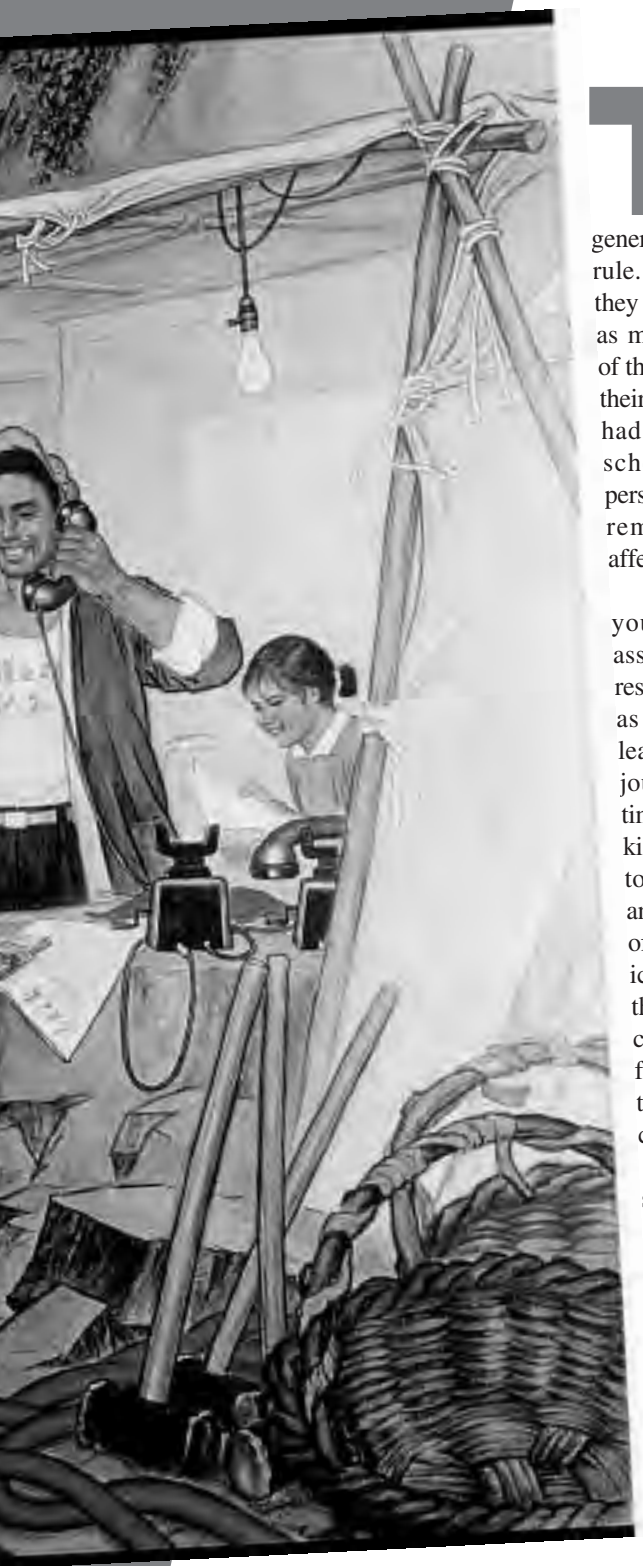
THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Teaching About the Urban Youth Generation

By Jennifer Eagleton

The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was a phenomenon that greatly affected the Chinese world. For several years the country was torn apart and turned upside down. It was launched by Mao Zedong, in his power struggle against Liu Shaoqi, in order to firmly entrench his view that ideology, rather than materialism, was the way to lead the country forward.[1] During this period of chaos, vast numbers of Chinese youth left the cities to work in the state farms and villages of the countryside.



From a Chinese propaganda poster, early 1960s, showing a group of young people signing up for a work detail. From the collection of Raymond Hung, used with permission.

These young people, known as Urban or Educated Youth, were the fruit of the revolution, the first generation to grow up under communist rule. By the time they were teenagers they were Red Guards, literally, as well as metaphorically, smashing all traces of the old society. By their mid-twenties their vision of a possible socialist utopia had almost disappeared, and as the scheme was dismantled they dispersed—some back to the cities, some remaining behind—but each was affected in some way.[2]

In recent years a collective urban youth identity has sprung up, and associations, conferences, and even restaurants have been opened with this as their theme. Those with literary leanings wrote of the psychological journey that they undertook at that time and their writings appear to be a kind of group biography, an attempt to make sense of their experience, and reveal a need to tell the real truth of their youth. In part this is a historical record for the next generation, the children of the reform era who can barely conceive the sacrifices of a time when everything one did had political consequences.

This generation can be said to be a living metaphor for the changes in the Chinese State since the founding of the People's Republic, where a society characterized by extreme ideology gave way to a socialist market economy marked by the renunciation of political dogma and the adoption of rampant consumerism. "For those of us who have gone through the Cultural Revolution, I am afraid that we have been marked for life. From now on, no matter what we do, what we write, will bear the stamp of our past"[3] is a common refrain from those who suffered through those years. Approaching middle age, these former Urban Youth now occupy prominent places in Chinese society. Some hold positions in government, some in education and business. A number have achieved success, while others are the newly dispossessed, laid-off from the crumbling state sector.

The story of this group of young people therefore presents an interesting way for teachers to deal with the delicate and complex topic of the Cultural Revolution, an event still arousing strong emotions even today, and to discuss its possible impact on China's future. Teachers would most likely find that this theme lends itself to the history curriculum, either used in the context of the Cultural Revolution as a whole, or as a self-contained unit, focusing on the impact of ideology during political movements on one particular group of people and its lingering legacy. This topic effectively draws history and politics together around a central theme, while also linking some universal concerns of youth. Perhaps most fascinating of all is the psychological impact of ideology on growing up. These young people are an ideal subject for junior and senior high school students who would be a similar age to the *lao sanjie* (the three senior graduating middle school classes of 1966, 1967 and 1968) who were among those sent to the countryside (or rusticated) as part of Mao's program.

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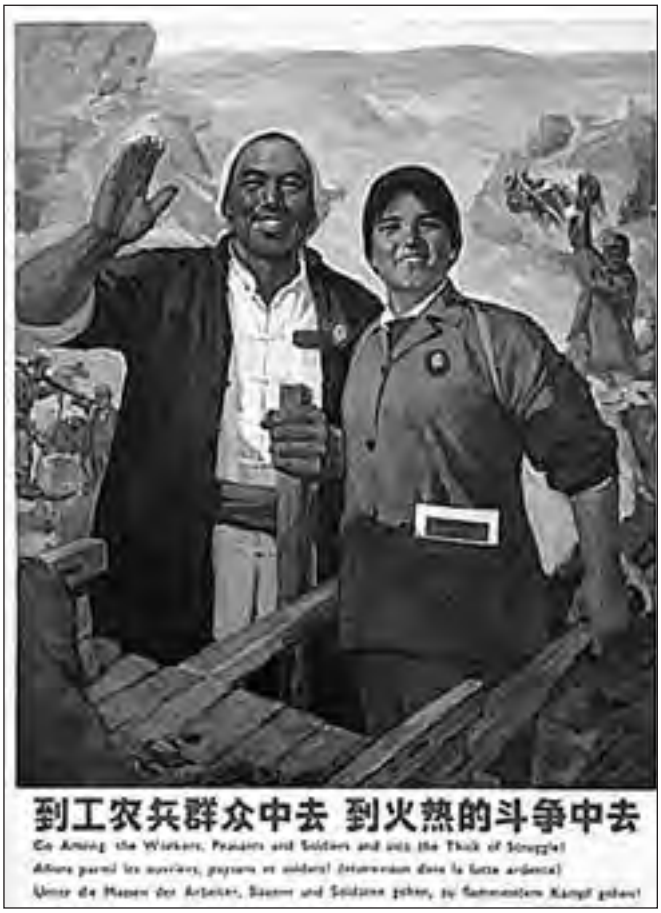
OVERVIEW OF THE RUSTICATION PROGRAM

Sending urban secondary school graduates to work in the countryside had been a practice since the 1950s.[4] Called going "up to the mountains and down to the villages," this concept of those with little education re-educating the educated was first practiced on a limited scale before the Great Leap Forward, then reintroduced in the early 1960s. It accelerated sharply in 1968 toward the end of the Cultural Revolution.[5] Overpopulation and unemployment in the cities became more severe, and sending urban youths to the countryside was considered an effective solution. The Red Guard movement had subsided by 1968, but the Communist Party feared that they would be reactivated again. The party's view was that relocating these young people was a quick way of reducing potential social problems.

But publicly, they put an ideological spin on their course of action. The young people were told to show their "red heart" by going to the countryside to learn from the peasants. Many actually did think that by going they would perform a revolutionary act. But for others it was a chance to escape awkward personal situations at home, like parents under political investigation. It was also a chance for them to overcome a dubious family background (i.e., a non-peasant heritage). The campaigns to "join up" also appealed to things dear to youth and played on their fears: patriotic feelings, peer pressure, and a chance for travel and adventure. Those who were tardy in participating were the recipients of "Thought Work," while gongs and drums were extensively used in front of households until they relented.[6]



Go Among the Workers, Peasants and Soldiers, and Into the Thick of Struggle!

This poster was printed for the foreign market. The caption on the poster is printed in Chinese, English, French and German.
Designer unknown, c.1967–1972

Postcards of this poster, and others as well, can be purchased on the Web site of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/chairman/chnintro2.html

This postcard is from the collection of Willa Davis-Held.

During the Cultural Revolution these young people went through a classic rite-of-passage experience: they left city homes for the unknown, suffered and labored in the countryside, and they returned, older and wiser. This naturally divides into three separate units—Unit 1: Departure; Unit 2: Testing; and Unit 3: Return. It would seem that comparison, role-plays, discussions and writing assignments would be among the most appropriate techniques for use in the classroom. As well, the growing collection of material in English detailing the Urban Youth story by the former participants themselves adds more of a personal dimension in the study of this time when revolutionary experiences were exchanged. A list of background reading about the Cultural Revolution is provided for teachers at the conclusion of this article.

MAO'S 1968 DIRECTIVE ON THE RUSTICATION PROGRAM

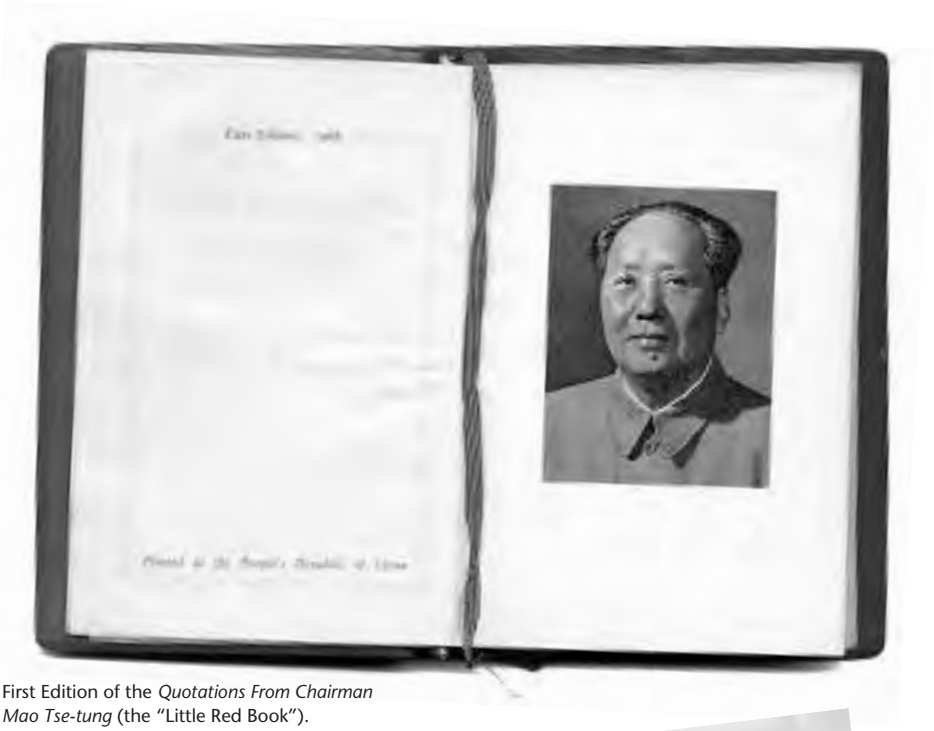
It is very necessary for educated youths to go to the countryside and learn from poor and lower-middle-class peasants. We must persuade urban cadres and others to send their sons and daughters to the countryside after they graduate from junior high and university, to bring about a mobilization. All comrades in the villages should welcome them.

UNIT 1
DEPARTURE

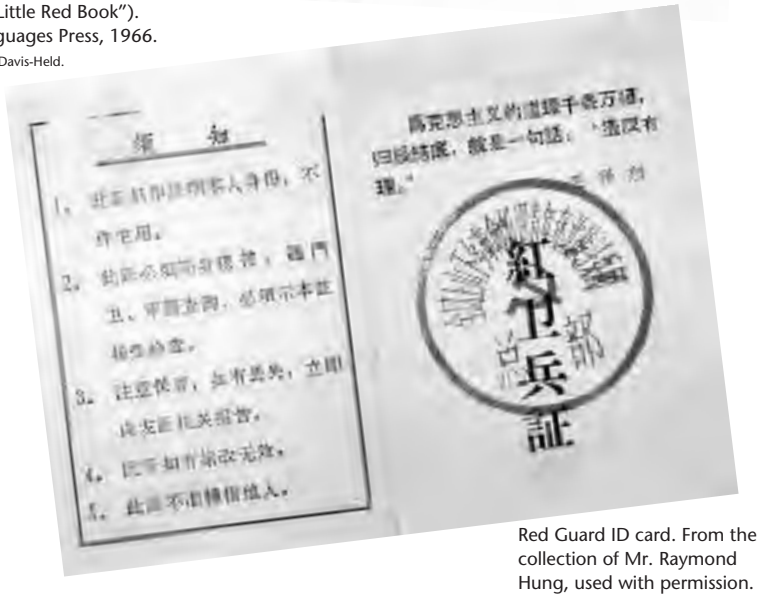
These days, the use of primary source materials is encouraged by educational authorities.[7] Unit 1 in particular benefits from using these kinds of materials. There are many ways that this could be done; this is just a guide.

1. Focusing on the things that these young people would be taught at school in preparation for their departure enables students to get a real feeling of what it would be like to be educated at that time. After teaching certain slogans and dogma, teachers should let the students make up their own slogans and propaganda posters. There are a number of sites on the Internet that show these as well as other Cultural Revolution memorabilia (see bibliography).
2. After looking at a number of these materials, the next step could be to read the directive that Mao gave in 1968 that launched this revamped phase of the Rustication program:

   It is very necessary for educated youths to go to the countryside and learn from poor and lower-middle-class peasants. We must persuade urban cadres and others to send their sons and daughters to the countryside after they graduate from junior high and university, to bring about a mobilization. All comrades in the villages should welcome them.[8]
3. Next, students can discuss the following questions:
   A. After looking at the material these young people had to study daily, how would you react to Mao's statement? Consider this in the light of your family background (a) as a peasant, and (b) as an intellectual.
   B. Why do you think that these things would appeal to the young people of that time?
   C. Pretend that you were a student at the time of the Cultural Revolution, and that you are reluctant about leaving the city (for example, your parents are sick). How would you feel if all your friends were leaving? What would you do?



First Edition of the *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (the "Little Red Book"). Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966.
From the collection of Willa Davis-Held.



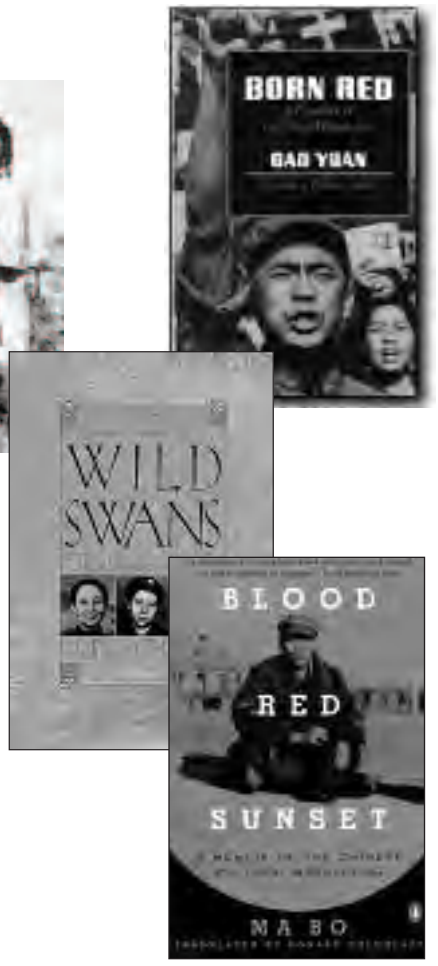
Red Guard ID card. From the collection of Mr. Raymond Hung, used with permission.

Other activities: Read propaganda pieces like *The Journey*, which was written to persuade youth to go to the countryside. This story deals with the excitement and preparation for departure.[9] Get students to read this now, and then at the end of Unit 2.

Another well-known story of this time, *Yenan Seeds*, emphasizes the role of the urban youth as successors of the Long March, and the challenges they faced as the new revolutionary vanguard.[10] The official media campaign also included numerous writings by urban youth aimed at encouraging younger siblings to volunteer. Students should write a story, or a letter to a sibling designed to make others join up.[11]

Finally, this section can conclude by comparing the present with 1960s China. The teacher can lead the discussion. These questions should be put to students:

- *Were the urban youth of the late 1960s and early 1970s more idealistic than the teenagers of today?*
- *Do you have ideals?*
- *Do you ever feel manipulated?*



"The Iron Women of Yesterday—What Are They Like Today?" From "Old Photographs of Educated Youth," Baihua Art and Literature Press. From the collection of Raymond Hung, used with permission.

UNIT 2
TESTING

This unit can concentrate on the impact of reality on idealism, and the nature of truth. Since the full story was revealed only after the Cultural Revolution was over, this section is based mainly on memoirs of the period, which have proliferated in the 1990s. Examples of this genre include *Blood Red Sunset*, *Born Red*, *The Red Mirror*, and *Wild Swans*. For a further selection, see the bibliography.

These works usually deal with arrival at the farms, communes and villages. Most express shock at the poverty and backbreaking labor encountered and the surliness of the peasants. At first it was not Mao who was blamed for the hardships these youths faced, but those under him. Only much later did they realize that their idealism and enthusiasm were manipulated by the great leader himself. The young people generally experienced a loss of hope, feelings of abandonment, and a sense of being deceived, which served to create feelings of confusion and betrayal.

Students should read one or two of these memoirs and write a book report on them. Then each memoir could be read in class, and the teacher can lead a discussion using the following:

1. What are ideals? How would you feel if your ideals suddenly were proved misguided? How would you react? Is it good to have ideals?
2. Is it possible to recapture idealism once it is lost? Do we become less idealistic as we get older? Why?
3. Read the story *The Journey* again (or other propaganda-type literature that has been read before). How do you feel after studying these memoirs?
4. Despite these difficult situations, some of the Urban Youth saw good things come out of their experience. Cite some examples from the readings.

Ask students to read fiction like *Land of Wonder and Mystery* which recalls the closeness that the Urban Youth experienced with their peers.[12] Discuss whether this kind of nostalgia is common to those who have lived through war and similar trials. Talk about reunions (why have them?). Have you ever been to a reunion? Ask students to talk about their grandparents' feelings about war reunions and Veterans Day.

UNIT 3
RETURN

This unit builds on the previous two units. Teachers should discuss with their students the effect of the past on the present and its possible impact in the future. With the end of rustication (it was gradually de-emphasized and finally abandoned with the death of Mao and the ascent of Deng Xiaoping), Urban Youth dispersed to various parts of China.

1. Ask students to recall something that had happened to them a long time ago. How did they think at the time, and have these feelings changed over time?
2. The Urban Youth have repeatedly said they feel that they have missed a stage in life—that is, the adolescent period, a time that is usually free of the responsibilities of adulthood.[13] Most feel they have difficulties with personal relationships. "The Right to Love" and "The Wasted Years" deal with such themes and the sense that time has been lost.[14] Students could write a story about relationships from the viewpoint of an Urban Youth two decades after the end of the Cultural Revolution.
3. Twenty years on, many of the Urban Youth are still confronting and trying to come to terms with decisions made in their youth. Students should read stories like "The Wages of Sin," which deals with the return of a child of Urban Youth parents who was left behind in the countryside, and his impact on his father's present life. Another story, "Cruelty" explores what is meant by sacrifice and how survivors feel guilty about the hardships suffered by those who have saved them.[15] Discuss guilt. How can it be overcome?
4. Discuss/write a report about the position of former Urban Youth in the 1990s. What problems do you think they may have (lack of education, first to be laid off from state factories)? See if you can list other groups of people in the world today (e.g., refugees) who may have similar problems.
5. Do you think that they pose problems for the Chinese government today? Discuss cynicism about political ideologies; lack of respect for authority.
6. Could the experience of being a Red Guard be related to the new enthusiasm for making money? Is it because they may have few ideals left? Can money replace a set of beliefs?

The most constructive way of teaching about this, if possible, is for a Chinese person who went through this experience to visit and talk to the class. Local Chinese community organizations should be able to locate such a speaker.

CONCLUSION

Because the Urban Youth grew up in one of the most violent times in China's recent history, their attitudes, feelings and thoughts over the course of time are historically significant. The Urban Youth were unique, trained from birth to "fight revolution." They were participants in a unique social experiment which failed, while eventually witnessing the reform and opening up of their country in the 1980s. This is a complex topic, much simplified here, but much can be learned from studying this group, not only from a historical perspective, but from the social and psychological points of view as well. ■

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NOTES

1. See Lin Biao, "Why a Cultural Revolution?" from Lin Biao's talk at the Central Work Conference, October 25, 1966, translated and quoted from Michael Schoenhals, editor, *China's Cultural Revolution: 1966–1969, Not a Dinner Party* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996, 9–26). This is a collection of primary documents from public and classified sources. There is an introduction to each document, which makes this book ideal for teachers. See also Roderick MacFarquar's *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (3 volumes), listed in the bibliography.
2. There are no accurate estimates of how many remained behind, but those who married locals and occupied cadre positions were often not allowed to leave.
3. Shi Tiesheng in a letter to the author, quoted in *Morning Sun, Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* by Laifong Leung (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994, Introduction, xxx). This book is useful for teachers as it contains an introduction, numerous appendices, political terms, and bibliography.
4. See the Introduction to Thomas P. Bernstein's *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Rural Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1977).
5. According to aggregate statistics released by the Chinese Government, 1.2 million educated youth were sent to the countryside between 1956 and 1966, while 12 million were sent between 1968 and 1975. See Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages,* p. 2.
6. See Bernstein, pp. 90–93. Some of this "thought work" involved members of the local residence committee dropping in on the household for a "heart-to-heart" chat. Parents were also threatened with job loss if they could not persuade their sons and daughters to do agricultural labor.
7. See Schoenhals, *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969, Not a Dinner Party* and Peter J. Seybolt, *The Rustication of Urban Youth in China* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1977). The latter work has useful translations of primary source documents concerning the aims and process of the rustication program.
8. Guo Xianhong, *The Journey* was first published in *Shanghai Literature* in 1973; selection was translated in *Renditions* No. 50, Autumn 1998, 10–17.
9. See also *Renditions*, No. 50, Autumn, 1998.
10. Hua Tong in *Yenan Seeds and Other Stories* (Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1976).
11. See poems and letters in *Renditions* No. 50, Autumn, 1998, 18–24.
12. Liang Xiangsheng in *Chinese Literature 5* (1983).
13. See *Morning Sun*, Laifong Leung.
14. Both are by Zhang Kangkang. "The Right to Love" is included in *One Half of the Sky: Selections from Contemporary Women Writers of China* (London: William Heinmann, 1987, 51–81). "The Wasted Years" is in *Chinese Literature* 3 (1982) 5–19.
15. Ye Xin, "The Wages of Sin" in *Renditions* No. 50, Autumn, 1998, 109–124 and "Cruelty," by Zhang Kangkang in *Renditions* No. 49, Spring 1998, 115–152.

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MEMOIRS AND FICTION

See *Chinese Literature from 1966 to the Early 1970s*. This quarterly of short stories by Chinese Literature Press, Beijing, demonstrates the political line over time.

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ELECTRONIC SOURCES ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The first two sites are the best dealing with this topic:

1. Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution
   www.cnd.org./CR
   This site has numerous links, including Cultural Revolution posters, memorabilia, personal narratives, and photographs.
2. Online Center for Cultural Revolution Studies
   www.lib.ohio-state.edu/OSU_profile/eacweb/default.htm
   This site is based at the China Collection at Ohio State University Library. It has an extensive bibliography of Cultural Revolution literature, as well as chronologies, posters and essays.
3. Artifacts from the Cultural Revolution
   www.culturalbridge.com/cnadd.htm
   Little red books, stamps, children's songs, badges, etc. Very useful to get the feel of the period.
4. Other sites exist, but don't deal exclusively with the Cultural Revolution:
   www.chinabig.com
   An E-journal run by the Chinese Community Forum in the United States dealing with issues of interest to the Chinese community. Subjects such as the Cultural Revolution often appear in the discussions.
   www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/ 20chin.htm
   This site describes a recent reunion of Urban Youth in Southwest China.