From Red Guards to Thinking Individuals

China's Youth in the Cultural Revolution

By Yihong Pan

Poster depicting the Red Guard cheerleading walking slogans around Chairman Mao. Image source: http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=Mao+Red+Guard+poster

Common scenes in photographs and documentary films of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) are the human waves of male and female youths on Tiananmen Square eerily presenting themselves as if they were graced by an audience with their idol, China’s ruler, Mao Zedong. In their military uniforms, army caps, and Red Guard armbands, they wave Mao’s “little red book,” with tears in their eyes, chanting “Long Live Chairman Mao!” These Red Guards of middle, high school, and university students served as the spearhead for Mao Zedong in his Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards formed a strong and bloody political purge of Party cadres from top down, an anti-humanitarian tragedy in the name of revolution to eradicate everything old and Western, and a movement in the rhetoric of creating an egalitarian society. It affected a nation of 800 million people, and consumed the energy of China’s youth even in distant parts of the country, but it resulted in the transformation of the Red Guard generation from the top of Mao into thinking individuals.

MAO’S RED GUARDS

Directed by Chairman Mao, the May Sixteenth (1966) Notification of the Central Party Committee “sounded the bugle” to advance the Cultural Revolution, which was essentially Mao’s purge of his political rival, Liu Shaoqi, the president of China, and Lin’s supporters over as well as policy issues. Its rhetoric declared a war on all “aCdemic authorities,” accusing them of opposing socialism, and representing ideas and culture of the bourgeois and exploiting classes. In the arsenal of weapons supporting Mao’s Cultural Revolution, citizens loyal to Mao used big-character posters, public debates, criticism, and denunciation.

The response to Mao’s call was swift. On May 25, 1966, instructed by the Maoist radical faction at the top, Nie Yanzui, the Party branch secretary of the Philosophy Department of Peking University and six colleagues put up a big-character poster accusing the university authority of misleading the Cultural Revolution on campus. Four days later on May 29, a group of students from senior cadre families in the Qingshui University Middle School formed a Red Guard organization in rebellion against their teachers and administrators. Within days, several other middle schools in Beijing had their Red Guard groups established. On June 1, at 8 p.m., the central radio station, through its nationwide network, broadcast Nie’s poster. The People’s Daily published the poster with a commentary the following day. The Cultural Revolution began in earnest, causing chaos in schools. Mao was away from Beijing for about fifty days during this period. In his absence, the central government under Liu Shaoqi sent its work teams in the universities and middle schools in Beijing trying to dissolve the rebel groups. Liu had been clueless that Mao’s Cultural Revolution had him as its target and intended these rebels as its shock force. In his letter to the Red Guards of the Qingshui University Middle School dated August 1, 1966, Mao openly stated “to rebel against reactionaries is correct. I want to extend to you warm support.” With Mao’s endorsement, Red Guard organizations spread nationwide. Red Guards in middle schools, formed by those from senior cadre and working class families, became the dominant force in the Chairman’s rebellion against the Party establishment he had once encouraged and now wished to destroy.

In August and September 1966, “red terror” seized China. The Red Guards attacked the “enemies of the people”—Party government cadres classified as “capitalist robbers,” teachers, artists, writers, intellectuals, former capitalists, landlords, the so-called rightists who were labeled for their open criticism of the Party in 1957, and others labeled as hooligans and common people. The Red Guards went searching their houses and confiscating their property. Violence, bloodshed, killing, and suicide occurred. The Maoist Cultural Revolution authorities sanctioned or even directed the Red Guards’ violence. Particularly noticeable was the violence of female Red Guards. The Red Guard educator was beheaded to death at the hands of female Red Guards of the elite Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Teachers University on August 5, 1966. These female Red Guards tortured Bian Zhongyuan, the vice principal, and other administrators for three hours. Bian died soon after. Although notified of this incident that same day, the Beijing and Central authorities did nothing. Instead, they praised the rapidly spreading Red Guard movement.

On August 18, 1966, Mao gave his now famous “audience” to the thousands of Red Guards on Tiananmen Square. On the rostrum of the Tiananmen, Song Binbin, the head of the Red Guards from Bian Zhongyuan’s school, presented a Red Guard armband to the Chairman. Mao asked her name, and when told that her name meant gentle and cultured, he remarked: “you want to be militant (taixiao)? So Song changed her name to Xiaowu.” The next day, the Red Guards of Beijing middle schools embarked on their destruction of the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits), changing street names and shop signs to conform to this new revolution. They smashed religious statues, destroyed temples and traditional architecture, and burned books. With the slogan “to rebel is justified,” the Red Guards traveled nationwide, “igniting the fires of revolution” in urban and rural areas, including Tibet and other ethnic minority regions.

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In addition, contrary to the glorious image portrayed by the Party, the peasants were uncooperative and motivated by practical, but not ideological concerns. Class struggle was not their priority. As much as they approved of the new social order, they did so from a practical standpoint. Other pressing issues, such as food shortages and health problems plagued the student efforts. Among the local administration and the military and state farms, serious corruption, abuses of power, and the sexual harassment and rape of female students, existed widely. An investigation conducted for "proving that the Red Guards are not serious" for the years 1969-1973 showed 23,000 documented cases of abuse of educated youths, of which seventy percent were rapes. What  Furthermore, the violence against youths was the Li Biano Incident of 1971. Shortly after his death in a plane crash while trying to flee China, Lin was publicly accused of plotting a coup against Mao and his former supporters were purged. This made many young losing confidence in the political system.

The Chinese peasants might have appeared to the youths as ignorant, or cunning and selfish, but they had a vitality and inner strength that sustained them in their survival, regardless of politics. As much as the Party and the state pushed the "struggle against class enemies," they understood that this struggle would create a vacuum in rural and urban areas. The peasants, who were the backbone of the revolution, had a different perspective. They were farmers, struggling against poverty and, to some extent, class struggle, as well as against the Party and its policies and capitalism. Yet they persisted stubbornly in their own moral and family values. When the Cultural Revolution destroyed books and intellectuals became criminals, the peasants maintained their respect for those who had once been their teachers. For villagers, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style." It was once said that in China, "education is the thing that never goes out of style.

When sent down to live among the ethnic minorities, the youths from the dominant Han Chinese majority believed that they should  "destroy" the "politicized" ethnic peoples. However, the Han youths who were sent to Inner Mongolia concluded that the Mongols and their every-day resistance to the Han government prohibition of Mongolian culture (the "reeducation") were too "soft" and that the "politicized" ethnic consciousness and made them identify with the Mongols.

Zhang Manling, in her story "There Exists A Beautiful Place" which was subsequently made into the film "Sacred Youth," tells the story of a female educated youth, Li Chunj, who was sent to a Dai ethnic minority village in Yunnan where the author herself had been living. Sent among the Dai people, the protagonist discovered how the Dai culture was different from the Han culture. In the Han culture, sexuality and contact between the sexes was supposed, romantic love was bourgeois, and the sense of beauty distorted, in the Dai culture, women were proud of their femininity and sexuality. They dressed in traditional clothes and were free to be themselves. The Dai were signs of the Dai courtship customs. The protagonist's own gender consciousness was awakened by this. This new woman wore Dai dress, learned to speak the Dai language, and tried to be one of them. Eventually, she left the village to go to a university. Although the story is fictional, this discovery of the inner self and gender consciousness was experienced by many educated youths. From the common people with their "valiant" campaigns, the educated youth became "normal" and led them toward the Western concepts of democracy and basic human rights.

More fundamentally, the transformation came about because of their own desire. Dewi H. said that these "children of Mao" learned to love the country. The large body of reminiscences by former youths written in the post-Mao decade dwells on one major theme—how, from peasant through rural life, these "children of Mao" learned to love the country. No longer satisfied with class struggle, class hatred, or self-negation, they described themselves as discovering basic human values, empathy, and compassion for others and for one's self. They became aware of their true, genuine selves, and the hard reality that the revolution could not change the world, at least one could change his or her own life.

Resistance to the Cultural Revolution finally came into the open in April 1976. Around the Chinese traditional Qingming Festival that commemorates those who have passed away, a crowd gathered in the Tiananmen Square to mark the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, the opponent of the Gang of Four. Among them were former Red Guards and educated youths. In the midst of speeches and poems, some called "China belonged to the Chinese people," "we don't have to follow the revolution," he learned that following for one's self meant taking responsibility for one's own life, learning to labor, to create, and to be in control.
POST-MAO

Two years after Mao’s death in 1978, the Communist leadership under Deng Xiaoping decided on reform and relaxation of political and cultural control. Another wave of the pro-democracy movement arose through the forum of the Democracy Wall (late 1978–early 1979) when the former Red Guards posted poems for literary freedom and political essays on democracy. Around the same time, those educated youths still on the farms in Yunnan staged a major strike and organized a petition movement, which spread all over China, and contributed to the end of rustication in 1980.32 In post-Mao China, the former Red Guard-educated youths kept a collective identity, and have been a forceful support for post-Mao reform. Some became involved in devising 1980s rural economic policies and in film and art projects portraying rural China and ethnic minorities. They have a major voice in examining the Maoist era through reminiscences, research, and mass media.33 As its rhetoric claimed, the Cultural Revolution would touch people “to their very souls.” These “children of Mao” had truly undergone a revolution of the soul, though not the revolution the Chairman had envisioned in May of 1966.31

NOTES

2. Yan and Gao, Turbulent Decade, chaps. 3, 4, 5, and 6.
5. Yan and Gao, 88–89; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 110.
7. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference," in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang ed., Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 40–46.
13. Mi Hedu, Hong weibing zhuyi (The Red Guard Generation) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1993), 113-115.
17. In addition to Jiang Qing, the other three were Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan.
21. Liu, 304.
25. Song, 326.
31. Yan and Gao, 88–89; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 110.

I would like to thank my colleague, Prof. Judith P. Zinner, for her careful editorial work and comments. Thanks are also due to the two referees for their helpful suggestions, and to the editor of EAA, Lucien Ellington, whose advice helped in the writing and revision of this paper.

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