



Big-character posters in Peking University, China Pictorial, November 1967. This image appears courtesy of the Long Bow Group Archives, Beijing.

The Social Conflicts Underpinning China's Cultural Revolution Turmoil

Why did China erupt into mass fighting in 1966-68 in most of the country's schools, universities, factories, country towns and villages?

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The violent factionalism that erupted during the Cultural Revolution provides historians with a unique window into the tensions and antagonisms in Chinese society that had remained hidden in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. In the heat of the 1966-68 upheaval, socio-economic groups which were disgruntled with their pre-Cultural Revolution status came into conflict at the grass roots level with groups that wished to preserve the *status quo*. These various groups' posters and newsletters, plus interviews with émigrés in Hong Kong, provided outside observers with a gold-mine of information and insight into the Mao-era system of social, economic and political stratification.

The Nature of the Cultural Revolution's Mass Conflicts

During the mid to late 1970s, interviewing émigrés in Hong Kong, I was able to collect information on a variety of local cases across China. These involved a substantial number of different types of upheavals in different sectors of society, sparked off by different kinds of underlying grievances and tensions. So the

question 'Why did people attack each other?' needs to be asked separately for each sector of society.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Researchers know the most about why secondary school students rose up and split into warring Red Guard factions.¹

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, China's secondary school students had faced increasing difficulties getting admitted to a university, and increasingly difficult career prospects if they were not admitted. In these same years, the criteria laid down by the government for getting into university kept shifting, but on the whole it gave progressively greater play to a parent's class origin and less to a student's academic achievement. A third criterion was also evaluated by admissions officers: a student's political activism. This was judged in terms of whether a student had been accepted into the Communist Youth League.² Ambitious students vied against each other to get in. Interviewees of middle-class origins (i.e., those whose parents before the revolution had been shopkeepers,

white-collar workers, professionals, etc.) recalled that they had been disturbed by policies in the mid-1960s that gave increased priority in Communist Youth League admissions to students of red-class origins (i.e., the children of pre-revolution workers, poor peasants and Communist Party officials). In these circumstances, amid rising tensions among students, the official policy in 1965 swung yet again, in the realisation that millions of students of middle-class family backgrounds were becoming discouraged at their chances of ever proving their political devotion.

When Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in May 1966, these two groups of secondary-school students reacted quite differently. The students of red family origin took advantage of the new campaign's thrust against 'bourgeois authorities' and against 'white [i.e., non-red origin] experts' to set up Red Guard groups that attacked middle-class-origin school teachers, and they sought to exclude students who were not of red-class origin from participating in the Cultural Revolution on the grounds that their thinking was suspect. Then suddenly, in the autumn of 1966 Mao decided to purge large numbers of Communist Party officials whose views, he felt, differed from his own. He shifted the fledgling Cultural Revolution campaign toward attacks against 'capitalist roaders in the Party'. The middle-class students, who had been sidelined and humiliated, took advantage of this to form their own Red Guard groups. These attempted to 'turn the spearhead' away from 'bourgeois authorities' and toward errant local Party leaders, a group that, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, included the parents of some of their red-origin schoolmates. Violent clashes between the opposing Red Guard factions erupted among secondary-school students across China, and in particular at the elite schools where students had, until recently, vigorously been competing against each other to get into a university.

In the cities for which we have information, the children of the officials overwhelmingly participated in what became known colloquially as the Loyalist or Conservative Red Guard faction, while the middle-class students from educated families gravitated overwhelmingly into the Rebel Red Guard faction. Students from working-class families split down the middle in their factional allegiances, even though they were of red origins. One reason was that at the non-elite lower-secondary schools (grades 7-9), where they predominated, fewer students were vying to climb up into higher education, not even into an upper-secondary school. The split among students in these working-class lower-secondary schools often was between the Communist Youth League members, who had stood over their classmates in positions of authority, versus the less ambitious non-activist students, who resented the activists and became Rebel Red Guards.³ Most 'bad-class' secondary school students (i.e., the children of the former capitalists and landlords) shunned any Cultural Revolution activity altogether, knowing that they might be vulnerable to retribution.

UNIVERSITIES

The students at universities were already the winners in the competition to advance through education. They did not need to worry about the same issues of class-origin preferment and tightening university admissions that had troubled ambitious secondary school students. My interviews with former university students and teachers revealed the type of factional split found at the working-class lower-secondary schools. According to my interviewees' descriptions, before the Cultural Revolution some of the most politically active university students were competing to gain a leadership status in the Communist Youth League or were angling to join the Party, and they had gained the animus of those students who concentrated instead on their studies. When the Cultural Revolution exploded, these two types of students tended to take opposite factional sides. An interviewee who had been a student at Yunnan Teachers-Training University noted:

Most of the students sought safety during the Cultural Revolution by joining the majority faction. This was especially true among the older students, who were close to graduation.⁴ But a second strong factor [in determining factional allegiance] was that before the Cultural Revolution, some students could be said to have been 'persecuted'—that is, they'd been afraid of being reported on—while other students were part of the established power as political activists: opportunists who were betraying others in order to climb up. Within their own classroom group, the activists became the Loyalists and the others became the Rebels.

FACTORIES

Two different types of grievance gave rise to upheavals in China's factories and the division of the workforce into warring factions. The first of these revolved around the political favoritism shown in previous years to workers who were willing to side with the factory leadership, who had participated enthusiastically in Party campaigns and helped prod fellow workers to work faster. The factories' Loyalist factions were formed from among these workers.⁵ (This is similar to the scenario at universities, where activists favoured by the League and by the Party formed the Loyalist core.)

A factory technician in Yunnan, for instance, noted that at his factory the 'political activists' among the workers prior to the Cultural Revolution 'were always ready to respond to Party orders. Their special duties were to make reports on other people.' During the Cultural Revolution other workers turned on these 'old activists'. Alongside this struggle, factory officials came under attack from one side or the other, and in the turmoil 'almost all of them were pulled down; it wasn't a case of some types of officials being ousted and other types not. Only some of the lowest officials survived. ... Today [i.e., in the 1970s] the factory's officials have become scared to make decisions and they've shifted a lot of the decisions to the army representative in the factory'.

‘... interviewees who had been secondary-school Rebel Red Guards recalled a similar ... sense of release and freedom from the conformist pre-Cultural Revolution tensions they had endured.’

A second reason for the upheaval and factionalism among workers was that some of them had been *materially* favoured or discriminated against prior to the Cultural Revolution. Based on worker-faction newsletters, Hong Yung Lee was the first scholar to present this scenario: that the Rebel worker organisations’ members were ‘from the smaller, poorer factories, the contract and temporary workers, the apprentice and unskilled workers in the larger factories’.⁶ Notably, the apprentices, temporary workers and contract workers had the lowest wages, did the most onerous tasks and, unlike most other workers, were entitled to few or no perquisites, and the temporary and contract workers had no job security. In addition, the workforces of entire factories that had been discriminated against in pay and status joined the Rebel side *en masse*. According to interviewing that I conducted about the Cultural Revolution fighting in the city of Changsha in Hunan province, the Rebel strongholds included some of the small neighbourhood firms of handicraft workers and tradesmen that had been collectivised in the mid-1950s: poorly capitalised operations that, by deliberate government policy, provided low wages. Another group comprised construction workers, also a low-paying trade, where the traditional wage bonuses had been suppressed in the 1960s by the industry’s Communist Party leadership. Yet another militant Rebel grouping was composed of transport coolies who hauled freight through city streets. A sizeable percentage of them reportedly had been in labour camps, and performed this tough very low-paid coolie labour because no one was willing to hire political and criminal convicts for other lines of work.⁷

On the whole, the large factories in heavy industry had been viewed by Communist Party ideology as more advanced and glorious than light industry or handicraft industry, and as a result these large factories had been favoured by the government in terms of wages and workers’ perquisites. The Party was also better organised there, and had nurtured more political activists. During the Cultural Revolution upheavals, the Loyalist factions normally appear to have predominated in such factories, while the Rebel faction had a stronger footing in the smaller factories that were less favoured by Party policy and that also contained a less powerful Party presence.

Anita Chan (a Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney) and I interviewed many dozens of workers and retirees during 2002-2004 at a small distillery in the capital city of one of China’s inland provinces.⁸ There, the entire workforce had belonged to the Rebel faction during the Cultural Revolution

upheavals. The distillery was part of the foodstuffs processing industry, which provided low wages and low status. The impoverished over-worked distillery workers had sensed at a semi-conscious level that people like themselves fit into a Cultural Revolution rebel faction. They could not imagine that anyone who worked at such a poorly paid factory would have any other identification.

A few interviewees from the distillery were also aware of a different reason for being in the Rebel faction. One of these, an elderly retiree who was in his early 30s when the Cultural Revolution erupted, looked back at the Cultural Revolution period with nostalgia:

Before the Cultural Revolution there were hidden problems. When our leadership said something was one, not two, it had to be accepted as one, not two. We could say nothing in response but just had to work more. You could only talk about good things and never about the bad things. In the Cultural Revolution, people talked about anything, without restrictions. People said things they dared not say before. Many things were exposed. If you wanted to say something you said it. Nothing could stop us. It raised people’s thinking. ... The Rebel faction was made up of ordinary small people, people without any power. They felt wronged. You’d been under your supervisor, and there was nowhere to vent your dissatisfaction. It wasn’t that I personally felt any anger, but when you joined the Rebel faction you felt better. When we talked with each other, we could feel a sense of relief.

In short, such workers gravitated into the rebel ranks not only because they materially had been among the have-nots but also, as this worker observes, because they had felt themselves stifled by a political/administrative hierarchy that had forced them to speak and act against their own interests. Repeatedly, interviewees who had been secondary-school Rebel Red Guards recalled a similar strong and at times exhilarating sense of release and freedom from the conformist pre-Cultural Revolution tensions they had endured.

Looking back in old age, forty years after the Cultural Revolution upheaval, most of the interviewees from the distillery did not share such recollections. Married, with families to look after, they were simply trying to get through the daily grind of life as best they could, and in their telling today, the Cultural Revolution turmoil seemed unsettling and at times frightening. In particular, all of the women interviewees looked back simply at a time of chaotic violence in the streets, constant worries about their children, and personal bafflement. These distillery workers’ views may well have been shared by many tens of millions of ordinary middle-aged people across China.

OPPOSITE

A woodcut of a militant Red Guard holding aloft a book of Chairman Mao’s quotes. His banner reads, ‘Revolution is Not a Crime! To Rebel is Reasonable!’. This image appeared in the *China Pictorial*, April 1967.

VILLAGES

Over the decades I have been able to carry out interviews with people from 31 villages.⁹ Slightly more than a third of these villages—eleven, to be exact—rode out the Cultural Revolution without any armed struggles between hamlets or villages or serious eruptions from below. Among the twenty villages that did experience conflicts, a high proportion were of a traditional nature—for instance, disputes between villages over land and access to water—which revived in 1967-68 when the local Party hierarchies and local governments collapsed. In ten of the villages of interviewees and in several of the published village studies, historically-rooted conflicts between a village’s different kinship groups also were played out, many of which involved struggles between kin groups to capture a village’s leadership posts.

Given a need to justify attacks and counter-attacks during the Cultural Revolution by way of Communist ‘ideology’, the traditionally based rivalries and the antagonisms often were clothed in socialist rhetoric. Mao quotations about ‘revolution’ and ‘class struggle’ were brandished by rival camps to legitimise attacks, and these slogans encouraged an exaggerated, uncompromising righteousness and intolerance and a recourse to violence. This extreme politics of the Cultural Revolution period meant that losing out in a conflict was likely to entail persecution, and such fears fuelled mounting cycles of violence and counter-violence—in cities as well as in the countryside, among worker and student groups and among farmers and the self-interested contenders for rural political power. An interviewee observed, regarding the Cultural Revolution in her own village, that ‘seeking revenge afterwards is very common in China, and that’s why people beat their victims down so hard: because they’re afraid that if they can rise again they might take revenge. So you feel you need to totally demolish them.’

A second form of rural violence was also widespread. As the Cultural Revolution began to seep outwards from the cities, many commune and village officials began to organise farmers to mete out severe persecution against the bad-class (former landlord and rich-peasant) households. The local leaders obviously saw it as a means of self-protection to preside over such persecutions. They could see that one of the charges being levelled against urban Party leaders during the Cultural Revolution was that they had been insufficiently militant on behalf of Chairman Mao’s class line, and so local rural Party officials became especially anxious to demonstrate



their militancy in pursuit of bad-class enemies. They convened public meetings at which bad-class people were denounced and persecuted, and in some cases killed.¹⁰

COUNTRY TOWNS

The livelihoods of the residents of the rural county capitals and commune market towns more closely resembled those of urban residents rather than villagers. It therefore is not surprising that the conflicts that embroiled many of the county capitals and commune towns during the Cultural Revolution closely followed the same chronology of events as the cities, or that the same type of factionalism arose there. This is clear from the interviews that I conducted with several former residents of towns. An interviewee relates that in his own town, which was a commune headquarters/market centre, the poorly paid commune clerks organised their own Rebel group.

At about the same time that upheavals and factionalism began to emerge in the towns, in a large number of rural counties the county and commune militia commanders became far more visible. As provincial Party organs collapsed in early 1967, Party leaders at the county level sometimes strategically withdrew from their posts and let the militia commanders, who were protected by their military connections to the regional army command, pretend to assume authority while the county and commune Party leaders continued to control events from behind the scenes. In other cases, where the militia commanders were politically ambitious, they used the opportunity to make a play for real power at the county capital or commune.¹¹

Both in rural communes where the *status quo* had prevailed against local opposition and in those

where it had never been challenged, the commune authorities were apt to support the Loyalist-faction mass organisations of the county capitals. Since the Loyalist faction's membership tended to derive from among those people in the county towns who had been politically favoured prior to the Cultural Revolution, the faction tended to uphold the pre-Cultural Revolution county leaders. This appealed to commune and village Party leaders. Their loyalty to their pre-Cultural Revolution superiors often appears to have remained informally intact. In many cases, such feelings of loyalty especially linked the communes' militia commanders to the county militia headquarters, and in turn the county's Party and government leadership. When the rural authorities received urgent calls to come to the aid of embattled county leaders or to the rescue of flagging county-town Loyalist factions, the militia corps of farmers were ordered out of the villages and dispatched to do their duty. When the rebellious forces in the county capitals were crushed, the rural militias progressively proceeded outward and upward toward the provincial capital, entering some of the cities to bloodily crush urban Rebel organisations.¹² Their commanders and the commune-town militia commanders under them orchestrated many of the mass killings of 1968, as is clear from the available documentation and interview accounts.

One puzzle is why the brutality perpetrated under the direction of the militia leaders of the countryside and towns became, on the whole, greater than what city residents perpetrated. Certainly, the cities experienced cases of murderous brutality, as in the secondary schools of Beijing in the early period of the Cultural Revolution, but the cities did not witness the surge of mass slayings of bad-class people as occurred in some counties and villages.¹³ Nor, unlike many counties, were there widespread massacres in the cities, with the exception of cities stormed by county militia.¹⁴ What was the psychology that rendered the county towns and rural militias more brutal in their treatment of prisoners? Might one reason be that the factionally engendered fighting in the towns had been more intense, and therefore more murderous, than in the cities? If so, had pre-Cultural Revolution grievances, animosities, and tensions been greater in rural towns than in cities? We have no answers to these questions, because we do not have sufficiently detailed knowledge about what occurred in even a single county capital or commune town during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁵ Such additional research is still required.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

The available evidence from areas inhabited by non-Chinese peoples strongly suggests that during the Cultural Revolution, officials interpreted such people's non-conformity to Chinese customs as deviations from Chairman Mao's teachings. Efforts were often made by officials and mobs alike to impose Chinese beliefs and customs by destroying the ethnic-minority people's religious sites and enforcing Chinese social practices.

Brutal persecutions were carried out against several ethnic groups whose loyalty to China was considered suspect. The worst occurred in Inner Mongolia (a Chinese province), where Mongols were accused of conspiring to betray China. Hundreds of thousands of Mongols, many of them from the countryside, were arrested in a witch hunt, and tens of thousands were killed while in detention.¹⁶

A CAULDRON OF GRIEVANCES AND VIOLENCE

It is evident that a complicated mix of pre-existing grievances and animosities was played out and amplified in the civil strife of the Cultural Revolution. Across a number of sectors of society, as has been observed, splits arose between those who had been successful political activists and had gained the trust of superiors as against those who had not been inclined to be politically activist and felt badgered and restrained by the politically favoured. We have observed this scenario, for instance, in working-class secondary schools, plus universities and factories. Separately, we have observed tensions arising from the uneven treatment faced by people who bore red origin vs. middle-class family-origin labels. We have seen how this influenced divisions into opposing factions in elite secondary schools. We have also observed a separate cause of hostility and factional alignment arising from relative material deprivation – as seen among the temporary and contract workers, apprentices, and the workforces of small peripheral factories and disfavoured occupations. We have also witnessed how groups took advantage of the political instability to launch efforts to improve their positions politically, one example being the effort by disgruntled kinship groups to oust village leaders who favoured their own kinsmen. We have also observed the repression of the customs of non-Chinese ethnic groups in the heat of the Cultural Revolution. And we have seen how the Maoist political teachings about 'class struggle' and hidden enemies prompted politically insecure officials to mount extraordinary displays of murderous violence against people of bad-class origins and against groups such as China's Mongols.

In different types of work units and communities across China, one or the other of the above forms of antagonisms took precedence. Even so, several of these causes of tension usually were operating at one and the same time in each community, lending added complexity to the splits into opposing factions and contributing to a dangerous brew of escalating violence.

These schisms of the Cultural Revolution revealed the tensions at the grassroots not only for this extraordinary period but also for the years preceding the Cultural Revolution. More than that, many of the same tensions persisted throughout the 1970s, once again largely concealed from view, after the mass upheavals were suppressed in 1968 and the system of political hierarchy and repression was reimposed.

In short, studying the Cultural Revolution upheavals of the late Sixties provides us with a window into understanding more about the whole sweep of the Maoist period. The socio-political Pandora's box that the Cultural Revolution opened up during 1966-68 remains a truly crucial political phenomenon for historians of modern China to research and explain.

Endnotes

- 1 E.g., Hong Yung Lee, "The Radical Students in Kwangtung during the Cultural Revolution", *The China Quarterly* 64 (December 1975): 645-83, and Lee's *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Stanley Rosen, *Red Guard Factionalism and the Cultural Revolution in Guangzhou (Canton)* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982); Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1985); Jonathan Unger, *Education Under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), Chs. 5-6; Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger, "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Canton", *The China Quarterly* 83 (Autumn 1980): 397-446; Joel Andreas, "Battling over Political and Cultural Power in the Cultural Revolution", *Theory and Society* 31/4 (August 2002).
- 2 E.g., Susan Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jonathan Unger, *Education Under Mao*.
- 3 Chan, Rosen, and Unger, "Students and Class Warfare".
- 4 This reason was also noted by a former lecturer from one of the elite universities in Beijing, who told me in the mid-1970s, "The students acted in their own interest when the Cultural Revolution began. Those who were about to graduate were the most loyal to the Party leaders of the university, since their allocations to good job postings depended on those leaders. It was first and second-year students who were the most radical."
- 5 Andrew Walder, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution in the Factories: Party-State Structures and Patterns of Conflict", in Elizabeth J. Perry (ed.), *Putting Class in its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (Berkeley: China Research Monograph 48, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1996), 169.
- 6 Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Cultural Revolution*, 340.
- 7 For the worker membership of the militant Shengwuian Rebel coalition in Changsha, see Jonathan Unger, "Whither China?: Yang Xiguang, Red Capitalists, and the Social Turmoil of the Cultural Revolution", *Modern China* 17/1 (January 1991).
- 8 These interviewees' recollections of the past are discussed in Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "Memories and the Moral Economy of a State Enterprise", in Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang (eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- 9 I have drawn upon these interviews in Jonathan Unger, "Cultural Revolution Conflict in the Villages", *The China Quarterly* 153 (March 1998): 82-106, and also Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), Ch. 3. The following paragraphs about China's villages rely upon these previous writings.
- 10 Zheng Yi, *Hongse jintian bei* (The Red Memorial Plinth), (Taipei: Huashi Wenhua Gongsi, 1993), 2-116.

- 11 This information derives from several interviewees. The assumption of authority by the militia heads can also be observed in Chinese county gazetteers and Zheng Yi's volume: again and again in these published sources, the new leaders at the county and commune levels who ordered massacres in 1968, or instructed villagers to do so, are identified as militia commanders.
- 12 In Guangxi province, county militias aligned to the Loyalist camp ultimately surrounded the provincial cities and perpetrated massacres. On this, see Hua Linshan, *Les Années Rouges* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1987). Liu Guokai, the best Chinese analyst of the Cultural Revolution turmoil, lists six other provinces where such assaults on cities were also widespread, and he writes, 'Whereas urban residents, workers, students, and other members of the "conservatives" [loyalists] still held back a little in fighting the Rebels for fear of accidentally hitting good people, out-of-town peasants had no such inhibitions; they went all the way, killing, burning, looting. Many cities were under siege, forcing non-partisan city-dwellers to guard the cities together with the Rebels to prevent their fall into the hands of the peasants, whose barbarity made no distinction between Rebels and ordinary citizens'. Liu Guokai, "A Brief History of the Cultural Revolution", *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 19/2 (Winter 1986-87): 97-8.
- 13 A large number of shocking cases are described in Wang Youqin, *Wenge shounanzhe* (Victims of the Cultural Revolution) (Hong Kong: Kaifang Zazhi Chubanshe, 2004).
- 14 In the city of Guangzhou, which was never invaded but where the Rebel faction was suppressed by the city's army command in August 1968, the top several leaders of the city-wide secondary-school Rebel Red Guard alliance were neither killed nor beaten by the victors. While the top commander of the Rebel Red Guards was imprisoned for two years, almost all of the other secondary-school Rebel leaders, including the deputy commander, were simply assigned in 1968 to work in villages alongside most of their schoolmates of both factions. On this, see Anita Chan, *Children of Mao*, 157, 163, 191, 194.
- 15 The events in a county town are described in Gao Yuan's interesting memoir, *Born Red* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), but Gao Yuan was a boy at the time and the events are portrayed from that perspective.
- 16 William R. Jankowiak, "The Last Hurrah? Political Protest in Inner Mongolia", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 19-20 (January-July 1988): 273-88; also W. Woody, *The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia* (Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asia Studies at Stockholm University Occasional Paper 20, 1993); also, with terrifying details, Zheng Yi, *Hongse jintian bei*, 285-92, and Wu Di, "Neirendang da xue'an shimo" (The Major Cases of Murder vis à vis the 'Inner Mongolian Revolutionary Party', from Beginning to End), in Song Yongyi (ed.), *Wenge da tusha* (Major Massacres of the Cultural Revolution), (Kaifang zazhi she, 2002), 59-110.

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Big-character posters in Peking University, *China Pictorial*, November 1967. This image appears courtesy of the Long Bow Group Archives, Beijing.