.44.  
\textsuperscript{46} Fokkema, p.18.  
\textsuperscript{47} Hong, p.87.  
\textsuperscript{48} Thurston, p.101.  
\textsuperscript{49} Ling, p.57.
lightening, they smashed an old world and erected a "blazingly new world."\textsuperscript{50}

Yet, revolutionary transformation was not always confined to the mere surface level, as Yan and Gao have implied. Sometimes an institution's basic function was challenged, as was shown by Gao Yan's encounter with a new "revolutionary" restaurant in Beijing:

This restaurant greeted us with a sign at the door: 'Revolutionary comrades, as part of the campaign to smash old habits and customs, we restaurant workers have decided that customers should serve themselves.' We served ourselves... found a table, and sat down. A slogan on the wall next to us read, 'Resolutely oppose the rotten bourgeois lifestyle.' When we were done, we followed the instructions of another sign above the sinks: 'Revolutionary comrades, please wash your own bowls and chopsticks.'\textsuperscript{51}

Such a radical change of a service industry, if standardized, could conceivably aide in creating a new, socialist culture. Examples such as this can perhaps be seen as genuine attempts at creating a revolutionary society, in contrast to the senseless destruction so prevalent for much of the movement.

Another way Red Guards attempted to build a socialist culture was by injecting the sayings of Chairman Mao into everyday life, thereby attempting to create a new social consciousness. It was assumed that, if the sayings of Mao were repeated to the public enough times, the public would eventually internalize these sayings and modify their behavior accordingly. Memorization was an obvious tool in this process, and public memorization of Mao's writings actually became a necessity in some areas, where "Red Guards were seen on bridges and main roads stopping passengers and asking them to recite Mao's quotations. So, everybody had to remember a few of Mao's quotations and


use them as a pass. In addition to promoting the works of Mao, Red Guards broadcast news of political events to inform the public about the Cultural Revolution. Zhai Zhenha and her fellow Red Guards often "stood at busy intersections reading Chairman Mao's quotations and Party documents about the Cultural Revolution through a megaphone." This may have annoyed some people, but it also may have given some an understanding of the political events shaping their country. One wonders in hindsight, though, if perhaps Red Guards could have brought political ideology and current events to the masses in a more beneficial, non-intrusive way! In Shanghai,

Groups of children went from one restaurant to another to sing about Mao, read quotations from his writings, and hand out mimeographed broadsides. In all public transportation vehicles, groups of young people read newspapers articles and editorials aloud. Once in a while, they shouted a number — the number of the quotation in the little red book containing excerpts of Mao's writings that everyone carries on him — and exhorted the passengers to read the quotation aloud in unison. At certain intervals, they would ask the passengers to shout 'Long live the Chinese Communist Party!' and 'Long Live Chairman Mao!'

Tactics such as this were probably seen as inconveniences by many members of the public, yet it is unclear if Red Guards noticed or cared. Indeed, it certainly seems, as Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao wrote, that at this time, "The Red Guards were everywhere, flushed with their own importance." Perhaps it was this self-confidence that motivated Red Guards to engage in what was arguably the most disruptive aspect of "destroy the four olds" — house searches.

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52 Huang, p.148.
53 Zhai, p.91.
55 Yan and Gao, p.66.
Revisionism in Others' Homes

Extricated from moral convention by their new power, and driven to extreme behavior by their passionate desire to eliminate "revisionism," Red Guards began searching the private dwellings of city residents in a hunt for items belonging to the "four olds." The ideology justifying this hunt was that those owning "revisionist" objects were by necessity "revisionists" themselves; thus the search for these objects was in fact meant to uncover those hostile toward Maoism. This new hunt for revisionism was quite popular, and Red Guards searched perhaps one-third of Beijing's homes during this stage of the movement. Yet, there appears to have been no methodological way for defining targets; instead, homes seem to have been searched either from hearsay or subjective whim. A "foreign expert" wrote how homes were liable to be searched due to the recollections, undoubtedly often faulty, of individual Red Guards:

When asked how they chose their victims, one Red Guard said that a group would think hard about the people they knew until someone remembered, for instance, that in the past a certain woman had worn cosmetics or frequently had her hair permed. The group would then proceed to the woman's home and point out the error of her ways.

Homes were also searched because of tips from concerned neighbors who "were generally 'very enthusiastic' in pointing out the places where 'the class enemy' had been evading or flouting the law." However, even Red Guards themselves sometimes questioned this method's reliability. Fulang Lo recalled an older woman who was accusing her male neighbor of being a capitalist roader:

Gradually, as she chattered on, I came to realize that the smiling woman

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56 Zhu, p.37.
57 Yan and Gao, p.77.
was actually the old man’s daughter-in-law, and that this was a family war. The daughter-in-law was trying to use the glorious Cultural Revolution to drive the old man out so she could take over his house.\textsuperscript{60}

Despite realizations such as this, there was no sustained effort to regulate house searches. Instead, house searches multiplied as Red Guards themselves increased in strength and numbers. During late August in Shanghai, house searches were made seemingly at random.\textsuperscript{61} Feng Jicai, the son of a banker, described one such search, this time in Tianjin:

The boys raided in a roughshod manner, leaving girls to ensure no item was left intact, such as knocking spouts off antique teapots. The broken possessions were piled up in the yard. They burned everything they could and confiscated the rest.\textsuperscript{62}

Unsurprisingly, some Red Guards saw in house searches an easy way to obtain extra cash. Bai Meihua remembered her group pocketing money during their searches; afterward, “We distributed the money among ourselves. Not equally, though. A few of the boys got most of it. We used it to go to restaurants together and to buy cigarettes.”\textsuperscript{63} Considering the tactics used by Red Guards during their house searches, it is hard not to agree with the following assessment made by Chin Ti:

From the activities of the Red Guards in ‘destroying the four old things,’ it may be seen that they have interfered with the private living of the people, plundered their possessions and property, and resorted to merciless means to treat those who, in their opinion, have carried on the ‘four old’ practices. Undoubtedly, they have aroused great resentment among the masses of the people.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Fulang Lo, p.44.
\textsuperscript{63} Bai Meihua, quoted in Thurston, p.163.
\textsuperscript{64} Chin Ti, p.248.
Indeed, by the time of house searches, it seems there was a substantial amount of public anger and opposition against the Red Guards, in contrast to the beginning of the movement, when Red Guards were not roundly supported, but at least not opposed.\(^65\)

Now, cases appeared where members of the public actually killed Red Guards. Adrian Hsia affirmed, “In August 1966 many Red Guards were killed by members of the civilian population, who had taken exception to their revolutionary acts;”\(^66\) Fokkema also wrote, “Not everyone submitted to the terror. There were street committees who resisted the wild charges of the politically and otherwise inexperienced Red Guards…. In those days, Peking buzzed with rumors of violent resistance to the Red Guards.”\(^67\)

The press, too, despite first encouraging house searches, now began to turn away from the Red Guards and criticized them for invading the homes of “good citizens.”\(^68\) Elites tried, once again, to redirect the Red Guards into targeting “genuine capitalist roaders”; yet Red Guards, Huang wrote, “did not seem to show any interest in finding the capitalist roaders whose identities were not clear at all. They were all very found of destroying the ‘four olds,’ searching homes… and physically torturing their victims.”\(^69\) House searches were eventually outlawed in November, yet by this time, “the young rebels no longer listened to orders and acted according to their own standards of what is done or not done in a revolution.”\(^70\) It now seemed that Red Guards had finally achieved their independence from the party; however this independence did not immediately bring with it positive results.

\(^{65}\) Rosen, p.115.
\(^{67}\) Fokkema, p.22. The subject of public resistance and violence against Red Guards is a perhaps unwritten chapter of the Cultural Revolution that certainly deserves further study.
\(^{68}\) Karol, pp.202-203.
\(^{69}\) Huang, pp. 159-160.
\(^{70}\) Karol, p.203.
The first stage of the Red Guard movement brought with it much chaos and most likely did more harm than good. However, given the circumstances, it is perhaps difficult to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Red Guards, as has been mentioned, were young and inexperienced. Therefore, as Karol argued,

...if they were to sally forth from the isolation of the campus and extend their activities to the rest of society, what solutions could they put forward when they knew so little of the problems? So the zeal had to be spent in giving new names to streets and squares, shutting 'luxury' restaurants, and searching the homes of former rich men and professors.\textsuperscript{71}

Red Guards at this time seemed unable to handle the responsibility given to them by radical elites. However, following the logic of "it is through swimming that one learns how to swim," radical elites still apparently had hopes that, through practice, Red Guards could master their skills and become proper revolutionary successors. Hence, no attempt was made by officials at this time to stop the Red Guard movement, only to redirect it. And redirection was what elites literally did, partly through \textit{chuan lian}, the process of allowing Red Guards free revolutionary travel all across the country. This new offer tempted Red Guards away from ransacking homes but ultimately led to an even further radicalization of the movement, past even what leftist members of the CCP were willing to accept.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Red Guards arose from a mixture of mass spontaneity and elite guidance, and these two forces continued to influence Red Guards throughout much of the Cultural Revolution. Initially unclear about the direction to take their movement, students were first easily guided by conservative party members to direct their anger against teachers, then against trivial aspects of Chinese culture, and finally, against the homes of ordinary people.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p.202.
citizens. However, at the same time Red Guards were being guided, they were also being
couraged to take the initiative through slogans such as “trust the masses” and “dare to
rebel.” These two concepts appear contradictory, but in actuality compliment each other
within Maoism. It was acknowledged that Red Guards were young and inexperienced,
but it was also assumed that, through the process of making revolution, they would
become revolutionary successors. Hence, the strategy adopted by radical elites was to
encourage Red Guards to first seize their newly given power by taking the initiative, and
then to learn how to master this power through direct experience. Thus there was
acknowledgement from radical elites concerning the necessity of trial and error among
the developing Red Guards. This radical elite-allowed room for trial and error was then
seized upon by conservative elites, who feared radical goals and sought to redirect the
movement into channels perceived as unchallenging to conservative aims. In this sense,
conservative elites continued the policies of the vanquished work teams, positioning the
movement against targets non-threatening to party hierarchy.

Although Red Guards were directed by conservative elites, they also felt the
influence of their own desires. Students naturally joined the Red Guards, dually
motivated by the chance of political fulfilment as well as by their genuine desire to
strengthen and protect China’s socialist revolution. Although the value and
appropriateness of students’ hunt for revisionism can of course be questioned, its’
earnestness cannot. Furthermore, as Red Guard initiative grew, so did their confidence.
This new confidence often manifested itself in destructive ways, but it also freed the
movement from primarily being under the influence of conservative elites. Sometime
during the campaign of “destroy the four olds,” Red Guards became a truly independent
organization, motivated primarily by the desires of its members. Red Guards apparently realized the true extent of their power, but would they now use this power in the way radical elites intended?
CHAPTER 4

SPREAD OF THE RED GUARDS

The Red Guard movement had, in pursuit of revisionism, terrorized many and wreaked havoc to much; but through this chaos, the Red Guards had also achieved a certain level of independence. In addition, middle-school Red Guards, the most active participants during “destroy the four olds,” were now basically a spent force, thereby placing the momentum once again behind the movement’s initiators, university students.\(^1\) This change in age brought with it the possibility of the movement itself also maturing, substituting the stage of destruction with something constructive. It therefore appeared that Red Guards were at last in a position to act as a counter-hegemonic force against conservative elements within the party, thus becoming revolutionary successors and fulfilling their role as the radical elites had intended. Yet, while this possibility was perhaps now conceivable, it was not immediately acted upon, nor even realized, by many Red Guards. Students had grown up in an environment stressing party loyalty — to rebel against the party meant defying an entire culture that stressed obedience — therefore, going against the party required more than just favorable circumstances. It also required a greater awareness among Red Guards of their independent strength, as well as greater clarity that direct assault upon the party was necessary. Radical elites needed to foster these two requirements without pushing the growing rebellion past its intended framework. It was this balancing act that they attempted to achieve during the fall of 1966 by further expanding Red Guard independence through chuan lian, strengthening Red Guard loyalty to Mao though huge mass rallies, and directing Red Guard rebellion,

\(^1\) Collier and Collier, p.87.
despite cultural conservatism, to effectively challenge the party. However, while radical elites were pursuing these goals, Red Guards themselves were beginning to realize something else – that their primary differences might lay not with conservatives in the party, but with each other. It was now when the factionalism that would contribute so heavily to the Red Guards’ doom appeared. Ironically, at the very time Red Guards were supposedly becoming revolutionary successors, they were beginning to self-destruct.

High Tide of the Red Guards

Fall of 1966 was, for Red Guards, an amazing time. The earlier removal of school authorities, coupled with the dizzying excess of “destroy the four olds,” led to an environment in which many Red Guards understandably saw everything as being possible.² An extreme freedom had been given to students, a social group keenly aware of their normally inferior position in China’s power hierarchy. Now, all pent-up frustrations at last could be expressed, all perceived wrongs avenged, and all actions previously only dreamed about could be carried out openly, for, as Rae Yang wrote, “Now the time had come for the underdogs to speak up, to seek justice!”³ A new revolutionary society was apparently in birth and students were both its chief actors and beneficiaries. Therefore, in the eyes of students (but undoubtedly not in the eyes of those whom students terrorized), “An atmosphere of extraordinary freedom and purpose existed in those days.”⁴

The freedoms being offered to Red Guards included freedom of speech, at least to a degree surpassing what was previously allowed in the People’s Republic. Red Guards,

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² Kwong, p.35.
³ Yang, p.117.
⁴ Milton and Milton, p.239.
clearly responsive to the new opportunities made available, began distributing their own
newspapers as well as carrying out independent demonstrations. The Miltons recalled:

Peking seethed with revolutionary exuberance in that golden autumn of 1966. The lawfully proclaimed Red Guard organizations made full use of their rights to demonstrate in the streets. They marched in endless columns, their ubiquitous silk flags shining in the northern sun. Newspapers and revolutionary proclamations, published by mass organizations at government expense, were hawked in the street corners by the young activists.5

Students now had the opportunity to present their own voices to the public at large. This chance for self-expression was a strong motivating factor for Red Guards such as Rae Yang, who wrote, “In the beginning, the Cultural Revolution exhilarated me because suddenly I felt that I was allowed to think with my own head and say what was on my own mind.”6 With this increase of expression came a natural broadening of thought. The “masses” were no longer to simply “trust the party,” but were to think for themselves.

Sidney Rittenberg, perhaps not a true Red Guard but still influenced by the movement, described the sudden change:

All at once, there was no one to trust, no one to tell us what to do, how to think, what to believe. We all had to think for ourselves, to decide was this good, was this right, was this revolutionary. Did it follow Mao’s teachings? It was perplexing, exhilarating – and terrifying.7

Students, allowed to think independently, could now direct their movement according to their own free will, at least in theory. However, in reality, the official press

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5 Ibid., p.157.
6 Yang, p.115.
7 Rittenberg and Bennett, p.316. Rittenberg, despite being middle-age during the Cultural Revolution, eventually co-founded the Norman Bethune Red Guards, an organization made up of middle-age foreigners living in China and sympathetic to Maoism. While this paper’s focus is on the student movement, it is important to note that eventually Red Guard-type organizations sprang up throughout much of China’s working and administrative classes.
continued to suggest where radical elites felt the movement should go.⁸ True, students
now could conceivably choose to reject the party line, and within an idealized realm of
free expression, the party’s voice would be only one voice among many, meaning that, if
students did accept the party line, it was because of its respective merit alone. Yet, even
if every voice in Cultural Revolution-era China was now indeed equal, past conditioning
still likely would make the party’s voice louder than all the rest. Thus, when an Urgent
Directive from the Central Military Committee on October 5 argued that the Cultural
Revolution was in fact a battle between two lines within the party – “the proletarian and
revolutionary line of Chairman Mao” verses “the bourgeois and reactionary line of Party
authorities taking the capitalist road”⁹ – most Red Guards immediately took notice, and
perhaps with the new idea to challenge the party implanted in their minds, their behavior
was influenced accordingly. It is thus unclear if Red Guards radicalized their movement
during October of 1966 from their own accord, or because they, once again, were simply
following the party. Whatever the reasons, the Red Guard movement now entered a new
stage, effectively winding down “destroy the four olds” in favor of a new campaign
against the “bourgeois reactionary line” within the party.¹⁰

Against the Party

Even if Red Guards were simply following the orders of Mao and other radical
elites, they were still going against the party; a step that required students to make an
objective mental break with their past. This is because students, as Hunter wrote, had

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⁸ See Hong, p.59. “The newspaper editorials, reflecting the views of the Maoist leaders, called for ‘free
mobilization of the masses’ and dropped ample hints that the Party leaders themselves were the major
targets.”
⁹ Quoted in Hunter, pp.111-112.
¹⁰ Hong, p.110.
...been brought up to believe that the Communist Party of China was a ‘great, glorious, and correct’ institution that had saved their country from humiliation and chaos and given the people a dignity and vision they had not possessed for a century. In their growing years, they had seen little or nothing to challenge this interpretation so they naturally tended to obey the Party.\textsuperscript{11}

This tendency to view the party as the “objective truth” was taught to students not only by their teachers at school, but also by their parents. Liang Heng’s father told him, “The Party saved me, and I have always believed that the Party understands far more than we ordinary people ever can what is right for our country.”\textsuperscript{12} Rebelling against the party therefore meant rebelling against years of prior conditioning. Because it was the “ultimate authority,” going against the party required more of a mental break than going against one’s teachers; however, going against one’s teachers could perhaps serve as preparation for going against the party, since that action, too, required distancing from past customs. Obedience toward the party and all forms of authority was seen as a virtue. Prior to the summer of 1966, many students had never challenged those with power in their schools.\textsuperscript{13} An Wenjiang wrote that, “Before the movement, I had been quite, obedient, and almost shy in class, but only because my free and reckless nature had been suppressed. Given the opportunity, I grew radical, daring, and enthusiastic.”\textsuperscript{14} It thus seems likely that it was students’ growing radicalism, first against teachers, and then against the “four olds,” that enabled them to make the mental jump necessary to challenge the party. This process is articulated by Ken Ling, when he explains that he and his friends realized the movement was now headed against the CCP: “We now understood that the previous struggles against the teachers and the movement to destroy

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Hunter, p.47.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Liang and Shapiro, p.42.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Kwong, p.7.
\item \textsuperscript{14} An, p.119.
\end{itemize}
the four olds in society had been a mere tempering and a trial of Red Guard courage. The Cultural Revolution had only now begun.  

The ultimate aim of the Cultural Revolution was now taking shape, but those students ready to embark upon a struggle with the party were advised to proceed cautiously by parents with experience in past campaigns. While some parents were likely to view any criticism of the party as anathema, those parents not fully satisfied with party rule (and thus perhaps sympathetic with the student movement) also wanted to moderate their children. Vocal opposition to the party, before the advent of the Red Guards, was therefore limited by at least three reasons: first, many loved the party; second, obedience to the party was ingrained; and finally, those who did criticize the party were severely punished. This last reason is why some parents, as Maitan wrote, were understandably 

...wary or apathetic, and expressed fears that the Cultural Revolution would be 'no different from the 1957-58 anti-rightist struggle.' They therefore advised their sons to avoid doing anything rash that they might afterwards regret when things returned to 'normal.'  

Parents based this caution not on paranoia, but on a realistic assessment of past events. By living in the often volatile People’s Republic, they had developed, in the words of Thurston, “a finely honed sense of the locus of political power and of the penalties for presuming to challenge it.” And, indeed, parental skepticism regarding the Cultural Revolution was not ill-founded – party members often kept dossiers on those Red Guards who criticized them, for future vengeance.  

Red Guards, perhaps because, unlike some of their parents, they had never fully experienced party repression first-hand, were not intimidated by conservative party

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15 Ling, p.61.
16 Maitan, p.18.
17 Thurston, p.93.
18 Chen, p.233.
officials keeping records on their behavior. Red Guards in Canton University demanded that party dossiers should either be given to the students or publicly destroyed, arguing that “if such material was kept it would inhibit people from freely making criticism of others in positions of authority.” When this request was denied, the Guangzhou Red Guards decided to raid party offices themselves, in search of the dossiers. The Colliers wrote that the significance of these raids “went much further than the importance of the issue concerning the dossiers. These raids amounted to a direct physical attack on the Party organization.” Red Guards in Guangzhou, through their attempts at securing or destroying those dossiers that threatened them, took what was perhaps the first step at challenging the party. Pleased with this initiative, and wanting to further encourage student radicalism, radical elites within the CCP Central Committee on November 6, 1966, ordered the public burning of all dossiers. Students, Huang wrote, saw this turn of events as “almost too good to be true. They felt spiritually and psychologically relieved, and they were all the more willing to follow Chairman Mao in rebellion and chaos.” Thus, students responded in the way radical elites had hoped.

Yet, now a new problem arose – students were not limiting themselves to those party members that radical elites had deemed to be appropriate targets. Instead, Red Guards showed a surprising tendency to target nearly all party members, including those belonging to the radical side. This over zealousness was perhaps because, as usual, it was unclear which party members were “revisionist” and which were not; it was also unclear as to what degree “revisionism” had corrupted the party. Out of this confusion, some

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19 Collier and Collier, p.93.
20 Ibid., p.94.
21 Huang, p.47.
22 Ibid.
Red Guards had taken the position that nearly the entire party had become revisionist and needed to be overthrown. Fulang Lo recalled asking a Beijing Red Guard how many revisionists inhabited the CCP. His reply was, “Thousands and thousands. Almost every Communist Party leader in a provincial government, city government, county government, in school leadership and work unit leadership are capitalist roaders.”

This near-total view of party corruption alienated members of older generations who saw in the party a more worthy organization. Li Hsien-nien, an elderly man, upon reading a wall covered with posters that denounced most of the party’s leadership, exclaimed, “It is impossible that there could be so many traitors!” and then reportedly wept “at the arrogance and callousness of these youth.” Another example is provided by Liu Chi, a party official in Shanghai, who, after being criticized, put up the following poster in reply: “I’d been a communist when my attackers were not born yet, and at their age I’d fought in Chairman Mao’s army against real enemies and not, like them, against the comrades who had given them the chance to learn and to live in freedom.” Red Guards were apparently radicalizing their movement past what many other Chinese would accept. Therefore, it was decided among radical elites that steps should be taken to refocus the movement. Kang Sheng, head of China’s secret service and, hence, highly qualified to talk about targeting individuals, asked Red Guards to remain firm in Mao Zedong Thought while going after CCP “traitors.” He specifically advised that those Red Guards who reviewed the casework of individual party members

...must have a clear and correct class viewpoint. What they are dealing with are one traitor [after another], and the longer they deal with something like that, the greater the likelihood of their minds becoming confused, and, slowly, maybe their

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23 Fulang Lo, p.50.
24 Chen, p.295.
25 Karol, pp.359-360.
own ways of thinking, their own ideology will become affected. One day you
find out about a traitor here, and the next day you deal with another traitor over
there; and in the meantime, all the material is concentrated here, in your hands; O
good gracious! The Chinese Communist Party is such a great, glorious, and
correct Party; how could things have become so dark, so black all over? [Maybe
it is] no longer quite so great, glorious, or correct [?] ...Unless you have a rock-
solid firm and steadfast viewpoint, slowly your own viewpoint and standpoint
can be shaken, and you will begin to waver....

Kang Sheng argued that no matter how many “traitors” the party held, its basic
“correctness” could not be questioned. The Cultural Revolution could question the
legitimacy of certain party leaders, but not the party itself. To make things even clearer,
the press now began to state that it was only one or two people at the top who were
responsible for the party’s “bourgeois reactionary line.” Red Guards should go after the
top “capitalist roaders” and their followers, but beyond that, it was apparently no longer
“right to rebel.”

Radical elites thus faced a balancing act – they had to radicalize students to
challenge conservative elements within the party, yet also try to prevent students from
continuing their assault past the realm radical elites intended. Thus, concurrently with
the movement’s general turn against the party, there occurred two outcomes of radical
elite initiation: the advent of huge mass rallies held in Beijing, designed to strengthen
loyalty to Mao and the radical side, and chuan lian, the free revolutionary travel given to
Red Guards. The “exchange of revolutionary experience” offered by chuan lian partly
aided in the radicalization of students, thereby making it easier for them to challenge the
party, while at the same time, seeing the “red sun” of Chairman Mao at a mass rally in
Beijing served in some ways to moderate students, indoctrinating them into believing

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27 Hunter, p.154.
their goals were the same as those of the radical elite. In these two ways, it seems, the
objective independence of the Red Guards possibly increased just as their subjective
loyalty to Mao and Maoism was strengthened.

Mass Rallies

Mass rallies were an integral part of the Cultural Revolution's beginning, helping
to organize and direct the movement. Between August 18 and November 20, eight huge
rallies were held in Tiananmen Square, in which a total of 11 million people took part. 28
Students throughout China were encouraged to flock to Beijing and attend a rally; upon
their arrival they were given free food, clothing, shelter, and medical care while waiting
"in the revolutionary mecca to catch a glimpse of 'the reddest sun' himself." 29 Services
such as this likely caused a favorable impression for many young Red Guards, such as An
Wenjiang, who wrote, "My trip to Beijing convinced me more than ever that Mao was on
our side." 30 Yet, it was not just these "free gifts" that converted students to Maoism; as
was explained in chapter 1, loyalty to Mao and his Thought had been stressed to all
students throughout their educational experience. Thus, many students were already
loyal to Mao, and saw such loyalty as a natural part of their lives. Illustrating this is
Liang Heng, who described a ritual undertaken by many Red Guards upon their arrival in
Beijing:

Like every other Red Guard coming to Peking for the first time, I took my
oath in front of the huge picture of Chairman Mao, lifting my 'Little Red Book' in
my right hand, sticking out my chest and reciting proudly, 'Chairman Mao, Liang
Heng has finally come to your side. I will always be loyal to you. I will always
be loyal to your Thought. I will always be loyal to your revolutionary line.' 31

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28 Maitan, p.28.
29 Milton and Milton, p.158.
30 An, p.121.
31 Liang and Shapiro, p.115.
Most students considered themselves Maoists even before the actual rally took place. The purpose of these rallies, therefore, was not to win over wavering students to a new cause, but to reaffirm students' commitment to a preexisting cause. By encouraging students to celebrate what they already believed, radical elites hoped they could motivate students to not waver from this belief in the future.

At these rallies, students were encouraged to continue in their movement through speeches made by radical elites such as Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, and Jiang Qing. Although Mao's supporters were the principal speakers, the central figure of every rally was always Mao himself, who, despite only publicly appearing for brief periods, and rarely, if ever, speaking, always dominated the event. It was this chance to see Mao that had motivated so many Red Guards to come to Beijing, and quite a few were driven to a near frenzy upon finally seeing their beloved Chairman. Describing this frenzy, An Wenjiang wrote,

\[32\] I was breathless with excitement, as my heart raced and tears poured down. A girl behind me fainted from happiness. My own joy was beyond words…. The whole square seethed with young people crying and chanting. He was our God and we worshipped him absolutely: 'Chairman Mao! Chairman Mao! Long live Chairman Mao!'

Seeing Mao was for many Red Guards a defining moment. In the view of a "foreign expert," "For the couple of million unsophisticated young people who took part…. I am certain it was the moment of a lifetime."[33] This certainly seems to be the case for Rae Yang, who recalled the event in ways similar to that of a transcendent, quasi-religious experience:

My blood was boiling inside me. I jumped and shouted and cried in unison with a million people in the square. At that moment, I forgot myself; all barriers that existed between me and others broke down. I felt like a drop of water that finally joined the mighty raging ocean. I would never be lonely.

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32 An, p.121.
again.\textsuperscript{34}

It is no wonder that many Red Guards would leave such rallies with an even stronger commitment to Mao Zedong, as well as a greater determination to fight against those party members believed to be opposing his will.

\textit{Chuan Lian}

Determination to go against the party was also fostered through \textit{chuan lian}, the grant of free travel to Red Guards, first announced by Zhou Enlai on August 31.\textsuperscript{35} Red Guards were now encouraged to “exchange revolutionary experience” and “make revolution” all across the country; which was truly a remarkable opportunity for students, many of whom had previously never traveled even outside their own cities.\textsuperscript{36} A Cantonese Red Guard described his travels:

I traveled with hundreds of others, free of charge, in trains, ferries, trucks. It was a fantastic experience seeing the country in this manner. We really did feel liberated in this fashion without any restrictions and in the company of lots of other youths, discussing quite freely things we had not thought about in the past.\textsuperscript{37}

Red Guards gleefully took advantage of the new freedom being offered, and while some used \textit{chuan lian} primarily as a means to visit distant friends and relatives,\textsuperscript{38} others saw the experience as the beginning of a new, revolutionary career. Rae Yang, portraying this later view, wrote,

We were not tourists. Our trip was not for fun and comfort. We were soldiers going out to war against an old world. In fact, many of us thought at the time that this trip would be a turning point in our lives, the beginning of our careers as ‘professional revolutionary experts.’\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{34} Yang, p.123.
\textsuperscript{35} Kwong, p.30.
\textsuperscript{36} Liang wrote that, regarding students, “under normal circumstances most couldn’t expect to leave their home town in their entire lifetimes.” Liang and Shapiro, p.111.
\textsuperscript{37} Quoted in Tariq Ali, p.361.
\textsuperscript{38} Thurston, p.98.
\textsuperscript{39} Yang, p.131.
A significant number of Red Guards participating in *chuan lian* apparently saw it as a serious opportunity to spread the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, it brought Red Guards to parts of China where the movement had not yet taken root, effectively spreading rebellion all across the country. In the somewhat biased words of William Hinton, this meant, "The overall political effect of this extraordinary travel was to stimulate rebellion, strengthen the left, and expose the right."^{40} Here, perhaps offering a description of this process of "strengthening the left and exposing the right," is an unnamed Red Guard from a Shanghai middle school, who recalled the time when Beijing Red Guards first entered her school:

Red Guards from Beijing in army uniforms with leather belts took on grand airs. They asked us: 'How come you are still so defined? There is no revolutionary atmosphere here at all.' I couldn't understand what 'revolutionary atmosphere' meant. Then a female Red Guard member from Beijing took off her leather belt and started demonstrating how to whip. That was the earliest image I have of the Red Guards from Beijing.\(^4^1\)

One possible reason for the spread in violence was that, by traveling to other cities, Red Guards no longer felt the same societal restraints of their home communities; so they could now be as "revolutionary" as they wished. Ken Ling, a Red Guard from Amoy, elucidated this process:

In Foochow I had no restraint or worry at all. I had neither relative nor friend nor even casual acquaintance; the problem of face did not exist. All this was so different from Amoy, where I had thousands of worries and constantly felt the conflict between my family upbringing and my own will to disregard everything.\(^4^2\)

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\(^{42}\) Ling, pp.94-95.
The spread of Red Guards through *chuan lian* therefore further radicalized the movement, as Red Guards first freed themselves of their inhibitions by traveling to other cities, and then used their prestige as "outsiders" to influence local Red Guards into emulating their more extreme behavior.

Radicalization also was fostered through a specific side effect of *chuan lian*, a side effect relating to the process which determined how Red Guards were considered eligible for free travel. At the beginning of *chuan lian*, Red Guards could not automatically board any train for free; they needed special permits for the service. Theoretically, these permits were available for any student who wanted them; however, in reality, they were at first given only to those conservative students who supported the local preparatory committees.⁴³ These preparatory committees, serving as the last vestiges of school authority, continued the moderating policies first established by the work teams. Like the work teams, the preparatory committees were primarily made up of local party members who felt threatened by the Cultural Revolution's expressed aims and thus sought to control and stall the movement. Willingly aiding the preparatory committee in this regard were the conservative students, a group whose leaders tended to be children of cadres.⁴⁴ Perhaps in response to this support, preparatory committees pursued a policy of

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⁴³ See Rosen, p.116. "Free travel tickets issued by the municipal committee to the schools went directly to the preparatory committees, which in turn distributed them to those supporting their authority."

⁴⁴ As will be explained in greater detail in the next chapter, Red Guards were not a homogeneous group, but split according to preexisting class lines. The first Red Guard organizations, formed by the children of workers, poor peasants, cadres, soldiers, and revolutionary martyrs, tended to be more politically conservative than the later Red Guards, who primarily drew their ranks from "bad" classes. Their conservatism becomes understandable when one considers that the classes initially forming Red Guards were the privileged classes in the People's Republic; they could expect more privilege in the future, and thus saw little reason to change the status quo. Along these same lines, most local party officials would likely possess minimal interest in threatening their jobs, thus making a natural alliance possible between these two groups. Furthermore, assuming that the children of cadres and local party officials were often two halves of the same family, the truly symbiotic nature of this alliance becomes clear.
distributing permits authorizing free travel only to those students whom they considered reliable; hence free travel basically was a "reward for good behavior."

This policy of offering selective rewards worked at first, at least through the month of September, 1966. However, by October, the preparatory committees were clearly loosing their grip on the movement.\textsuperscript{45} The flight of conservative Red Guards from their home communities across China only weakened the position of the preparatory committee vis-à-vis the local radical Red Guards who had stayed behind. In other words, the constant decrease of conservative Red Guards through \textit{chuan lian} meant the local ratio of radical Red Guards in each area steadily increased. Faced with an ever-worsening scenario, preparatory committees decided to reverse course in early October. Preparatory committees thus "began 'officially' to encourage everyone to leave on \textit{chuan lian}, primarily to avoid the criticism building up against their leadership of the movement, and to prevent the rebels from doing extensive mobilization work."\textsuperscript{46} There were now at least two relatively distinct Red Guard organizations traveling across China on \textit{chuan lian}; and as the second group traveled to other cities, it encouraged local radical factions in their struggles against their own preparatory committees.\textsuperscript{47}

Evidently, the practice of allowing everyone to go on \textit{chuan lian} may have given local preparatory committees temporary breathing room, but in the end only strengthened the radical side. Radical Red Guards, by traveling from one city to another and spreading rebellion practically everywhere, had become much stronger from \textit{chuan lian}, emerging as "seasoned veterans" through their many struggles. Hinton wrote that,

Since whenever they arrived they immediately called for rebellion, they

\textsuperscript{45} Rosen, p.124.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p.125.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p.124.
also had a chance to live through for a second or even a third time the experience of being labeled counter-revolutionary, of being denied the right to speak, to organize, and to advocate, and consequently also the experience of standing firm, finding mass support, and fighting back.48

Radical Red Guards gained from chuan lian courage and experience that they may have previously lacked. This new knowledge was then taken back and turned against those conservative Red Guards who had earlier oppressed them in their home communities. It was after chuan lian that the Red Guards began to fight each other.49

Conclusion

Fall 1966 appears to have been a pivotal time during the Cultural Revolution; it was a period of fine-tuning during which many of the themes that eventually shaped the movement were put into place. Red Guards, at the end of “destroy the four olds,” were perhaps now the strongest active player of the Cultural Revolution. However, it seems that Red Guards did not yet realize their strength, or perhaps more exactly, Red Guards were not utilizing their strength in the way radical elites desired. Therefore, radical elites continued to influence the movement, even if Red Guards themselves were possibly unaware of this continued influence. Red Guards, now enjoying what they considered a “free press,” certainly saw themselves as experiencing a greater degree of freedom and independence than was previously imaginable. Past conditioning, however, guaranteed that party suggestions from the top received a large audience, especially if the suggestions were seen as coming from Mao. Hence, radical elites successfully used preexisting beliefs to shape debate and guide the movement in a way that participants possibly saw as manifestations of their own desires. Red Guards, in this sense, likely did

48 William Hinton, p.95.
49 Kwong, p.67. "In many schools, the wanton use of physical punishment and fighting among the students occurred only after these students returned from their revolutionary tours."
not consider themselves to be "led," especially since where they were being "led" was to
attack aspects of the party itself, a tactic requiring at least a selective break from the past.

Students had been taught to love "their party," both from teachers and from
parents. Obedience to the party was taken for granted, as well as obedience to all forms
of authority. Red Guards' struggle against teachers and "destroy the four olds" could
perhaps serve as training for action against the party, but it was unlikely that this prior
rebelliousness in itself was enough to convince students that challenging the party was
now possible or even necessary. Furthermore, the past history of the People's Republic
had many examples of what could happen if one challenged the party. Red Guards'
parents had experienced the anti-rightist movement; those parents who had been victims
of that movement would likely encourage their children to moderate their behavior, lest
they experience the same fate. However, Red Guards themselves had never directly
experienced any such prior campaigns, and this inexperience may help to explain why
some students were willing to undertake early actions against the party. In Guangzhou,
Red Guards struggled to claim authority over the dossiers being kept on them by
conservative party members. Radical elites found out about this struggle and ordered that
all such dossiers be publicly burned. It now seemed that students could challenge the
party unafraid; perhaps it was only students' love for the party that prevented them from
acting in the way radical elites desired.

Radical elites tackled the problem of continuing student loyalty to the party by
promoting, through huge mass rallies, students' love for Mao. These mammoth
gatherings, supposedly held in honor of the Red Guards, were in actuality, frenzied
celebrations of students' loyalty to Mao. Through these rallies, Chairman Mao assumed,
in students' eyes, the position of ultimate authority; it was under this authority that students could now justify attacking the party. Through these rallies, students convinced themselves that they were not attacking the party itself, but only those party members opposed to Mao who were taking the capitalist road. In this way, mass rallies were both a radicalizing as well as a moderating force upon students. They radicalized students to challenge the party, but they also moderated students, limiting their attack to specific elements within the party. Indeed, at the same time as these mass rallies, some students were acting as if the Cultural Revolution were to be directed against all party members. This extreme view alienated many people of the older generation, but probably more importantly, it also threatened those radical elites who were attempting to direct the movement. Mass rallies served as one means by which radical elites strove to keep the movement within acceptable bounds. While Red Guards were now freer than ever before, already there were clear limits to their freedom.

Red Guards themselves may not have been aware of any such limits, however, as they now enjoyed chuan lian, or free revolutionary travel, all across the country. This was a remarkable experience for many Red Guards, giving them the opportunity to leave their own cities and gain independence. Chuan lian occurred at the same time as the mass rallies and the Cultural Revolution's turn against the party, and it clearly played a major role in radicalizing the movement. Students, by leaving their communities, were suddenly freed from the cultural restraints of home. Red Guards now began to act in a more "revolutionary" way than before, and used their prestige as "outsiders" to influence local Red Guards in the cities they visited. Thus, the experience of chuan lian, for Red Guards, likely served as further preparation for their eventual struggle against the party,
and it certainly increased the violence of the movement. Moreover, it also set the stage for a rise in Red Guard violence against each other.

The next chapter will examine in greater detail the preexisting splits among the Red Guards, and the way these splits were to influence the movement. Needless to say, Red Guards were not a homogeneous organization, and chuan lian perhaps served only to further deteriorate any chance of Red Guard unity. The first Red Guards allowed to participate in chuan lian were the children of party members, revolutionary martyrs, workers, and poor peasants, the classes most favored in the People’s Republic. These Red Guards tended to be politically conservative, at least when compared to those Red Guards who belonged to the “bad” classes and thus had reason to challenge the status quo. It was while these conservative Red Guards were away on chuan lian that radical Red Guards, by default, began to grow significantly in strength; they eventually forced local preparatory committees to expand chuan lian to all students. Radical Red Guards now mimicked their conservative peers by traveling throughout China, and in doing so, brought encouragement to the radical student movements then developing throughout China’s cities. It appears that chuan lian in this way magnified the already existing split between students, solidifying Red Guards into two basic camps – radical and conservative. Increasingly, the battles of these two camps were waged mostly against each other. Consequently, the fall of 1966 was when Red Guards came closest to being the revolutionary successors that radical elites intended, yet it was also when the student movement began to implode.
CHAPTER 5

RED GUARDS' OPPOSING CLASS INTERESTS

This chapter examines the differences between conservative and radical Red Guards during the fall of 1966. It argues that, while both conservative and radical Red Guards were aided in their birth by competing factions within the CCP, and while both sides continued to receive some elite support throughout the movement, it was primarily students' self-interest that dictated the direction of their struggle. Red Guards arose from a field of preexistent tensions within the student body, and these tensions shaped Red Guard behavior. Predominately, there appears to have been tension among students regarding their "class." The stress upon class in Maoist China led to an environment in which students were keenly aware of their position within the power hierarchy. Students belonging to favored classes were constantly reminded of their privileged status through school policy, while those from "bad" classes were frequently held accountable for their parents "crimes." A bleak future seemed to await the children of China's "counterrevolutionaries," but for the children of cadres, soldiers, workers, poor and middle peasants, and revolutionary martyrs, the future seemed bright. Thus, better off students, likely content with their lot, would see little reason to change the status quo; hence, they would pursue conservative means to safeguard their interests. Disadvantaged students, on the other hand, were enticed by the redistribution of power seemingly offered by the Cultural Revolution, and favored radical goals that challenged the status quo. Therefore, the student body was effectively split even before the onset of the Red Guards, and it was in relation to this split that Red Guards began to form. Furthermore,
once formed, it was with different notions of “class” that the opposing sides defined themselves. Self-interest motivated conservative Red Guards to favor a traditional view of “class” based upon economic lines, while radical Red Guards saw it beneficial to define “class” politically, as a struggle against “power holders.” It was these differing views of “class” that allowed both conservative and radical Red Guards to pursue their opposing interests within the accepted Maoist framework of “class struggle.” It can be said that radical and conservative Red Guards used the same means to pursue different goals.

**First, Conservative Red Guards**

Students’ freedom during the late summer of 1966 greatly exceeded what had previously been allowed in the People’s Republic. This new freedom arose in part from the struggles of radical students, as was explained in chapter 2, who opposed the authoritarian style of work teams with a Maoist-inspired message of personal initiative. The withdrawal of work teams on July 28, and the subsequent publishing of the 16 Points on August 8, led to a situation which seemed, upon first glance, to allow radical students further capitalization of their recent gains. Yet, it was those students who belonged to the conservative side that first “seized the moment” and formed the Red Guards.\(^1\) Perhaps this was because, as Kwong explained, “The initial leaders in the Revolution were those who were better socialized and integrated into the system, and they responded more wholeheartedly to the central government’s call than those who were not.”\(^2\) In other words, once the new-forming Red Guards received their official blessing on August 18,

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\(^1\) See Rosen, p.109, who wrote of a Guangzhou middle school after the publication of the 16 Points, “At least in the short run the ‘lifting of the lid’ led to the mobilization of those students most likely to be conservative in support of the Party organization....”

\(^2\) Kwong, p.14.
those students who had traditionally been leaders quickly followed the rising tide.

Unsurprisingly, student leaders in socialist China tended to be members of the favored classes, and those student leaders given the most authority were probably the children of cadres. These sons and daughters of China's elite conceivably assumed that they, like their parents, deserved power. As Huang surmised, "Since their fathers had followed Chairman Mao in making revolution for several decades, they felt that they themselves naturally were the most loyal to Mao and that it was their duty to be revolutionary vanguards."\(^3\) This belief was also purposively fostered by school authorities and conservative party members, who saw in children of elites a natural ally, knowing that "they could be counted on, even when freely mobilized, not to challenge the structural legitimacy of the Party organization and not to ask for a restructuring of the Chinese political system."\(^4\) Consequently, in elite schools, meetings were organized for cadre children; in these meetings school and local party officials encouraged students to follow in their parents' footsteps.\(^5\) Conservative Red Guards thus formed due to encouragement from above, in combination with their own internalized belief that they were the true successors of the revolution.

Conservative Red Guards' belief in their revolutionary self-worth arose not just from their parents' accomplishments, but also from the intense stress on one's "class," which was in many ways a defining aspect of Maoist China. Rosen affirmed that, prior to the Cultural Revolution, "References to family origin had begun to permeate all areas of student life."\(^6\) Students were constantly reminded to which class they belonged, and an

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\(^3\) Huang, p.38.
\(^4\) Hong, p.56.
\(^5\) Rosen, p.79.
\(^6\) Ibid.
individual’s place in the class hierarchy was taken into consideration when distributing punishments and rewards. A student’s class, for example, played a key role in determining whether she or he would be allowed to enter college. Students from good classes – the children of workers, poor and middle peasants, cadres, soldiers, and revolutionary martyrs – were clearly favored over the children of capitalists, landlords, rich peasants, and other “counterrevolutionaries.” The official socialist ideology justified this favoritism by contrasting the accomplishments of the present socialist society with the old society’s failures. Furthermore, students were frequently warned of the seemingly always-possible “bourgeois comeback” that would negate the triumphs of the People’s Republic by hurling China back toward her oppressive past. This twin policy of celebrating the revolution’s accomplishments while also stressing the revolution’s basic fragility to bourgeois subversion would likely mean that children of good classes would see their current prestige as a hard-won natural right, and the continued subjugation of their bad-class classmates as a necessary safeguard. State policy guaranteed that students of good classes would distrust those belonging to the bad classes, while bad-class students would likely view those from good classes with envy and resentment. Hence, before the Cultural Revolution even had begun, there was already a palatable divide within the student body; and as the Red Guards formed, it “took place against a background of already-existing tension, albeit sporadic and uneven, among Chinese students as a whole.”7

It was therefore to be expected that Red Guard organizations, once formed, would reflect the preexisting tension. Indeed, the first Red Guard organizations, consisting of

7 Maitan, p.90.
children from the "five red categories," saw little need to open their ranks to students from bad-class backgrounds. Elite Red Guards explained their exclusionary position by arguing, "Our principle is to allow only leftists to revolt, and not to allow the rightists to turn over the world. Unfair? Uncomfortable? There can be no fairness with you [students from 'bad' family backgrounds]." In addition to being denied the right to rebel, students from unfavored classes were also subject to increased harassment, both petty and otherwise. Fulang Lo recalled a peasant Red Guard who told her,

> From now on, the Black Sort are not allowed to smile or to cry. Their smiles mean they are laughing at the revolution; their tears are shed for their lost past. The Black Sort are not allowed to sing songs because their voices are poisonous arrows directed towards the revolution.

Such statements are perhaps laughable, but yet with work teams gone and teachers marginalized, conservative Red Guards were nonetheless by default the dominant force in their schools, free to rule over their classmates in any ludicrous way they wished. Thus, in some schools,

Red Guards posted lists that specified the class background of all the students, and then stipulated that the students from 'good' family backgrounds should enter the classroom through the front door, while the students from 'bad' family backgrounds should enter through the back door.

Hong is of the opinion that, "At best, the Red Guards treated students outside the 'five red categories' with contempt, and, at worst, made them targets of the movement," and it seems that Hong is correct. For example, Yan and Gao write of students with bad-class backgrounds who were forced to undertake study sessions while being denied permission

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8 The "5 red categories" are workers, poor and middle peasants, soldiers, cadres, and revolutionary martyrs.
9 Hong, p.86.
10 Fulang Lo, p.9.
11 Hong, p.89.
12 Ibid, p.86.
to go to the toilet.\textsuperscript{13} Even more troubling, they also write of marginalized students being “arrayed together and watched over daily by the fiercest Red Guards, who lashed them with belts and cursed them.”\textsuperscript{14} Apparently, elite Red Guards had few qualms in humiliating their unfortunate classmates. The justification for this humiliation lay in the “theory of natural redness,” also known as the “blood-line theory.”

The blood-line theory was “the rage” among conservative Red Guards during the late summer and early fall of 1966. It rationalized their sole control of the movement via a popular couplet that went, “If the father’s a hero, the son’s a good chap / If the father’s a reactionary, the son’s a bad egg.”\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, only the children of good-class backgrounds were entitled to be Red Guards. Despite repeated warnings from the radical elite that this “theory” was in fact erroneous, the blood-line theory nonetheless remained in use by conservative Red Guards, thereby solidifying preexistent divisions among students along class lines.\textsuperscript{16} When the first conservative Red Guards began to go on \textit{chuan lian}, they took the blood-line theory with them, spreading their message of “natural redness” throughout China. Thus, by September, the blood-line theory had become not only the sole criterion by which one could become a Red Guard, but also the determining factor for a host of other activities. Yan and Gao wrote, “At its height, the blood-relation theory made family background the only test of acceptability. Boarding trains and cars, entering shops and hotels, going to hospitals, all required announcing one’s family background.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} Yan and Gao, p.103.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.104.
\textsuperscript{15} White, p.222.
\textsuperscript{16} See Milton and Milton, p.162, who wrote, “For a long time, the theory of blood and class origin served to split the mass ranks despite repeated pronouncements that this was an erroneous and potentially counterrevolutionary theory.”
\textsuperscript{17} Yan and Gao, p.104.
Second, Radical Red Guards

Conservative Red Guards' pervasive insistence on the blood-line theory no doubt angered those whom the theory discredited. Students who may have previously disagreed on other issues found themselves united in their opposition (or support) of the blood-line couplet. Furthermore, as more and more conservative students left their campuses on chuan lian, those whom the couplet left out saw their strength relatively increase, and it was only at this time that the radical elite's pronouncements decrying the blood-line theory began to have an effect. Chen Boda, in early October, publicly criticized "the monopoly over leadership positions exercised by children of cadres." At the same time, disenfranchised university students also began to criticize the blood-line theory by forming Red Guard organizations of their own. These newly-formed groups then followed their conservative classmates on chuan lian, bringing with them, to universities and middle schools throughout China, their messages of rebellion. It was from this second wave of Red Guards, deemed "radical" because of their opposition to all conceptions of "natural redness," that the blood-line theory lost its hold over the movement. Rosen wrote that in middle schools in Guangzhou, "Rebels were only able to rise up after the criticism of the blood line theory had begun in earnest." Perhaps if radical university students, aided by elite encouragement, had not risen up to oppose the blood-line theory, the Red Guards would have remained nation-wide a movement limited to the children from favored classes. But because radical university students did rise up, there now appeared two distinct Red Guard organizations, and, as Rosen explained, it

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18 See Rosen, p.126, who wrote, "It was on the issue of the couplet that the majority of the schools divided. Early splits over other issues were frequently obscured by the division caused by the couplet."
19 Ibid., p.164.
20 Ibid., p.190.
was primarily one’s position regarding the blood-line couplet that determined to which side one belonged:

Generally, the credentials of a Rebel were established by what his / her position had been with regard to: 1) the school’s Party committee; 2) the school’s work team; and 3) the blood line theory couplet. By far the most important of these was the third.21

Radical Red Guards were those students who had opposed authoritarian restraints or limitations on their struggle. They were the individual actors of a consistent trend among some students committed to transforming the Cultural Revolution into a movement that challenged the political status quo. While their goals were at first relatively limited, they soon expanded their focus and began to challenge some of China’s basic precepts, such as the standard definition of “class” and the guiding role of the Chinese Communist Party.22 Understandably, as a movement for social change, its membership consisted largely of students from marginalized groups; for, as Hong wrote, “The most discontented members of the society tended to be the most radical revolutionaries.”23 Clearly, in Communist China, discontented groups would likely include such categories as the children of former landlords, businessmen, rich peasants, and intellectuals.24 For these marginalized groups, the Cultural Revolution appeared as an almost miraculous opportunity to right perceived wrongs. It was thus precisely these students, conscious of their marginalization, who

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21 Ibid., p.126.
22 See Hong, p.340. Hong argued that, at first, radicals “simply wanted exoneration and the removal of the labels or ‘bads’ that the Party had put on them. But as the movement turned against the Party, they saw that their interests lay in bringing about a basic change in the distribution of power in the society.”
23 Ibid., p.63.
24 For the role of intellectual students among Red Guards, see Rosen, p.160. Rosen here affirmed that “most of the key rebel units were led by students of middle class, usually intellectual, background.” Hong, p.341, also wrote, “With the exception of the intellectuals at the highest level who had been co-opted by the Party, those persons who were more educated tended to be more radical....”
...would be the most willing to see disturbances because they have everything to gain and nothing to lose. In the past they felt frustrated and hopeless because they only saw the absolute control of the Communist Party with few indications of change. Now it is different – Chairman Mao turns out to be on the side of justice, redressing their unjust repression and explaining that their mistreatment is entirely due to the power holders in the Party and the apparat men.25

Radical Red Guards were against the conservative and authoritarian aspects of the party, yet they were also firmly committed to Mao. Because of this dichotomy, it was the radical Red Guards who were perhaps best positioned to become revolutionary successors, in the way radical elites intended.26

Yet, while it can be argued that it was the radical Red Guards who came closest to this vision, ultimately they did not fulfill their role in the way radical elites had hoped.

Two major obstacles facing radical Red Guards, which conceivably contributed to their failure, were that they were numerically small, and easily divided. Rosen explained that, during the fall of 1966, “Although it now became somewhat fashionable to be a Rebel, the dispersal of the student body into small groups during *chuan lian* had prevented a strong, united Rebel organization from developing in most schools.”27 New organizations of radical Red Guards only began to emerge during the time of *chuan lian*, and just as they formed, they began to travel across China in pursuit of their own quests of rebellion. During these separate struggles, most likely, leaders would emerge and students would develop a sense of loyalty to their own group, thereby making it problematic to reunite once *chuan lian* had finished. Conservative students, on the other hand, might not have faced this difficulty, since they had formed their own organizations


26 This assumption brings with it the interesting possibility that, in a Marxist-Leninist society, the children of capitalists can become “truer socialists” than members of the Communist Party!

27 Rosen, p.125.
nearly a month before *chuan lian* and perhaps developed a sense of solidarity through their struggles against the "four olds." While the separate experiences of *chuan lian* probably caused some tension among conservative Red Guards as they began to regroup and respond to the radical threat, it seems that conservative students as a whole were in a better position to act as a unified front than radical students. Thus, *chuan lian* may have contributed to the factionalism among radical Red Guards. This perhaps explains why, in Guangzhou, for example, radical students were more divided among themselves than their conservative classmates.  

Factionalism was apparently rife among radicals, but making their situation even worse was that, vis-à-vis conservatives, the total number of radical students was small. Hunter observed, “Of the millions of Red Guards in China, only a minority were radical.” Red Guards were often seen in the West as part of a nearly world-wide student revolt during the 1960’s (and, no doubt, Red Guards inspired many Western radicals in their own revolts), but the truth, Hong believed, was that, “Contrary to the generally held assumption that the Red Guard movement was essentially a revolt, only a minority… could be considered genuine rebels.” This assertion brings with it important questions. Was the radical minority due to their suppression by conservatives, or was it actually due to the fact that most Chinese students felt content with their society? Or, to put it another way, a majority of Red Guards did not actively challenge the party. Was this because they were afraid of the party, or because they loved it? These issues were apparently pondered by radical Red Guards themselves – who questioned the reasons for their minority status, and why the rest of society did not follow their lead – as can be seen

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28 Ibid., p.165.
29 Hunter, p.133.
30 Hong, p.62.
in Shanghai, where radical Red Guards tried to overthrow the local municipal committee
and received only minimal support from the public at large. These radicals, according to
Hunter, “could not bear the thought that perhaps the prestige of the municipal committee
arose from a genuine respect on the part of the people for a government that had visibly
improved their lot.”\textsuperscript{31} It thus seems that radical Red Guards were pursuing their own
self-interests, but that these interests were not in accord with China’s majority.

**Conservative and Radical Red Guards’ Opposing Interests**

A central supposition of this chapter is that both conservative and radical Red
Guards, although both aided in their formation by elite guidance, once formed, pursued
policies reflective of their own interests. Conservative Red Guards, having benefited
from government policy, had a clear stake in maintaining the status quo. These Red
Guards would be enthusiastic participants of “destroy the four olds,” campaigns against
teachers, and harassment of those students belonging to a “bad” class, because these were
all struggles that did not threaten the basic distribution of power within the People’s
Republic. By participating in these campaigns, conservative Red Guards had the
possibility to win recognition (which brought with it the potential of rewards from the
party hierarchy), as well as the opportunity to experience the pleasure of a power
increased almost beyond restraint.\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, radical Red Guards would be drawn into
revolutionary activity in order to struggle against the work teams, the school authority,
and the local (and national) party committee. These were struggles which could change
the distribution of power; and because radicals came from disenfranchised groups, any
change in power was seen as a chance to improve the radicals’ lot. Likewise, once

\textsuperscript{31} Hunter, p.42.
\textsuperscript{32} A psychological study on Red Guards, focusing on the effects of being given near-unlimited power,
would certainly be an interesting read.
radical Red Guards were driven by their self-interest to challenge the power hierarchy, conservative Red Guards were driven by their own self-interests to protect that power hierarchy. As Hong has made clear,

...the radical mass organizations were largely composed of underprivileged groups, whereas the conservatives were heavily drawn from the better-off social groups. The radicals attempted to change the political status quo as much as possible, whereas the conservatives strenuously defended the status quo.33

Conservative Red Guards saw their radical classmates as a threat to their position in society. Once radicals began to challenge the distribution of power, conservatives sought to regain control of what had been “their movement,” or, failing that, at least to redirect it along lines less hostile to their interests. Thus, the conservatives continued their stress of

...the ‘theory of natural redness,’ which emphasized class origin over current political consciousness and performance. They seldom raised any questions over the special privileges enjoyed by the stratum to which they belonged, but they frequently denounced the radicals for their ‘bad’ class backgrounds.34

Similarly, if radicals criticized party members for their excess, conservatives would accuse radicals of trying to “negate or transform the Party’s class line.”35 When radicals complained of “power holders,” i.e., those within the party who were abusing their power, conservatives complained of “bourgeois authorities,” which meant former capitalists and their children.36 As radical Red Guards talked of a “class struggle between two lines” within the CCP and chose their targets among the elites,37 conservative Red Guards stressed the need to “revolutionize one’s ideology” and continued to target the

33 Hong, p.5.
34 Ibid., p.342.
35 Rosen, p.235.
36 Hong, p.224.
37 Ibid., p.123.
same radicals that the work teams had oppressed.\textsuperscript{38} The motivating factor behind all these actions appears to be the conflicting self-interests of the opposing sides, and what caused these self-interests was the "class" to which these two sides belonged.

Throughout the fall of 1966, it was radical Red Guards who effectively dictated the direction of the Cultural Revolution. Conservative Red Guards, it appears, were forced into a defensive position, initiating nothing and only carrying out actions in response to the radical onslaught. During this time, however, conservative Red Guards were also realizing that their radical classmates were getting support from radicals within the party. The early part of December thus saw conservatives, once again, on the offensive (in what radical students would later call the "December Black Winds"), this time directing their attack not only against radical students, but also against the Cultural Revolution Small Group, which conservative Red Guards rightly recognized as the home of the radical elite.\textsuperscript{39} In addition to greatly increasing their violence against radical students, conservative Red Guards began to put up big character posters directed against radical elites, suggesting, "Let's kick out the Cultural Revolution Small Group and promote the Cultural Revolution by ourselves!"\textsuperscript{40} Conservative students argued that it was they, and not their radical classmates and party supporters, who were best qualified to lead the movement. After all, it was conservative students who had been the first Red Guards; and, as they rhetorically asked, "How was it possible to say that those who rose up first, bearing deep class hatred against the class enemy, did not defend the revolutionary line of Chairman Mao?"\textsuperscript{41} Conservative Red Guards at this time also

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p.94.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p.125.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p.126.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
began to question the qualifications of elites outside the Cultural Revolution Small
Group, such as Lin Biao, whom, as they pointed out, “came from a bankrupt petty
bourgeois family, and was a beggar in his youth. How can he be our leader?”42

Conservative Red Guards justified their December offensive by employing a
traditional definition of “class” based upon economic lines. As noted earlier, radical Red
Guards, however, saw “class” differently. They “defined ‘class’ politically, thus drawing
their justification for attacking the Party from the thesis of ‘class struggle.’”43 These
different perceptions of class are given further elaboration by Rosen:

The conservatives, defining class solely in economic terms, felt justified in
singling out the main remnants of the bourgeoisie as the main targets of the
movement; the rebels, adopting a definition of class which took into account
political consciousness and behavior, argued that the targets in class struggle
could include anyone violating the thought of Mao Zedong, and that through
proper study, proletarian class consciousness could be obtained by those of bad
class origin.44

It appears that, during the end of 1966, it was radical Red Guards who, despite their
relative minority, nevertheless set the terms of debate. Perhaps this success was because
it was at this time the radicals who maintained the initiative. Conservatives, their
arguments based upon traditional notions of class, were not able to slow the wind in the
radicals’ sails. Instead, “The conservatives’ counter attack backfired, only inviting
further retaliation from the radicals.”45 Radicals gained in their momentum, continuing
to view “class struggle” as a struggle against the “power holders.” Radicals were thus
able to dismiss the conservative attack as yet another example of the “power holders”

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p.340.
44 Rosen, p.96.
45 Hong, p.127.
trying to retain their power, and, through this, retard China’s newest “class struggle.” As Hong explained,

In the eyes of the radicals, whatever justification the conservatives might draw on to attack the Small Group, their attacks were indicative of their opposition to directing the movement against the power holders, and thus, regardless of whether they were actually controlled by the power holders or not, objectively they were defending the interests of the power holders.\(^46\)

Having defeated the conservative thrust, radical Red Guards continued in their struggle against the “power holders,” likely feeling more empowered than ever before. Their future glaringly bright, radical students set their sights on even bigger targets. To quote Hong once more, the choice for radicals now became “not whom they were going to attack, but whom they were going to exempt from attack.”\(^47\) It seemed the possibility for real change lay tantalizing at their fingertips, if only they could reach it. At the close of 1966, the radical Red Guards were elated and on the cusp of their greatest success – the January Power Seizure.

**Conclusion**

Students in the People’s Republic were divided even before becoming Red Guards. The emphasis placed upon “class” in Maoist China separated the student body into “good” and “bad” classes. Those students who belonged to favored classes were reasonably content with their position in society, and could expect to receive future benefits from their status. Hence, these “good class” students had little reason to change the status quo. Obviously, this was not the case for those students labeled as representatives of the “bad classes.” They found themselves discriminated against within their classrooms, and were no doubt aware that such discrimination would likely continue

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p.126.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., p.115.
into the foreseeable future. The People’s Republic, for students such as this, was likely bleak, and it was therefore in their interest to oppose the status quo.

Red Guards, once formed, reflected these interests. First to arise were the conservative Red Guards, made up from children belonging to the privileged classes. They harassed their less privileged classmates, tortured their teachers, and destroyed the “four olds,” but they did little to challenge China’s basic power hierarchy. Radical Red Guards, coming from China’s disenfranchised classes, were engaged in different kinds of struggle. They targeted work teams, school authorities, and eventually, the party itself. While conservative Red Guards occupied themselves with China’s culture and educational system, radical Red Guards challenged the framework of power within the People’s Republic.

Both radical and conservative Red Guards saw themselves engaged in “class struggle,” but it was with a different understanding of “class” that each one operated. Conservative Red Guards defined “class” from an economic basis, while radicals understood “class” within a political framework. Again, it was their opposing self-interests that caused this difference in opinion; an economic definition of “class” was used to favor the status quo, whereas a political conception of “class” served as a rallying cry for the disenfranchised. In this way, conservative and radical Red Guards both participated in a common “class struggle,” while, at the same time, pursued opposing goals.

Finally, it is important to note that radical Red Guards and their conservative classmates received support from opposing factions within the Chinese Communist Party. Conservative elites encouraged privileged children to “follow in their fathers’ footsteps,”
and radical elites encouraged the disenfranchised to rise up in rebellion by forming Red Guard organizations of their own. CCP support was certainly helpful, and perhaps played a decisive role in creating the Red Guards. Indeed, elite influence played a huge role throughout the Cultural Revolution. Yet, it has been the argument of this chapter, that, the importance of such elite-given help notwithstanding, Red Guards were primarily motivated in their struggles by their own interests. In other words, Red Guards were not passive players in an elite-driven drama that ultimately had very little bearing on student lives. Instead, Red Guards were active players in a pressing battle to defend or expand their positions of power within Chinese society.
CHAPTER 6

DEGENERATION OF THE RED GUARDS

The focus of this chapter is on the degeneration of the radical Red Guards. It argues that radical Red Guards were quickly forced into a defensive position during the early months of 1967, largely because of losing support from the radical elite. The radical elites’ sudden dismay in their protégées came as radical students began to abuse their power through luxurious living and heavy-handed rule. Once radical elites withdrew their support, radical Red Guards, greatly weakened by factionalism, were unable to maintain their recent gains. As has been mentioned, this factionalism among Red Guards largely arose from preexisting disputes, but as this chapter will also show, deficiencies in Red Guard organizations further contributed to factionalism, and, perhaps more significantly, factionalism was additionally nourished by the ideological precepts of Maoist theory. Maoism’s emphasis on struggle, its theory that “one divides into two,” and its claims of scientific truth all contributed to students’ justification of their factional strife. But, just as most Red Guards continued to fight each other in a never-ending battle to determine who was really “red,” a minority of students began to question the worth of the theory that governed their lives. Ironically, given the intentions of “proletarian democracy,” some participants in the “democracy” of the Cultural Revolution did not leave with their allegiance to communism strengthened.

January Storm and the Commune Ideal

The Cultural Revolution aimed, in part, to expand proletarian democracy through a remodeled dictatorship of the proletariat that would better represent the Chinese people.
Inspired by Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune, it sought to do away with the top-down authoritarianism that had infested the CCP and caused it to separate from the masses. Like the Paris Commune, members of this new administrative organization would be directly elected, paid no more than an average working class wage, and be subject to recall, thereby creating an elite-mass relationship that was truly interdependent.

At least in this regard, the Cultural Revolution seemingly aimed at a more accountable government. True, given the eventual outcome of the Cultural Revolution, many would now question radical elites’ commitment to this goal; nevertheless, at the time, it seems that many Red Guards perceived these aspirations as sincere. Maitan, explaining further, wrote,

The leading group in the Cultural Revolution paid the price for their democratic revolutionary propaganda, which recoiled on them like a boomerang: currents began to form whose aim was to sweep away the entire panoply of bureaucracy, destroy the old apparatus root and branch and create new bodies which would express more authentically and more completely the aspirations of those social forces... that were pressing from bellow....

Arguably, the radical student movement, begun during the summer with opposition to the work teams, came to a dramatic head during the first month of 1967, gaining its inspiration from the commune ideal. This monumental time is recalled by a Red Guard from Guangzhou:

In 1967 the mass movement matured rather rapidly and its morale rose. And we began to understand and appreciate problems which we had not even been in a position to think about in the preceding seventeen years. Many of us reasoned that we had been suppressed because we had no power and calculated that therefore we had to have power.

Radical Red Guards, understandably, were very keen to create new socialist administrative bodies better reflective of proletarian democracy, since any new body

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1 Maitan, p.66.
2 Quoted by Tariq Ali, p.363.
brought with it the possibility of better integration into the People’s Republic. Thus, inspired by the hope of a better future, radical Red Guards began to overthrow provincial party committees and appoint themselves as the new bureaucratic elite. This daring seizure of power occurred in cities throughout China, and was probably the radical Red Guards’ greatest success. Later, they would refer to their triumph as the “January Storm.”

The first provisional party committee to fall was in Shanghai, and in its place radical students and workers declared a “Shanghai People’s Commune.” Apparently, the ideal of the Paris Commune, long cherished by communists throughout the world, was now reality. However, despite the optimism of its members, this new organization almost immediately proved itself ineffective as administrative initiatives collapsed amid petty squabbling. While various Red Guard organizations were able to temporarily unite in overthrowing the provincial party committees, they were unable to stay united once in power. Ironically, Red Guards’ tendency for factionalism was made only easier by the democratic intentions of the commune system, as pointed out by Karnow:

…the commune concept, so attractive in theory, was subverted in practice by the very principles it sought to promote. Licensed to reject their leaders or assail their rivals as they chose, innumerable worker, student, and other factions tore apart the commune even before it could be built. ¹

Hence, within half a year, the Cultural Revolution had grabbed Red Guards from the status of students and thrown them into the ranks of the elite, but upon their entrance into these powerful ranks, Red Guards floundered. As Hunter argued, “Most Red Guards were completely unprepared for the… responsibilities that came with victory.” ² This realization was soon shared by the radical elite, the group perhaps most responsible for

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¹ Karnow, p.381.
² Hunter, p.293.
the students’ success. It seems Red Guards, always talented at destruction, were less capable at construction; and it soon became “clear to everyone, including Mao, that the radicals were hopelessly inept unless firmly guided.”

Zhang Chunqiao, later a member of the “Gang of Four,” expressed the new view of radical elites in Shanghai when he admitted, “Young people have contributed much to the Cultural Revolution, but they cannot be expected to take over at once the duties of the [leading] secretaries.”

The reality of Red Guard ineffectiveness caused the ideal of the commune to be quickly swept aside. Instead of being a new bureaucracy made up of Red Guards alone, it was announced that the overthrown party committees would be replaced by a Revolutionary Committee, more commonly called a triple alliance, made up of Red Guards, radical party members, and the People’s Liberation Army. Maitan described this new administrative body:

Those features of the Revolutionary Committees given most prominence by the leadership were that they were, in historical terms, a new type of institution, that they enabled the three major constituents to join together, that they guaranteed constant control by the masses and the expression of the will of the masses, and finally, that they functioned more flexibly and less bureaucratically than past bodies.

While the intention of Revolutionary Committees, as explained by elites, seemed highly favorable, to radical Red Guards this description was only rhetoric. Radical students, to quote Maitan again, “were not inclined to welcome the setting up of the triple alliance, which in their eyes trammeled the movement from below....” Those Red Guards who had carried out power seizures especially distrusted the motives of the PLA, whom they

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5 Kornow, p.264.
6 Zhang Chunqiao, quoted in White, p.254. One is left to wonder whether some of the destruction of the Cultural Revolution could have been avoided had radical elites realized this earlier.
7 Maitan, p.150.
8 Ibid., p.167.
feared would set conservative limits on their movement. In hindsight, it was the Triple Alliance that marked the beginning of tension between radical Red Guards and the army, a tension that would greatly contribute to the radicals' destruction.

Radical Red Guards, up until this point, had received encouragement from the radical elite. Now, however, it seemed leftist students had overstepped their bounds. Radical elites, such as Zhou Enlai, began to encourage Red Guard moderation; in early February, Zhou "openly castigated an assembly of Red Guards for their chaotic and 'arrogant' conduct," while, at another rally, Zhou reportedly told Red Guards, "You now have a great degree of democracy and freedom. This must be accompanied by discipline." However, despite these repeated calls for moderation, it seems that "appeals from above only had a limited effect. The Red Guards did nothing to diminish their campaign...." Radical Red Guards had now taken their movement past the realm of acceptable levels of challenge to the establishment of the elites. As Maitan affirmed, "Once it got going... the Red Guard movement tended to acquire a momentum of its own which the leaders, using traditional organizational methods, were powerless to stop."

Degeneration of the Red Guards

Radical Red Guards, having assumed power, were easily enticed by the perks of their new positions. For example, Hsia reported, "It was not long before many of these revolutionary rebels began to demand motorcycles, bicycles, telephones, good food and

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9 Ibid.
10 See Maitan, p.110. Maitan observed, "That the Red Guards went further than they were meant to is shown by the leadership's repeated calls to order, the... denunciations of excessive and even violent behavior and the limitations set to the movement."
11 Karnow, p.270.
12 Hunter, p.160.
13 Maitan, p.110.
14 Ibid., p.109.
other consumer articles."\textsuperscript{15} Ironically, despite having criticized members of the once-ruling party committees for their excessive living, Red Guards themselves fared no better when it came to resisting affluence. This hypocrisy was commented upon by Thurston, who wrote,

\ldots revolutionary rebels throughout the country, in imitation of the very behavior they had criticized in those they were seeking to overthrow, took up residence or established their headquarters in elegant traditional gardens that had once served as homes to high ranking imperial officials.\ldots \textsuperscript{16}

Red Guard's appreciation of the finer things in life was also noted by Bennet and Montaperto, who together wondered whether "Red Guards who spoke out against revisionism would themselves let a single opportunity for enjoyment pass."\textsuperscript{17} The life of radical Red Guards in Amoy after the January Storm is described by Ken Ling:

\begin{quote}
The leaders had relaxed their revolutionary fighting spirit and become lazy and corrupted by material comforts. Many of them no longer went out personally to direct struggles but sat back in their offices or drove their cars to the military compound to play ping-pong and basketball and see free movies.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

However noble their intentions may have been, it seems the moral principles of the radical Red Guards quickly degenerated upon receiving power.

In addition to succumbing to material temptation, Red Guards also continued China's long tradition of authoritarian rule. Rittenberg affirmed that, "at the first challenge to power, the rebels fell back on the tactics they had been raised on. When they were seeking power, they abhorred oppression. When they were in power, they practiced it."\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, according to Jack Chen, Nieh Yuanzi – the philosophy professor whose poster had started the Cultural Revolution – acted "in as high-handed a way

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{15} Hsia, p.165.
\textsuperscript{16} Thurston, p.102.
\textsuperscript{17} Bennett and Montaperto, p.104.
\textsuperscript{18} Ling, p.207.
\textsuperscript{19} Rittenberg and Bennett, p.354.
\end{footnotes}
towards other minority groups on campus as the old revisionist administration."²⁰

Perhaps, having lived all of their lives under authoritarian conditions, Red Guards had no
knowledge of more amicable ways to behave.²¹ "Democracy," to them, may have only
meant being in authority, and did not include debate, compromise, and minority rights.
Also, as students – a relatively privileged position within Communist China no mater
what class one belonged to – Red Guards possibly took their new leadership positions for
granted. Hong wrote, "On the whole, the attitudes of the Red Guards were arrogant,
authoritarian, and coercive, reflecting a mentality that went with their privilege and high
position in the society."²² In addition, radical Red Guards were likely further inclined
toward authoritarianism because of the state’s persecution of their parents, coupled with
the knowledge that, had no revolution occurred, their lives would have conceivably been
better. Authoritarianism could therefore be seen, in the eyes of radical Red Guards, as a
kind of “revenge” for perceived wrongs. Likely, it was a combination of all these factors
that caused most Red Guards to adopt a dictatorial style of leadership. This perhaps
explains why, as Chen surmised,

The corrupting force of power acted swiftly on weak heads. Within
months these young men turned into tyrants of a fascist cast. They delighted in
seeing people march to their orders, in humiliating their victims, and they quickly
graduated to violence.²³

Material excess and heavy-handed rule undoubtedly hurt the Red Guards and
lessened whatever limited prestige the movement still attained in the public eye. Yet,

damaging as this was, it only paled in comparison to the destruction caused by Red

²⁰ Chen, p.278.
²¹ Of course, authoritarianism did not suddenly appear in China with the CCP. Any explanation of Red
Guards’ heavy-handed rule must keep in mind, as Chen, p.381, suggested, “the recent history of China with
its feudal mandarins, landlords and warlords, Kuomintang sadists and dictators and imperialist Japanese
invaders who perpetuated the most horrible atrocities on a whole people.”
²² Hong, p.89.
²³ Chen, p.381.
Guards as they fought against each other. While Red Guards may have seen their factionalism as heroic battles against a "class enemy," it seems more likely that much of the fighting was unnecessary, based upon personal ambitions rather than the needs of a collective struggle. Nearly twenty-five years later, a former Red Guard recalled, "When anyone got a little power, their personal interests took over.... You could describe the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution as a sacred movement, but later it degenerated into a vicious power struggle." 

Ultimately, this factionalism caused not only the deaths of many Red Guards, but also helped to finish off the movement as a whole. Thus, a movement begun in some ways for social change ended as a movement of recrimination and counter-recrimination. As Liang Heng has maintained, the "factional struggles were so absorbing that the Revolutionaries had little time for anything else." 

Red Guard factionalism, Fokkema argued, arose in part from defective organizations. There was never a central "Red Guard Committee" seeking to organize China's millions of students and to help to arbitrate their disputes. Instead, Red Guards largely formed from preexisting friendships; while these small groupings would ultimately congeal into larger "organizations," it was from the grassroots where the movement derived most of its momentum. The Miltons wrote,

Once students recognized their rights to form revolutionary organizations, both teachers and students got together in small groups on the basis of friendship, mutual interest, or academic departments.... Within one to four months... these small factions coalesced into two or sometimes three major mass rebel organizations.

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25 Liang and Shapiro, p.117.  
26 Fokkema, p.25.  
27 Milton and Milton, p.165.
Students, having witnessed their small associations merge together into mammoth organizations, likely felt a sense of pride in their newly-found strength and numbers, but, more importantly, it seems students bestowed upon their collective organizations the same loyalty they had previously bestowed upon their individual groups. In short, students did not feel “lost” in their organizations, they did not see themselves as just “another body” among thousands of other bodies; instead, as Hong affirmed, “Once both sides had their own organizations, the members of each group developed a personal stake in the outcome of the confrontation and a loyalty to their own group...”

Students, as Red Guards, surely identified heavily with their organizations. Their loyalty is eloquently described by Rae Yang: “Suddenly I felt that these classmates of mine were dearer to me than my own brothers and sisters.... I was willing to sacrifice my life for any of them, while before the Cultural Revolution I mistrusted them, seeing them as nothing but my rivals.” It can be assumed that individual Red Guards found self-worth and a sense of personal definition in their collective organizations. This explains both the loyalty individual Red Guards felt toward their organization, as well as the loyalty of the organization to its members. Collective loyalty to the individual is clearly shown by Kwong, who wrote,

The Red Guard organizations always sided with their members, and not necessarily because they agreed with them – they would also do so even when they knew the member was in the wrong. This approach was taken not only to gain the allegiance of the supporters by showing that the organization was always behind them, but also because the organization leaders felt that to admit the wrong doing of members would undermine the group’s prestige.

28 Hong, p.108.
29 Yang, p.121.
30 Kwong, p.56.
Red Guards’ self-identification with their collective organizations could be characterized as “my organization, right or wrong.” Naturally, the adoption of this uncompromising mindset by opposing Red Guard organizations would result in increased tension; and with no side willing to back down, this tension would be expressed as factionalism.

**Maoist Confusion**

Perhaps more importantly, strife among Red Guards was also caused by Maoist theory. The classic Maoist dictum that “one divides into two” meant, in the eyes of elites, that factionalism among Red Guards was inevitable.\(^{31}\) Karol has explained, “The Central Group certainly did not encourage these splits among the students, but it accepted them as a fact of life and declined to arbitrate on their internal differences....”\(^{32}\) It can thus perhaps be argued that elites’ acceptance of “one dividing into two” aided in the creation of a faction-prone environment among Red Guard organizations. This factionalism was further strengthened by the Maoist belief that “struggle” was the driving force of history. This assumption, coupled with a simplistic view of historical determinism that saw “Maoism” as the next stage for humanity as a whole, meant that, through struggle, it would be the “Maoist” side that ultimately won. Acceptance of historical determinism is given a clear example by the Miltons, who alleged, “After a period of extremely complex factional struggle in the Cultural Revolution, someone had asked Mao which side is correct. He had replied, “The side that wins.””\(^{33}\) This faith in a future favorable to Maoism was undoubtedly reassuring to any side that considered itself

\(^{31}\) “One divides into two,” a popularization of Marxist dialectics, argued that every “thesis” faced a “counter-thesis,” and it was the tension between these two that would lead to the creation of a “new thesis,” which would face its own “new counter-thesis,” and so on. Maoism argued that, through this constant struggle, society progressed.

\(^{32}\) Karol, p.264.

\(^{33}\) Milton and Milton, p.170.
"Maoist," since, despite possible momentary defeats, Maoists still had the laws of history behind them. There was then little reason for Maoists to compromise their struggle, since perseverance brought with it victory. Maoism therefore contributed to the factionalism and violence of Red Guards by telling them (1) factionalism was inevitable; (2) it was the struggle between factions that propelled history forward; and (3) since Maoism was "scientifically validated," Maoists engaged in struggle were sure to win. These three precepts help put into context the following exchange between Gao Yan and Zong Wei, two Red Guards, after being attacked by a rival organization:

We agreed the fight would not be the last. 'Chairman Mao says that armed struggle is the highest form of political struggle,' I observed. 'When people can't solve their contradictions, they naturally resort to struggle by force.' The big question before us was how to prepare for the fighting to come. We decided that absolute pacifism was not a practical option. 'Chairman Mao says we will not attack unless we are attacked, and if we are attacked, we will certainly counter attack,' said Zong Wei.\textsuperscript{34}

Significantly, Red Guards may have seen themselves as hostile toward each other, but they did not see themselves as hostile toward Maoism. This apparent similarity of opposing Red Guard "platforms" caused much confusion among foreign observers at the time, and probably did little to clarify individual Red Guards' understanding of events, either. Rosen has commented on the "armed struggles between factional units whose uniform pledges to Chairman Mao and the Party Center appeared to make their similarities greater than their differences...."\textsuperscript{35} While radical and conservative Red Guards had different goals, it was with the same terminology that these goals were expressed; thus, it was under the banner of "Maoism" that both conservative and radical

\textsuperscript{34} Gao Yan, p.213.
\textsuperscript{35} Rosen, p.1.
Red Guards undertook their operations for or against the status quo. Huang therefore surmised,

It is groundless to call one faction ‘pro-Mao’ and the other ‘anti-Mao,’ or one faction ‘pro-Mao’ and the other ‘pro-Liu,’ because both factions openly claimed and sincerely believed that they supported Mao’s revolutionary line and opposed Liu’s bourgeois reactionary line.\(^{36}\)

The relative sameness of the Red Guards’ expressed aims was also noted by Hunter, who wrote,

In the Red Guard movement, it was precisely this universal admiration of Mao that made the struggle so bitter. The students’ views coincided on so many points that they had to keep their eyes peeled for the characteristics they thought they should find in their opponents. Only by magnifying their differences could the students distinguish between the groups that were genuinely carrying out the Chairman’s policies and those that were being manipulated by the reactionaries.\(^{37}\)

Despite their similarities, Red Guards, believing that “one divides into two,” felt pressured to identify the side opposed to Mao; and because every Red Guard organization saw itself as supporting the policies of the Chairman, it was always the other organizations that were opposed to Mao. The fact that these other organizations also claimed to support the Chairman did not matter; this merely illustrated their ability to “wave a red flag in order to oppose the red flag.” Consequently, conservative Red Guards would argue that radicals cunningly adopted revolutionary posturing in order to turn China back toward her oppressive past, while radical Red Guards argued that conservatives stressed their revolutionary class heritage only to maintain their current prestige. Understandably, both factions’ ability to debunk the opposing side’s revolutionary credentials led to a perplexing environment in which participants could only wonder,

\(^{36}\) Huang, p.124.  
\(^{37}\) Hunter, p.118.
Who was really red? Who was "waving the red flag only to oppose the red flag"? Who was struggling for real unity and who was simply splitting the revolutionary ranks? Who had a right to seize power? And if they had no right, then was it not right to seize power away from them or at least prevent them from using it?38

If one could "wave the red flag to oppose the red flag," radical Red Guards, who had previously justified their seizures of power during the January Storm as being the will of Chairman Mao, could in fact be hidden reactionaries bent on the destruction of Chinese socialism. Thus, there was no need for conservative Red Guards to recognize radical leadership; on the contrary, as self-perceived genuine revolutionaries, conservative Red Guards were obligated to rise up and overthrow this reactionary leadership. In was partly because of logic such as this, that, soon after their most impressive victory, radical Red Guards were, once again, on the defensive. Fualng Lo, upon finding out that police, working in conjunction with conservative Red Guards, wanted to arrest her as a "counterrevolutionary," struggled to understand this sudden reversal of fortune:

My mind was in complete confusion. They had actually tried to arrest me. But why? I was a good person. I had been trying to do everything I could to follow Chairman Mao. I was a good student. I did nothing wrong. I was his most loyal Red Guard! Why?39

It is conceivable that, for some Red Guards, this confusion regarding who was really "red," coupled with the possibility that what was "red" today might become "black" tomorrow,40 cast doubt upon the validity of Maoism. Indeed, these new feelings of doubt were later expressed by Fualng Lo, who, having suddenly fallen from revolutionary grace, "began to question why Chairman Mao's quotations made people

38 Chen, pp.266-267.
39 Fualng Lo, p.88.
40 "Red" means socialism and revolutionary behavior, while "black" denotes capitalism and/or counterrevolutionary behavior.
criminals and caused so many deaths."\textsuperscript{41} Similar to a religious questioning of faith, students on the receiving end of the Cultural Revolution's turmoil began to wonder if their misfortune was actually due to mistakes in the overall theory that governed their lives. Dai Hsiao-ai illustrates this trend among some Red Guards who questioned the supposed "scientific truth" of Maoism:

\begin{quote}
In my opinion, all of the factionalism, fighting, the shifting alliances, and the different positions arose because the instructions from Chairman Mao just didn't work. He might say that all members of the 'left' should unite, but we were never told how to determine who was 'left' or 'right.' His statements were so general that everybody, even those who opposed him, could find something to justify his position.... There was no way to interpret his vague directions and implementing them proved impossible.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

It is perhaps these students who found Maoism lacking that made the ultimate intellectual jump of the Cultural Revolution, since they no longer questioned their position within society, but questioned their society itself. However, it seems that such intellectually-penetrating students were only a minority among Red Guards; most Red Guards continued to battle within the framework of Maoism, likely still believing in its precepts.

\textbf{Conclusion}

As this chapter has shown, radical Red Guards began 1967 by continuing their powerful ascent. Inspired by the Paris Commune, radical students and workers sought to create new administrative bodies better representative of proletarian democracy, and during the famous "January Storm," radicals began to act upon these wishes. Provincial party committees were overthrown, and in their place appeared self-declared autonomous organizations modeled upon the commune ideal. It appeared that radical Red Guards had just experienced a great triumph, achieving a possible stepping stone for a future civil

\textsuperscript{41} Fulang Lo, p.101.
\textsuperscript{42} Dai Hsia-ai, quoted in Bennett and Montaperto, p.221.
society. However, immediately upon celebration of their success, it seems radical Red Guards began to waste the opportunities given to them. The democratic aspects of the commune system only strengthened Red Guards’ latent factionalism. What is more, upon assuming power, many radicals arguably lost sight of their movement. Questions about the overall status of power within Chinese society disappeared as radical Red Guards, following in the path of their predecessors, began to enjoy the perks of their positions, delighting in material excess and heavy-handed rule. By early February, it became apparent to radical elites that their young apprentices were unfit to rule. The ideal of the commune was discarded in favor of a triple alliance among Red Guards, radical party members, and the PLA. Many radical Red Guards saw, probably accurately, this announcement as a sidelining of their movement. The marginalization of Red Guards within the triple alliance meant that radical students could no longer dictate the course of their struggle, and indeed, for the remainder of the Cultural Revolution, radical Red Guards were on the defensive.

Had radical Red Guards envisioned a well-planned movement, one aimed at genuinely redistributing power throughout Chinese society, perhaps they could have accomplished something tangible during the January Storm. Maybe, with radical Red Guards no longer heeding the suggestions of radical elites, they could have become a genuinely independent mass movement – like Poland’s Solidarity – that would have threatened the CCP’s monopoly on power. Such a movement, to succeed, would likely require a sense of “class” consciousness, as well as a realistic understanding of a group’s collective power in relation to the party. Radical Red Guards, however, did not seem to possesses these insights. Their factionalism clearly prevented them from acting as a
unified whole, and it is unclear to what level radical Red Guards ever saw themselves as a collective "group." Furthermore, it is also unclear to what degree radical Red Guards wanted to change Chinese society. Rather than bringing about a thorough redistribution of power, radicals may have simply wanted to taste a bigger slice of the rulers' "pie."

And, as we shall see in later chapters, radical Red Guards arguably lacked any realistic appraisal of their strength whatsoever; hence, they willingly fought the party, the army, and each other long after their movement had become, for all intents and purposes, a lost cause.

Finally, in addition to these reasons, radical Red Guards were also possibly hampered by their belief in Maoism. While a minority of students did question the theory's validity, it seems that the majority of Red Guards remained committed to their Chairman's ideology. This commitment, as has been shown, conceivably aided to factionalism. Maoism saw Red Guards' tendency to fight against each other as an example of "one divides into two," a supposedly universal theory that guaranteed all human progress. Hence, rather than being detrimental, Red Guard factionalism was viewed as a necessary and unavoidable part of struggle. Furthermore, although this struggle was unavoidable, Maoism was blessed in that it represented the scientifically deduced next stage of humanity; thus, any side engaged in struggle, providing it conceived itself as "Maoist," was encouraged to persevere since the true Maoists were assured final victory. Such a deterministic theory was perhaps useful in motivating Maoists during the Civil War, as that was clearly a battle against a side not Maoist.

43 While individual radical Red Guards identified with their collective organization, it does not seem that separate radical organizations identified themselves as part of a broader radical movement.  
44 As was explained in chapter 2, such fighting may have persisted in part because of radicals' hope that Mao would intervene on their side, as he had done before.
However, during the Cultural Revolution, nearly everyone was Maoist; and this meant that all sides were now motivated to engage in a perpetual struggle. It was believed that only final victory would show which side was truly “red”; Unfortunately, every side was determined to keep fighting until the end, since every side saw victory as their Maoist due.
CHAPTER 7

STUDENTS' PREDISPOSITION TOWARD VIOLENCE

Today, when one imagines Red Guards, it is likely not as searchers for proletarian democracy and greater freedom, but as perpetuators of senseless violence. This chapter examines what are perhaps some of the motivating factors behind this violence. If Red Guards, as Kornow wrote, were “a kind of nationwide dementia [that] swept across China... [and] wantonly terrorized, tortured, and murdered Mao’s real or suspected enemies,”\(^1\) then this chapter attempts to understand why. While psychological preconditions are certainly an important factor,\(^2\) the focus of this chapter is instead on how Maoist acceptance of violence, in combination with the People’s Republic’s cultural idealization of her violent past, led to an eagerness among Red Guards to use violence not only as a way to mimic past heroic struggles, but also as a way to bring about self-legitimization to their movement, seeing it as a “life or death struggle” affecting the entire world. It was this perceived importance, coupled with students’ near-universal belief in Maoism, that guaranteed willing participation in the Cultural Revolution through a Maoist cycle of criticism, struggle, and transformation, commonly known as dou-di-gai, a cycle that only incited yet further violence. Thus, the professed aims of the Cultural Revolution were perhaps undermined by the very “rules” in which the “game” was played, while at the same time, the ideological and cultural acceptance of violence in the People’s Republic meant that public revulsion over the excessive bloodshed would be

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\(^1\) Kornow, p.xiii.
\(^2\) In the words of Ling, p.167, “There are always people happy to see others suffer.”
long delayed, and in this way, a movement that claimed to be democratic quickly turned fascist instead.

**Maoist Acceptance of Violence**

Maoism sees a separation between “the people” and their “class enemies.” Violence, according to this theory, is a morally acceptable way to resolve contradictions with one’s “class enemy,” but is not an acceptable way to resolve contradictions among “the people.” Explaining further, point six of the 16 Points, entitled “Correctly Handle Contradictions Among the People,” argued:

A strict distinction must be made between the two different types of contradictions: those among the people and those between ourselves and the enemy. Contradictions among the people must not be made into contradictions between ourselves and the enemy; nor must contradictions between ourselves and the enemy be regarded as contradictions among the people.

It is normal for the masses to hold different views. Contention between different views is unavoidable, necessary and beneficial. In the course of normal and full debate, the masses will affirm what is right, correct what is wrong and gradually reach unanimity.

The method to be used in debates is to present the facts, reason things out, and persuade through reasoning. Any method of forcing a minority holding different views to submit is impermissible. The minority should be protected, because sometimes the truth is with the minority. Even if the minority is wrong, they should still be allowed to argue their case and reserve their views.

When there is a debate, it should be conducted by reasoning, not by coercion or force.3

At first glance, it seems these comments urge moderation; however, upon closer reading there appears a possible loophole. Moderation is only urged when dealing with contradictions among “ourselves,” i.e., “the people.” Therefore, violence may be allowed when dealing with “the enemy.” As was argued in the last chapter, Red Guards saw their opposing organizations as being hostile to Chairman Mao, thus these organizations were

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3 Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, adopted on August 8, 1966, by the Central Committee of the CCP. Official English Version. See [http://www.rojadsdatabank.org/16points.htm](http://www.rojadsdatabank.org/16points.htm), accessed on February 11, 2004
viewed as “the enemy.” It follows that the restraint urged in 16 Points, arguing as it did about contradictions within “the people,” need not apply when dealing with “the enemy.” In this way, Red Guards were able to use the apparent moderation of the 16 Points as a way to justify their barbarism against each other. Tsu, a former Red Guard at Qinghua University, recalled,

With regard to the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao had made it clear over and over again that violent fighting was not correct. But we reasoned that this prohibition applied only to issues between factions of the people. Anything could be done to the class enemy and we were fighting class enemies!4

Red Guards, envisioning their opponents as “class enemies,” were able to mentally justify their violent behavior as an inevitable consequence of “class war,” for, as Zhai Zhenhua coldly rationalized, “In class struggle, either you die or I do.”5 Rae Yang also accepted the use of violence, believing “that violence was both inevitable and necessary to a great revolution.”6 In other words, the struggle’s perceived acuteness meant that there would be bloodshed. This acceptance is seen by Zhai Zhenhua, who, after possibly beating someone to death, dispelled her feelings of guilt and remorse this way: “It was all right. We were in a war and there are always casualties on battlefields. I shouldn’t be intimidated by the death of one class enemy. The revolution had to succeed....”7 Individual acts of violence were thus acceptable consequences of China’s rush toward a better future. In the words of Wang Youqin, “Such brutalities were considered at most ‘trivial mistakes’ or ‘unavoidable radical behavior’ for such a ‘great

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4 Tsu, quoted in William Hinton, p.167.
5 Zhai, p.96.
6 Yang, p.134.
7 Zhai, p.98.
revolution." Also notice how Sidney Rittenberg, while disgusted by Red Guards' harassment of others, nevertheless felt that,

...ugly as it was, I couldn't help seeing the revolutionary spirit in it. These young people had gone overboard, it was true. That, perhaps, was the price for setting free a people who had no experience with freedom. Given time, they would learn, I thought."

Violence and death were accepted by both participants and observers during the Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, however, it can perhaps be argued that violence was not only accepted, but implicitly encouraged through a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Aiping Mu wrote, "Drawing on Mao's famous saying that revolution should not be conducted in a gentle and cultivated manner, ...[Red Guards] believed that the more grossly they behaved, the greater their revolutionary prestige." This belief was then mutually reinforced as competing Red Guard organizations sought to increase their revolutionary credentials by increasing their violence; until ultimately it became "revolutionary" to beat people. Fulang Lo wrote that "beating up capitalist roaders became a 'fashionable' thing.... Many people would beat a so-called capitalist roader just for fun." The prestige to be gained from beating a "capitalist roader" was undoubtedly enticing even to those who normally found little pleasure in violence, as is shown by a twenty-year-old male Red Guard who recalled beating his department head: "I didn't have the heart to torture him, but you had to put on a good show. The harsher you were, the more revolutionary you'd be considered. That's why things got so bad." Revolutionary "prestige" attracted those seeking recognition, but for those less

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8 Wang Youqin, pp.4-5.
9 Rittenberg and Bennett, pp. 323-324.
10 Mu, p. 325.
11 Zhu, p.39.
12 Fulang Lo, p. 102.
13 Quoted in Feng Jucai, p.81, 1991.
vainglorious, participation in beatings perhaps arose from peer-pressure and the desire to socially conform. But, as more students engaged in beatings, those motivated by glory were forced to “up the ante” in order to gain the recognition they craved. Hence, predictably, beatings soon spiraled out of control. The first known teacher to be beaten to death was Bian Zhonyun, killed by students at the girls middle school attached to Beijing Teacher’s University on August 5, 1966.\textsuperscript{14} Reportedly, after her death, the students responsible displayed “no sense of guilt, but rather an excited, giddy atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{15} One is left to wonder if such giddiness was genuine, or in fact feigned by terrified girls trying to appear “revolutionary.” At least one example of a Red Guard exaggerating her true feelings in order to protect her “revolutionary” credentials is provided by Liu Ting, the daughter of Liu Shaoqi, who was perhaps the most prominent victim of the Cultural Revolution. Allegedly, Liu Ting lied to her classmates by telling them that she had beaten three people to death. After one of her classmates confronted Liu about this lie, Liu explained her actions this way: “It was glorious to beat people at that time…. So I exaggerated and said that I had beaten three people to death.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Cultural Romanticization of Violence}

Red Guard violence also may have stemmed from a political culture that idealized and romanticized the People’s Liberation Army for its struggles during the Civil War. For example, “heroes” in Communist China were often army men such as Lin Biao;\textsuperscript{17} and, as Aiping Mu asserted, “In those days, it was natural for the younger generation to

\textsuperscript{14} Wang Youqin, p.5.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 29.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.21.
\textsuperscript{17} See Milton and Milton, p.146. They maintain that Lin Biao “was particularly revered in those early days of the Cultural Revolution by many of the middle class and university students for his reputation as a fearless leader.”
mimic their revolutionary heroes.”¹⁸ Glorification of war exploits was undoubtedly part of the general student psyche; it is therefore conceivable that this idealization of violence helped in shaping Red Guard behavior. An Wenjiang has recalled, “Almost all of our heroes were from wartime. We admired the red uprisings by the communists. Violence and brutality were not negative words, if used against class enemies. The more violent and brutal the better!”¹⁹ It thus seems that students, having spent much of their lives learning about the exploits of the PLA, likely saw the Cultural Revolution as a welcomed opportunity to create exploits of their own.

The Cultural Revolution offered not only a chance for students to mimic their revolutionary heroes, but also it provided an opportunity for them to repay the perceived “blood debt” which perhaps facilitated the birth of their nation. Students, throughout their education, were made aware of the sacrifices incurred by prior revolutionaries in their struggles to create the communist dream; their predecessors were the “poor peasants” who “fought valiantly for a new and brighter China.”²⁰ Zhai Zhenhua recalled that, during her education, she and her fellow students “were reminded again and again that the happy life we lived today had been paid for in blood. It was ours only because countless martyrs had sacrificed their lives.”²¹ Students thus perhaps had a “blood debt” that they felt morally obligated to fulfill. This moral obligation to “make revolution,” despite the inevitable hardship, is given clear example through a powerful speech made by Zhai Zhenhua:

In our happy life today, countless revolutionaries died. They died for freedom, they died for justice, they died for the working people, and they died for

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¹⁸ Mu, p.318.
¹⁹ An, p.125.
²⁰ Zhai, p.40.
²¹ Ibid.
us. Think of the martyrs.... What reason can we have to favor our own interests over our country’s? Think of the martyrs. What reason can we have not to be the successors of the cause of proletarian revolution?

My classmates, the revolutionary martyrs gave their lives in exchange for a new China for us! It is now our turn to build on the foundation they laid. What a glorious task it is to build a strong China. And what an arduous task it is to carry the revolution through to the end....

In this way, students felt morally required to become Red Guards. And arguably, they may also have felt that violence would be the “required cost” for their movement to succeed. Rae Yang affirmed,

Like the forerunners we admired, now we are going to places where forces of darkness still reigned and dangers lurked. We will enlighten and organize the masses, dig out hidden enemies, shed our blood, and sacrifice our lives for the final victory of the Cultural Revolution.

It appears that, just as the success of the People’s Republic came forth from the sacrifices of “countless martyrs,” so would the success of the Cultural Revolution be assured through the sacrifices of valiant Red Guards. This belief in the inevitability of violence is also demonstrated by Gao Yan’s response to his grandfather, who had urged him not to fight: “Grandpa, you don’t understand....We’re defending Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line. We have to fight. There’s bound to be bloodshed and loss of life.”

It seems that, within the People’s Republic, the horrific violence of the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War had been elevated to the ranks of national myth. True, the brutality of these wars were certainly stressed, but arguably, this stress did not result in a rejection of violence; instead, it likely created an acceptance of violence.

Glorification of the sacrifices made by the CCP resulted in a hunger among students for glories of their own; and the clearest way to get this glory was to mimic the heroic

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22 Ibid., p.51.
23 Yang, p.131.
24 Gao Yan, p.246.
exploits they had heard praised throughout their lives. It thus follows that when students
formed Red Guards, they imitated what they had learned. Sometimes this imitation was
done directly, as is shown by a Red Guard’s treatment of Liu Meide, who was a
chemistry teacher at the middle school attached to Beijing University:

One day in August, she was ordered by the students to climb on a table
and kneel there. A student placed one foot on her back, posing like Mao
Zedong’s description of how to struggle against landlords: ‘force them down on
the ground and then place one foot on them.’

Perhaps another example of direct imitation is offered by Gao Yan, who recalled how his
Red Guard organization tortured a girl belonging to a rival group. This use of torture was
perhaps an imitation of the idealized struggles of which they had learned; and perhaps,
too, was the tortured girl’s stoic response:

The boy hit her several more times. She stayed erect, saying nothing. In a
moment, the others had joined in. They hit her on the head and back, kicked her
legs, and slashed her cheeks with willow branches. She pressed her lips firmly
together and held onto the seat of the chair. She reminded me of the heroine in
the novel Red Crag, who had been tortured and executed by the Kuomintang and
American imperialists in Chongqing’s prison.

The Cultural Revolution may have allowed Red Guards to experience their
idealized violence first hand, but the inevitable disjuncture between fantasy and reality
caused some participants to have second thoughts, as shown by Rae Yang:

In the past when I read about torture in revolutionary novels, saw it in
movies, and daydreamed about it, it was always so heroic, so noble; therefore it
was romantic and beautiful. But now, in real life, it happened in front of me. It’s
so sordid!  

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26 Gao Yan, pp. 225-226. The girl was eventually released, but later died in a battle between the two rival
organizations. Gao, pp.250-251, described her dramatic death while his group stormed the compound
where she and her teammates were trapped: “Suddenly, a window on the third floor opened and a figure
appeared, holding a big red flag emblazoned with the name of the East-is-Red-Corps [her organization]....
I’d rather die than surrender to you!” she shouted. Then she jumped from the windowsill. The red flag
furled halfway around her as she cried ‘Long live Chairman Mao!’ She hit the ground. Her body lay
perfectly still, enfolded in the flag.” It seems likely that such a death, as well as Gao’s reaction, were both
inspired by a romanticized understanding of past struggles.
However, it seems that such reactions were rare, or at best, short-lived. Perhaps a more common response is provided by Ken Ling, who wrote, “After ten days or so, I became used to it all; a blood smeared body or a shriek no longer made me feel uneasy.” It seems plausible that many participants, once they experienced violence first hand, would have been shocked or disgusted by what they saw. Similar to Rae Yang’s reaction to actual torture, the romanticized, heroic image of bloodshed would likely appear at odds with the tragic reality. Yet, while this realization may have provided at least momentary hesitation, significant numbers of Red Guards continued to practice violence. Perhaps what enabled questioning participants to overcome their aversion to violence was their steadfast belief in Maoism. A former Red Guard told Feng Jicai, “After the Cultural Revolution broke out, I never doubted its policies.... At that time, it never occurred to me that we were being vicious. On the contrary, we felt justified and heroic because of our firm class stand.” It appears that for those who believed, violence could not dim the allure of the Maoist goal.

Maoism’s World-Wide Significance

Participants’ strong belief in Maoism may have stemmed from the official propaganda that lauded both the theory and the theory’s creator. According to Shaorang Huang, “The propaganda media launched the idea that Mao was the savior not only of China, but of humanity as a whole.” As Lin Biao, in his brief forward to the “Little Red

27 Yang, p.119.
28 Ling, p.22.
29 The Red Guard movement was comprised of millions, and it is unclear what number actively engaged in violent behavior. It would certainly be a beneficial study to break down the percentage of Red Guards who were actively engaged in violence, were only occasionally violent, or were never engaged in violence.
31 Huang, p.141.
Book," affirmed, "Mao Tse-tung's Thought is Marxism-Leninism of the era in which imperialism is heading for total collapse and socialism is advancing to world-wide victory." 32 Apparently, the perceived truth in Maoism was applicable not only to China, but also to the entire world. Hence, the struggle to defend Maoism in the Cultural Revolution was in fact a battle to "free" all mankind. The significance of this task was realized by participants, as is clearly shown by the following Red Guard poster from the middle school attached to Qinghua University: "We are guards defending red power. The Party centre and Chairman Mao are our backers. To emancipate the whole of mankind is our duty. Chairman Mao's Thought is the ultimate principle of our actions." 33 The imagined world significance of the Cultural Revolution thus reaffirmed the Red Guards' commitment to Maoism at the same time as it encouraged their whole-hearted participation. In this way, it mentally justified Red Guard violence as the unfortunate but necessary means to a truly great end. As Feng Chang-yeh made clear, "We're working for the world revolution. We aren't working for ourselves.... We aren't working only for China; we're working so that all the peoples of the world shall be free...." 34

Participants may have felt compelled to devote their all to what they saw as a noble cause. The perceived vital significance of their struggle meant that Red Guards likely saw themselves as carrying the hope of the entire world. Under such conditions, it was of course morally indefensible to back down; one could only persevere until victory. As a Red Guard poster in Shanghai explained, "This is a life-or-death struggle, from which everyone will emerge either a revolutionary or a counter revolutionary. There is

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32 Lin Baio, Foreword to Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung (Beijing: Peking Foreign Language Press, 1966).
33 Quoted in Zhai, p.73.
34 Feng Chang-yeh, quoted in Myrdal and Kessle, p.185.
no middle way.\textsuperscript{35} Red Guards would, of course, face great difficulties; such was the law of class struggle. Nonetheless, Red Guards felt assured of victory. They saw themselves as representing Maoism, an ideology derived from the "laws of history" and thus applicable to the entire world. Fighting Red, the spokeswoman for a Red Guard organization in Beijing, explained her belief in the theory's strength:

'So if Chairman Mao is our red commander-in-chief and we are his red soldiers, who can stop us? First we will make China red from inside out and then we will help the working people of other countries make the whole world red.' As if this were not enough, she added: 'And then the whole universe.'\textsuperscript{36}

It is also important to note that, along with the Cultural Revolution’s promise to free the world, there was the implicit promise that in so doing, China would regain the throne of the "most advanced" culture on earth. National pride certainly played a major role in motivating Red Guards. By benevolently ensuring a policy for all nations to follow, China would once again become the "middle kingdom," and the hundred-plus years of humiliation would finally be over. The prospect of freeing the world, while at the same time enabling China to regain her dominant position among the hierarchy of nations, was undoubtedly an intoxicating prospect for many young Red Guards, and it helps to put into context the following poster that was seen by Hunter in Shanghai:

...this is a struggle that will affect the fate of our nation and the world revolution! It is a struggle to defend the central committee and Chairman Mao's ideas and the dictatorship of the proletariat! Since it is a matter of life and death, we should hurl ourselves headlong into it!\textsuperscript{37}

Red Guards hoped to "free" the world by remaking the world in China’s image, thereby restoring her national pride in the process. This vibrant hope can possibly explain the

\textsuperscript{35} Hunter, p.49.
\textsuperscript{36} Fighting Red, quoted in Strong, p.450.
\textsuperscript{37} Hunter, pp.44-45.
devoted fervor of many Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, as it is conceivable
that in the eyes of some, such a goal was worth any price.

_Dou-Di-Gai_

The agreed upon way, upon which participation in the Cultural Revolution was to
take place, was through the Maoist cycle of criticism-struggle-transformation, or _dou-di-
gai_. In this cycle, China’s initial unity would be lost through a “dialectical” struggle
between competing factions; however, the loosing faction, after performing an honest
self-criticism, would rejoin with the victorious side, and then these two sides, both
changed by struggle, would now form a unity even stronger than before. In this way
Chinese society would be transformed.\(^{38}\) _Dou-di-gai_ were the “rules” of the game, and
nearly everyone wanted to play. Wang Hongbao, the son of a high ranking Beijing party
official recalled, “When the Cultural Revolution began, everyone supported it. Ninety
percent of the people, ninety-nine percent of the people supported it – even those who
were accused, even those who came under attack.”\(^{39}\)

But despite the widespread acceptance of _dou-di-gai_, there were serious problems
with the technique. As has been mentioned before, the Cultural Revolution was a battle
against revisionism. Revisionism, however, was not thoroughly defined, and
incorporated both the conceptual along with the concrete. Revisionism could thus mean
bourgeois actions, as well as bourgeois ideas. Revisionism’s nebulous character thus
brought with it a huge expansion in the ranks of the possibly “guilty.” Furthermore, one
did not need to be consciously committing revisionism to, in fact, be guilty of revisionist
behavior. A participant might have thought that she was waving a “red flag,” but

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\(^{38}\) This is perhaps a simplified reading of _dou-di-gai_.

\(^{39}\) Wang Hongbao, quoted in Thurston, p.154.
objectively, she was waving a "black flag." This meant that nearly everyone possibly could be guilty, and importantly, the cycle of dou-di-gai played upon this guilt. For example, a person could be accused of being a revisionist even though the accused might not have knowingly committed any revisionist behavior; rather than attempting to debate this charge, the accused would accept his fate and admit his "mistakes," and in doing so, fulfill a vital component of dou-di-gai, the process of self-criticism. In other words, it seems that the very cycle of dou-di-gai affirmed and validated the accusatory process of the Cultural Revolution through its stress on self-confession. And it follows that, with every successive round of questionable accusations and dubious confessions, the legitimacy of dou-di-gao itself was strengthened. Wang Hongbao described the frantic scene:

Everyone believed he had committed mistakes. The old intellectuals believed they had committed mistakes.... They were all confessing to their mistakes. Even Liu Shaoqi believed at first that he had committed mistakes, even Liu Shaoqi wrote his self-confession.40

It appears that participants believed in the goals of the Cultural Revolution, and through dou-di-gai they hoped to contribute to the realization of these goals. Hence, there was a tendency to admit one's guilt even if one had not consciously done anything wrong. Wang described his father who was branded a revisionist:

My father was one of the very first people to come under attack... and my father believed he was wrong. He believed he had committed serious mistakes. He came home one day and told us that. He said that he had not committed mistakes intentionally, that he had not realized at the time that they were mistakes, but that still he had made mistakes. But he said that he had always supported Chairman Mao. We must not blame anyone for what was happening to him and for what would happen to him. I came to believe that the attacks against my father were warranted.41

40 Ibid., p.155.
41 Ibid.
*Dou-di-gai* caused the accused to believe in the accusations against them and, at the same time, it legitimated the charges of the accuser. The justification that *dou-di-gai* provided therefore may have added to the violence of the Cultural Revolution in that it gave sanction to potentially libelous behavior.

**Belief in Mao**

If *dou-di-gai* served to strengthen participants’ commitment to the Cultural Revolution, so, too, did their faith in Chairman Mao. It seems that many Red Guards, as they faced difficult times that caused them to occasionally question the value of the Cultural Revolution, found solace in the perceived rightness of Mao. Fulang Lo wrote that, despite her questions,

I always returned to my belief in Chairman Mao, who led the Chinese people in defeating the Japanese invaders and the corrupt Guomindang regime. He is our greatest hero. He must want to do something good for China in launching the Cultural Revolution.42

Aiping Mu also found justification for her actions by her faith in the Chairman. She claimed, "It was my faith in Chairman Mao that convinced me to oppose my teacher."43 Red Guards’ belief in Chairman Mao both motivated and comforted them when facing hardship, as is shown by Gao Yan, who observed Red Guards on a hunger strike. He wrote,

The weakened strikers were leaning on each other or lying on the ground. A girl’s mournful voice began to sing:

*Lifting my head, I see the Big Dipper,*
*Deep in my heart I miss Mao Zedong;*
*In the black night when I think of you,*
*Brightness floods into my heart;*
*When I feel at a loss, I think of you.*
*You illuminate my way like a beacon....*

Gradually, others joined the wailing soloist, until all strikers were singing,

42 Fulang Lo, p.68.
43 Mu, p.313.
many with tears flowing down their cheeks. They repeated their song over and over until they were exhausted.  

What is significant about Red Guards' mental and spiritual reliance upon Mao is that it seems to have mounted as students faced troubling times that might have otherwise caused them to question their "faith." For example, it is conceivable that the above mentioned soloist, suffering from hunger, could have reached the opinion that ultimately her suffering was for nothing, and that the Cultural Revolution as a whole was also ignoble. However, her reaction was the opposite. The level of confidence students had in their Chairman appears, in hindsight, as truly remarkable. In fact, this confidence apparently stayed with some Red Guards until their deaths. An Wenjiang asked of the Red Guards who died, "Did they die for fame or personal interest? No. They died shouting 'Long live Chairman Mao!' They died defending their revolutionary cause...."  

However, the fact that supposedly "rebellious" students died while invoking the name of their culture's greatest authority brings into question whether they were in fact "rebellious" at all. Indeed, Hong is of the opinion that, "The Chinese students revolted, not because they were alienated from the prevalent value system, but because they wanted to conform with it." Maitan also makes mention of the dubious "rebellion" offered by the Cultural Revolution:

It is unusual to find praise for the spirit of rebellion incorporated into the ideology of any leading group, and there can be no doubt that this was an important factor in mobilizing the Red Guards. However, the peculiar – one might say, contradictory – nature of this rebellion was involuntarily revealed by one Shanghai Red Guard inscription: 'In a word, we will rebel against anyone

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44 Gao Yan, p.230.  
45 An, p.126.  
46 Hong, p.61.
who dares to oppose Chairman Mao and his Thought.\footnote{Maitan, p.261.}
The possibility that Red Guards were not rebelling, but rather attempting to conform to
the status quo, may also have contributed to the level of violence during the Cultural
Revolution. As has been shown, violence was an accepted component of Maoism, the
chief ideology of the People’s Republic. Therefore, if Red Guards were vying to
conform to that ideology, they probably were behaving according to that ideology’s
precepts. Participants could show their commitment to Maoism by engaging in violent
behavior, and strengthening one’s commitment to Maoism was the very goal of the
Cultural Revolution’s “extensive democracy.” Perhaps this is why, as Monro maintained,
the Cultural Revolution’s “mass mobilization – described as ‘extensive democracy’ by
Mao – was irredeemably marred by populist and quasi-fascist characteristics…”\footnote{Robin Munro, “Chin Erjin and the Chinese Democracy Movement,” Introduction to Chen Erjin, China: Crossroads Socialism, trans. Robin Munro (London: Verso, 1984), p.3.} One
could perhaps argue that the Cultural Revolution’s professed aim of “extensive
democracy” was, in fact, quite limited, and that this limitation helped to nourish a
tendency for violence that was probably inherent from the beginning.

Conclusion

Today, to many what appears most striking about Red Guards is not their ideals,
but their violence. This chapter has argued that such violence was probably already
inherent within Chinese society, as is shown by Maoism’s acceptance of struggle and the
People’s Republic’s idealization of her brutal past. Thus, before the Cultural Revolution
even began, violence was seen as a legitimate way to settle disputes, as well as a way to
bring about personal recognition. Red Guards, both those seeking fame as well as those
hoping to sincerely contribute to the “life or death struggle” of the Cultural Revolution,
would therefore find it easy to use violence. In addition, this tendency toward violence found further nourishment from possible structural deficiencies within the Cultural Revolution. The lack of room for genuine debate, the questionable process of *dou-di-gao*, and the possibility that Red Guards were, in fact, not in actual rebellion, but rather attempting to conform to the status quo, all aided in creating an environment ripe for bloodshed. And when these disparate factors came together, the result was an explosion in savagery, far past what anyone had expected.
CHAPTER 8  
END OF THE RED GUARDS

This chapter traces the final demise of the Red Guards. As was mentioned in chapter 6, the People’s Liberation Army was first ordered to take part in the Cultural Revolution during January 1967. Theoretically, the PLA was called upon to support “the left” via the newly-created Revolutionary Councils, conceived as a “triple alliance” among Red Guards, the army, and radical party members. Yet, despite these orders, the PLA consistently aligned itself with the right, challenging radical Red Guards to a high stakes political tug-of-war during the first half of 1967. At this time, radical elites waffled in their support between radical students and the conservative army, but after the Wuhan Mutiny threatened to bring China into a civil war, radical elites came down firmly on the side of moderation and cut off all ties with the radical Red Guards. The army received authorization to use force, and radical Red Guards were slowly beaten into submission. During this time, thousands of Red Guards died, and thousands more voluntarily left the movement. The few Red Guards who remained were finally pacified by Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams in the summer of 1968. Then, in the fall, radical elites began shang shan xia xiang, more commonly known as the “down to the countryside movement,” and the problem of student unrest was solved entirely.

Understandably, many Red Guards ended their participation in the Cultural Revolution feeling bitter and betrayed. They had risked their lives in defense of Maoism, only to be rewarded with banishment to the countryside. Officially, Red Guards found themselves castigated for their “bourgeois” behavior. But ironically, as this chapter will
argue, it was perhaps not bourgeois individualism, but problems with the theory of Maoism, which led to the downfall of the Red Guards. The thesis of this chapter is that both the failure of the Red Guards and the overall failure of the Cultural Revolution in general can be traced back to defects within Maoism. Specifically, it was Maoism that nourished the violence and factionalism of the Red Guards, thereby causing them to adopt the very behavior for which they were later criticized. Furthermore, it was participants’ sincere belief in Maoism which prevented the Cultural Revolution from being a genuine revolution; instead, the Cultural Revolution was, at most, a dramatic attempt at reform within a dominant Maoist status-quo. Clearly, if the dominant theory itself was defective, then any attempts at change within that theory would likely be defective as well. Thus, as this final chapter will argue, perhaps it is Maoism that was chiefly responsible for the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution.

Entrance of the PLA

Radical Red Guards arguably began 1967 with their greatest triumph – the January Power Seizure – but by the year’s end, radicals were basically a spent force. The variable which caused this dramatic change was the sudden entrance into the political fray by the PLA. The People’s Liberation Army became participants in the Cultural Revolution with the advent of the triple alliance, a new form of government intended to replace the overthrown party committees. After the initial euphoria of the January Storm settled down, radical elites realized that, while much of China’s existent conservative bureaucracy might have been overthrown, the reality of radical Red Guards’ inexperience meant that they were an incapable source of alternative rule. Or, as Philip Bridgham sarcastically wrote, “The most serious problem facing the Maoists in the wake of the
January Revolution was that it had succeeded too well, destroying the Party and government control apparatus without providing an effective substitute.\(^1\) Therefore, in part by default, it became the responsibility of the army – the only cohesive force left in the People’s Republic – to take over the administrative duties formally overseen by party bureaucrats. In this way, the PLA was quickly given a much greater sphere of influence over Chinese society; and predictably, once the PLA was given this increased power, it was not interested in possibly limiting its newly expanded position. Therefore, right from the beginning of its entrance into the Cultural Revolution, the PLA found it necessary to support the conservative Red Guards, despite urgings by radical elites for the army to support the left. Maurice Meisner commented that,

> Faced with the dilemma of determining who was ‘the revolutionary left’ among a multitude of groups all claiming to be the true followers of Chairman Mao’s Thought, the army usually supported the less radical of the rebel organizations in the interests of political and economic stability.\(^2\)

Members of the PLA quite naturally allied themselves with conservative Red Guards, for, as Hong pointed out, “the PLA supported the conservatives in part because their interests and ideology coincided, and in part because, as a practical matter, it was the conservatives who supported them.”\(^3\) Clearly, conservative Red Guards and the PLA both benefited from the status quo; it follows that they both likely feared the possibility of radical upheaval. Furthermore, as has been mentioned, the PLA enjoyed the expanded power it could wield through the triple alliance, and it saw no reason to relinquish this position to a group of rebellious students it likely saw as incompetent.


\(^3\) Hong, p.243.
Radical Red Guards, however, were not eager to accept their newly marginalized status. Leftist students who had previously seen their chief obstacle as conservative elements within the party now began to direct their struggle against the army. And, although radical elites were becoming increasingly doubtful about the need for "revolutionary" students, they were apparently not yet ready to completely give up on their radical protégées. Thus, the official press encouraged the PLA to ignore the mistakes of the Red Guards, to not interfere in their disputes, and to allow them to rectify their own problems.\(^4\) It seems radical elites were hoping that the PLA could maintain the necessary administrative facilities to run the country, while at the same time allow radical Red Guards the freedom to learn from their mistakes and become proper revolutionary successors. This message of moderation became official policy on April 9, 1967, when the Military Affairs Commission of the Central Committee issued a Three-Point Directive stating that (1) the army was not to take military action against any revolutionary group — instead, the army should confine itself to political work; (2) the army had to first receive permission from the Party before branding any group as reactionary or counter-revolutionary; and (3) the army could not retaliate if attacked.\(^5\) Needless to say, the Three-Point Directive was a huge boost to radical Red Guards' morale; they took it to mean that the Central Committee approved of their still-developing struggles against the army. The publication of the Three-Point Directive, therefore, led to an increase in radical Red Guard actions against the PLA, both violent and otherwise.

\(^4\) Kamow, p.341.
\(^5\) Hsia, p.212.
Radical Red Guards, dismissing the army as a hierarchical tool of conservatism, wished the PLA would experience the same turmoil that had already engulfed most of China. Hoping to spark an internal revolt, radical students instigated soldiers by saying, “You soldiers get only 6 Yuan a month, while an officer draws a high salary and a car to ride in.” Radical Red Guards may have hoped that, by weakening the side of their perceived enemy, their own side would become stronger by default. At least to some degree, leftist students were successful in their quest to destabilize the army. Hong wrote that, during the late spring and early summer of 1967, “insubordination within the units threatened to cripple the PLA’s command structure.” Some soldiers began to side with radical students and refused to carry out their orders; Kornow has claimed that “in several places, army units swept up in the ferment squared off against each other.” The army was loosing its cohesiveness, and during the summer of 1967 it perhaps seemed likely that the PLA was going to self-destruct. However, right at this precarious time, the army’s fortunes began to change.

The Wuhan Mutiny

The PLA, through the Three Point Directive, had been ordered to maintain strict neutrality during the Cultural Revolution, even in the face of an attack by rambunctious Red Guards. Yet, while this order may have been the ideal, the ideal was not always followed. As a specific example, PLA units in Wuhan were accused by radical Red Guards of using force against their faction. Two emissaries sent by the Central Committee investigated the matter. They ultimately agreed with radical students’ charges and sought to reprimand the PLA for violating the Three Point Directive. However,

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6 Hong, pp. 251-252.
7 Ibid., p.283.
Karnow, p.343.
rather than accepting this reprimand and committing self-criticism, the local Wuhan garrison employed a far more serious tactic. On July 20, 1967, in what became known as the Wuhan Mutiny, the local PLA garrison kidnapped and beat the two above-mentioned emissaries from the Central Committee, causing a national uproar. Maoism dictates, “The Party controls the gun, and the gun will never control the Party,” but the Wuhan Mutiny showed that at least some units of the PLA were willing to directly challenge the will of the Central Committee. The significance of the Wuhan Mutiny was not what actually took place— the kidnapping and beating of two party officials— but what it possibly signaled, i.e., a full-scale army rebellion. Meisner wrote, “The Wuhan Mutiny raised the specter of civil war, for it revealed that the one apparently cohesive force that remained in the country, the PLA, was something less than a monolithic entity.”9 In other words, if radical elites continued to encourage radical Red Guards, China might face civil war or a military coup. While the Cultural Revolution had so far seen exceedingly great chaos, it now faced the possibility of an upheaval that was quantitatively worse. Faced with such a prospect, even a fiery radical like Mao became cautious. He likely felt that radical Red Guards had only a slim chance of defeating a mutinous army, and even if they did, there was no guarantee that a “better China” would result. As Karnow pointed out, “despite Mao’s inspirational appeals, the radicals could neither seize power nor wield it effectively. Instead of forging a new revolutionary order, they were creating chaos.”10 Thus, despite having invested such hope in the radical Red

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9 Meisner, p. 329.
10 Karnow, p. 276.
Guards, Mao now decided to side with the army. Philip Short has explained, “Faced with a choice, Mao preferred a flawed instrument of rule to no instrument at all.”11

The aftermath of the Wuhan Mutiny therefore saw radical elites pragmatically cutting off their ties with the radical Red Guards. The official news media, such as The People’s Daily, “became critical of the students, who... were told that they had made many mistakes...”12 The official explanation for this turning of the tide was that students, as intellectuals, had shown that they were too marred by bourgeois thinking to continue their role as leaders of the Cultural Revolution. Mao explained this argument further on August 31, 1967:

As I see it, the intellectuals, including young intellectuals still receiving education, still have a basically bourgeois world outlook.... This is because for 17 years after the liberation the culture and educational circles have been dominated by revisionism. As a result, bourgeois ideas are infused in the blood of the intellectuals.13

Predictably, it was specifically students’ bourgeois individualism that was assailed. The press began to argue that, while such individualism was perhaps progressive in motivating students to challenge the work teams, it prevented students from accepting the dictates of “proletarian discipline.”14 The Cultural Revolution, the media argued, had now progressed past the “petty bourgeois mentality” of students in favor of the firm proletarian outlook of workers, peasants, and soldiers.15 Ironically, radical elites thus reneged on their previous denunciation of the blood-line theory by essentially vindicating the emphasis upon class which had been the conservative Red Guards’ mantra. This

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12 Hong, p. 253.
13 Mao Zedong, quoted in Huang, pp. 66-67.
14 Rosen, p. 209.
15 Ibid.
about-face was done to prevent China from becoming engulfed in civil war. Apparently, even Maoist elites now questioned the need for continued violence.

The Cultural Revolution thus began a slow march toward moderation. By early fall of 1967, "discipline, not rebellion, was the order of the day."\textsuperscript{16} Elites no longer encouraged Red Guard upheaval; suddenly it was no longer "right to rebel." True, the festivities of October 1, National Day, included a parade for "the Red Guards who astonish the world,"\textsuperscript{17} but in reality, as Karol maintained, this was only "the applause accorded to actors who are making their final exit."\textsuperscript{18} Radical elites' new stress on moderation was shown in a 2,000 word directive issued by Chairman Mao on October 7, 1967. This directive, summarized by Karol, implied, "I told you to 'open fire on the headquarters,' not to destroy it; we need the people who have made mistakes, and anyway, we can't solve our problems in a single Cultural Revolution."\textsuperscript{19} Accordingly, the time had come for students to return to their schools. As a Central Committee directive from October 14, 1967, made clear, "The universities and schools must reopen without delay and all young people must return to their studies, at least for half the day."

\textsuperscript{20} If students insisted on continuing the Cultural Revolution, they could focus their energy, "first and foremost," on discussing educational reform.\textsuperscript{21} Apparently, it would have to be a future generation, struggling under a future Cultural Revolution, which would bring China closer to its communist goal; at least, this was the message now

\textsuperscript{16} Hsia, p.165.
\textsuperscript{17} Karol, p.307.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, pp.307-308.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p.290. Interestingly, the Cultural Revolution, as envisioned by Mao, was only the first of a series of Cultural Revolutions. This is because Mao believed that multiple Cultural Revolutions were necessary for China to reach communism.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.311.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
preached by radical elites, the very same group once responsible for initiating the Cultural Revolution.

End of the Red Guards

At this time, radical elites clearly wanted Red Guards to disappear. But as Dennis Woodward eloquently wrote, “The genie of rebellion once unleashed was not easily returned to its former abode.” It seems radical Red Guards were not keen to return to their campuses and that urgings by elites did not move them. Eventually, it was something other than reasoning that brought about the end of the Red Guards. On September 5, 1967, Red Guards were ordered to hand in their weapons; if not, the army was authorized to use force. In this way, by the use of force, the Red Guard movement was squelched. According to Karol, “The crushing of the Red Guards was… unexpected, and by no means painless.” Indeed, the level of violence directed against the Red Guards certainly appears to have been great. Song Erli believed that, “The army was the greatest perpetrator of atrocities during the Cultural Revolution,” and Karnow wrote, “In many provinces, the casualties inflicted by the army on Red Guards and other radicals ran into the thousands.”

There are a variety of possibilities to explain this carnage. Perhaps one reason for the excessive bloodshed was the radical Red Guards’ determination to continue to fight despite such overwhelming odds. It might have been that radical students hoped Mao would learn of their suffering, be moved to change his mind, and once again intervene on their behalf. Another explanation lies with the fact that, at this time, both radical and

23 Karol, p.308.
24 Song Erli, quoted in Thurston, p.197.
25 Karnow, p.298.
conservative Red Guards employed heavy artillery in their battles against one another. Hong affirmed that, "both sides employed every conceivable weapon – in one case, even anti-aircraft guns – apparently determined to physically wipe out their adversaries."\(^{26}\) It is conceivable that such advanced weaponry, in untrained hands, could cause excessive bloodshed. Along the same lines, it is probable that, by seeing radical Red Guards in possession of such weaponry, the PLA deemed it unwise to treat the rebellious students as anything less than a serious threat. Doubts concerning the sheer force and determination of radical Red Guards become dispelled when one realizes that, although the PLA was given the green light to use force in September of 1967, and although once it "was given a clear mandate… to use whatever degree of force was necessary to restore order, it did exactly that,"\(^{27}\) it was not until the following summer that the Red Guards were finally beaten into submission. The squelching of the Red Guards, therefore, was not an easy task. Thus, while it seems clear that thousands of Red Guards died by the hands of the army, it is perhaps less clear to what degree the violence was excessive.

Interestingly, just as committed Red Guards continued to battle from fall until spring, a majority of students voluntarily dropped out from the movement. Ken Ling explained,

> The Cultural Revolution had dragged on too long; many of those who had once found the movement full of excitement were becoming bored. And those who had viewed the clashes as a struggle between the just and the unjust now were jarred awake by the mutual killing and the baseness of mutual invective.\(^{28}\)

To this Yan and Gao add,

> At first, the youth had been embroiled in the fire and smoke of the event with hardly a moment to reflect on the meaning of the Cultural Revolution in

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\(^{26}\) Hong, p.282.


\(^{28}\) Ling, p.361.
individual terms. A minority believed the activities to be a lifetime profession. The majority, however, gradually developed a revulsion at the many instances of horror and grew tired of the factional strife.\textsuperscript{29}

Maoist conviction may have delayed Red Guards’ revulsion toward violence, but even Maoism could not forever blind them from finally seeing the reality of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, as the fighting dragged on, it seems an increasing number of students came to the conclusion that, no matter how appealing were the ideals, they were still not worth the bloodshed. Ken Ling described their possible thought process:

Their attitude could be summed up as follows: I have been in school the longest. My parents have made the greatest investment in me and all my family members will depend on me for support after my graduation. Should I let more than twelve years of schooling be destroyed by a single bullet?\textsuperscript{30}

Perhaps it was from inner debates such as this that a majority of students left the movement. Kwong believed that, “Even in universities that remained active throughout the movement, only about a third of the students stayed.”\textsuperscript{31} William Hinton, describing Qinghua University, which was perhaps the most radical university during the Cultural Revolution, wrote that “toward the end, when factionalism developed to the point of armed struggle, only a few hundred people actually took part. Thousands left the area altogether, to return only after order had been restored.”\textsuperscript{32} Participants’ apathy, undoubtedly combined with the army’s violence, led to a serious dwindling of the Red Guard movement.

The relatively few Red Guards who remained now returned to their universities, not to study, but to continue their battle. Fearing reprisals from the PLA if they ventured outside, opposing Red Guard factions instead became entrenched within their campus

\textsuperscript{29} Yan and Gao, p.278.
\textsuperscript{30} Ling, p.362.
\textsuperscript{31} Kwong, p.71.
\textsuperscript{32} William Hinton, p.70.
walls, focusing all of their energy and risking their lives for a war that had only negligible consequences for China as a whole. The Miltons wrote,

By the summer of 1968, the students were, for the most part, holed up in their various schools, each faction barricaded within the walls of its own 'territory.' None of the offensive or defensive strategies of these deadly serious student armies had any further effect on national politics. Devoid of any coherent political orientation, factional strife among the students had taken on a life of its own.33

This scene is also described by Hong:

As the armed struggle continued, the two warring factions fortified the parts of campus which they occupied by setting up a defense perimeter ('strategic villages'), constructing tunnels connecting their buildings, and accumulating weapons and food. Consequently, many Peking school campuses were transformed into armed camps.34

Struggles between Red Guard factions were becoming increasingly surreal, but never less deadly. Hong wrote that, during June of 1968, "Both sides kidnapped members of the opposing faction to extract damaging information and engaged in a free-wheeling armed struggle for the final showdown."35 The fact that Red Guards were now objectively engaged in what can only be called a pointless struggle did not detour committed students from supporting their faction. Had students been allowed to continue their battles indefinitely, it seems likely that their fighting would have continued until one side was finally obliterated. However, that was not the case.

Under the guise of saving Red Guards from themselves were the Chinese workers, who organized themselves into Mao's Thought Propaganda Teams and entered

34 Hong, p.261.
Chinese campuses at the end of July, hoping to finally quell the violent students.\textsuperscript{36} This occupation took place, Hong believed, because “the workers were genuinely annoyed with the factional struggles on the campuses and were willing to ‘help’ the students.”\textsuperscript{37} It is unclear if these workers were self-organized, or if they were in fact compelled to enter the campuses by a higher force such as the PLA or the CCP. Certainly, the image of proletarian workers installing discipline upon a bunch of petit-bourgeois students had definite propaganda value in Communist China. Similarly, it is also unclear what techniques were employed by the workers in pacifying the students. According to an unnamed former Red Guard, “When the Mao Zedong Thought Workers’ Propaganda Team entered the school... we Red Guards lost all status and were treated like so much crap.”\textsuperscript{38} It is conceivable that Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams were heavy-handed in disarming the students, but it is also likely that formally powerful Red Guards resented the sudden loss of their prestige. The purpose of Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams was to disarm the students and to reestablish order within China’s universities, but until further study is made, it is unclear to what degree their actions were necessary, and to what degree they were excessive.

Excessive or not, the workers were ultimately not entirely successful. While Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams were able to disarm the remaining Red Guards and force them to disband, they were not able to reestablish order within China’s schools. Thus, while students were no longer killing each other, they still refused to work together and this resilient factionalism made it impossible for schools to reopen. Perhaps it was

\textsuperscript{36} Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams entered Qinghua University on July 29, 1968. On July 31, they entered Zhongshan University. Eventually, Mao’s Thought Propaganda Teams occupied all of China’s universities.

\textsuperscript{37} Hong, p.285.

\textsuperscript{38} Quoted in Feng Jicai, p.92, 1991.
out of frustration that elites decided to initiate one of the most dramatic campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. Karol wrote, "After the failure of attempts to ‘consolidate’ the student movement, the leaders took the decision to send the students away from the cities." Fall 1968 thus bore witness to a brand new campaign, *shang shan xia xiang*, literally meaning “up to the mountains; down to the countryside.” Zhu Xiao Di has described the campaign:

> After stirring up a whole generation of youth at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao now redirected the millions of Red Guards into the vast Chinese countryside and let the huge land absorb their unused energy. To glorify this movement, it was described as an exciting, wonderful learning experience for young people and they fell over each other to participate.

However, such hyperbole aside, not everyone was enthusiastic about the new campaign. The Miltons observed, "Many of the Red Guards perceived, in some cases perhaps correctly, that, rather than facing their revolutionary duty, they were confronting exile and punishment as scapegoats for the politics of the Cultural Revolution." Indeed, it seems probable that, for many Red Guards who had previously been enchanted by the promise of becoming revolutionary successors, life in the countryside was a bitter disappointment.

**Looking Back at the Cultural Revolution**

Although the Cultural Revolution did not officially end until Mao’s death in 1976, *shang shan xia xiang* effectively marked the end of the mass mobilizations that, in many ways, characterized the movement. One is left to wonder how former Red Guards, with the clarity of hindsight, saw their struggle. Rosen affirmed, “There are strong indications

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39 Karol, pp.337-338.
40 Zhu, p.69.
41 Milton and Milton, p.342.
that for many Red Guards, the immediate fruit of the GPCR was a sense of disillusionment. The violence and the disappointment of the Cultural Revolution likely left some participants feeling broken and betrayed. Chihua Wen has poetically written, “The Revolution was a giant burning furnace that fired our souls but left only dust when the fire burned down.” Similarly, Rae Yang has claimed, “I was a paper tiger. On the outside, I was armed to the teeth, a ferocious Red Guard. But inside I was a big bag of miserable doubts and fear.” Red Guards’ perceived betrayal by those elites on whose behalf they believed they fought might have caused some to have become engulfed by nihilistic doubt. Another conceivable reaction would have been bitterness, also shown by Rae Yang, who lamented the fate of the Red Guard “martyrs” who “were later judged to be big fools who sacrificed their lives for a wrong cause. Now history has pretty much forgotten them.” The present-day dismissal of Red Guards is also painfully noted by an unnamed participant: “I’m sure future generations will vindicate us but it is too soon to make a judgment on us now. So many plays, movies, and stories today portray the Red Guards as no better than the KMT or Nazi brown shirts. It’s not fair.”

Exoneration of the Red Guards is probably a long way off; indeed, one wonders if such a movement merits any other response than its portrayal as barbaric. While the cruelty of the Red Guards must certainly not be forgotten, it is also perhaps important to acknowledge that, for many of the participants, the Cultural Revolution was, at least in

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42 Rosen, p.247.
44 Yang, p.154.
part, a wonderful experience. To quote Rae Yang once more, "I have never felt so good about myself before, nor have I since." Song Erli has described a possible source for these feelings:

In the years to come, those of us who put up the big character posters will always look back and remember the freedom of those days and our political zeal. Even me. Even though I was looked down upon as a son of a bitch, even though I suffered from my involvement with democracy and from my blind zeal. That was the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution. But from the bottom of my heart, I loved those days.

Certainly, any romanticization of the Cultural Revolution is a danger that should be avoided, and historians must possess a clear understanding of the movement’s violence. However, at the same time, an accurate historical view of the Cultural Revolution should take into account the enthusiasm of many, possibly most, participants. As this thesis has repeatedly argued, taking into account participants’ enthusiasm may shed light on the movement’s outcome. This is because, perhaps to a large degree, it was participants’ commitment to Maoism that allowed such violence to spring forth. Rittenberg has explained,

In those heady, hypnotic days, we all did strange, sometimes outrageous things. How could we have been so carried away? I later wondered. How could we have forgotten ourselves like that? But back then it was real, vital, necessary. We were caught up in a trance of excitement and change.

He also has written,

We were caught up in a shining and powerful drama, our hopes for a future of democracy and freedom were so bright that they blinded us to the realities around us. It didn’t seem like a wild, violent, terrifying high-stakes political battle. It seemed like the birth pangs of a new world.

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47 See Hunter, p.294, “One must take into consideration the millions of people for whom the Cultural Revolution was a liberating and enlightening experience.”
48 Yang, p.115.
49 Song Erli, quoted in Thurston, p.297.
50 Rittenberg and Bennett, p.339.
51 Ibid., p.361.
It seems that the allure of the Maoist goal blinded participants to the carnage they were creating. Thus, if one is interested in possessing an understanding of the Cultural Revolution deeper than mere “senseless rampage,” it is perhaps necessary to understand the ideology that shaped the movement and drove China’s citizens to participate. By looking at the Cultural Revolution through the lens of Maoist ideology, the apparently “senseless” violence begins to take focus.

It is also worth noting that the reason participants acted according to Maoist precepts was because they believed in those precepts. Interestingly, despite conservative scholars’ claims that socialism goes against human nature, the Cultural Revolution seems to suggest that millions of people can in fact feel affinity to socialism, at least in its Maoist variant. But while Maoism was perhaps liberating in that it inspired participants to “dare to rebel,” it was also confining in that it kept such rebellion within a Maoist paradigm. This duel-faceted aspect of Maoism is shown in the following argument made by Song Erli:

For me, the Cultural Revolution was a revolution against feudalism, a revolution for democracy. And it was a revolution, a socialist revolution, but not necessarily a revolution where the Party cadres would retain control. It was more a revolution for a humanistic socialism.

The Cultural Revolution was perhaps not a revolt against an oppressive Communist Party. Rather, it may have been an attempt to make a regime that the majority of Chinese people supported better conform to the dominant ideology in which most Chinese believed. The Cultural Revolution, its name aside, can perhaps be more accurately

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52 This is not to say that Maoism "works," but only to suggest that people can see Maoism as a "natural truth" aligned with human nature, in much the same way as some economists would see capitalism.
53 Song Erli, quoted in Thurston, pp.169-170.
described as an exceedingly drastic attempt at reform, undertaken by a willing and enthusiastic citizenry, within a dominant Maoist status quo. And ironically, it is perhaps this rigid commitment to Maoism that may explain the eventual tragedy of the movement.

**Conclusion**

It seems radical Red Guards, through their dramatic success during the January Power Seizure, inadvertently sowed the seeds for their own demise by creating such a chaotic environment that only the PLA could bring stability to the nation. Once the PLA entered the fray via the Triple Alliance, it quite naturally found itself supporting the aims of the conservative Red Guards. This PLA-conservative alignment arose from the fact that both these sides benefited from the status quo and feared the uncertainty that came with further radical upheaval. Thus, radical Red Guards, who had previously directed their struggle against conservative elements within the CCP, now began to see the army as the chief obstacle to their goals. Consequently, from the time the PLA entered the Cultural Revolution in January 1967 until well into the summer, radical Red Guards and the army found themselves effectively entangled in a political tug-of-war.

This tug-of-war was permanently drawn to the army’s advantage after the events of the Wuhan Mutiny on July 20, 1967. This mutiny brought with it the specter of full-scale army rebellion and civil war, and it was in the face of this horrific possibility that radical elites were finally compelled to sever their ties with the radical Red Guards. The Cultural Revolution now entered a phase of moderation, as was signaled by a September 5, 1967 order for Red Guards to hand in their weapons or face persecution by the army. Throughout the fall and into the spring, radical Red Guards and PLA battalions battled each other in an orgy of violence that led to the deaths of thousands. However, while the
battle was long, its outcome was perhaps never in doubt, as idealistic students equipped with heavy firearms were simply no match against trained professionals. During this time, the majority of Red Guards simply left the movement, perhaps appalled by the violence they saw, while those still committed became permanently holed up in their college campuses. Within these campuses, the determined continued to fight, despite the fact that now their movement had little, if any, impact on China as a whole. Eventually, though, these remaining fighters were also pacified, as Mao's Thought Propaganda Teams, ostensibly made up by members of the working class, entered China's campuses at the end of July 1968. Students were at last disarmed and the Red Guards were forced to disband, but apparently the factional strife that had come to occupy students' lives could not be so easily forgotten, and attempts to "consolidate" the student movement came to naught. Therefore, perhaps out of a sense of frustration, radical elites initiated the shang shan xia xiang movement in the fall. Students now suddenly found themselves forcibly compelled to begin new "revolutionary" lives in the countryside. The shang shan xia xiang movement, one of the biggest internal migrations in China's history, was undoubtedly a dramatic end to the mass mobilization stage of the Cultural Revolution.

It has been a central argument of this thesis that students participated in the Cultural Revolution out of a sincere commitment to Maoism. If this is so, it seems likely that when Red Guards saw the end of their movement, many of them felt a sense of disillusionment. They had, at least in their eyes, valiantly struggled to defend China's Maoist ideology. It is thus certainly conceivable that, rather than seeing shang shan xia xiang as a just reward for their revolutionary determination, Red Guards saw it as a punishment, tantamount to banishment to the countryside. Furthermore, even though
students were eventually able to return to their home cities, their participation in the
class movement as Red Guards has not been exonerated. Hence, even today former
participants may still feel that they have been denied social validation for their struggle.

Any exoneration of the Red Guards, however, brings with it the danger of
romanticizing their movement, and clearly, this should not be done. The brutal reality of
the Red Guards, despite their possibly noble ideals, remains an ugly scar on the history of
the People’s Republic, and this scar should not be washed away. Yet, at the same time,
to focus only on the violence, and not the context which produced this violence, would
make it impossible to reach a historical understanding of the Cultural Revolution. This
thesis has argued that to fully understand the Cultural Revolution, one needs to
understand the ideological precepts of Maoism in the way it was understood and applied
in 1960’s China. One should also take into account the existing class differences and the
various cultural codes that played a significant part in shaping Red Guard behavior.

When one begins to process these disparate influences, the “senseless, random” violence
of the Cultural Revolution begins to be explained. Specifically, by analyzing the
concepts of Maoism, one sees how it perhaps encouraged violent behavior, and then, in
the case of students, explained this violent behavior as an example of students’
“bourgeois” upbringing. In brief, Maoism contributed to the violence just as it offered an
explanation for the violence. Similarly, Maoism may also have nourished factionalism,
through its tendency toward dogmatism and against compromise. The tool of Maoism,
then, appears in hindsight to have been yet another questionable source from which to
launch the Cultural Revolution, and ironically, it is perhaps this tool, more than any other,
that helps to explain the eventual tragedy of the movement. Problems within Maoism may have doomed the Cultural Revolution from the very beginning.
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