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Articles

I

Perspectives of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution:
A Historiographic Survey
By Matthew E. Kowalski



Between the years 1966-69, Communist China experienced one of the greatest periods of social and political upheaval in its history. In assessing the meaning of Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, historians and political scientists have argued from several different viewpoints. One facet of the Cultural Revolution that has proved particularly controversial is the role of the Red Guard movement in the shaping of political events. During the late sixties and early seventies, many 'China Watchers' and academics saw the Red Guard movement as a shining example of 'people power' and student agency. These scholars tended to regard the events in China as being linked to the global student protest movement of the Vietnam-war era. As China began to open itself up to the outside world during the 1980's, however, a new generation of historians took a more negative view of the Red Guards and the aims of their anti-authoritarian campaign. The new literature on the topic, written by both professional scholars and survivors of the Cultural Revolution, has characterized the Red Guards as the 'lost generation' of Chinese politics.

Most the early works dealing with the Red Guard movement are largely the product of educated inferences. With China's almost complete isolation from the Western world during the sixties, hard information on events occurring in the PRC was difficult to obtain. It was left to so-called 'China Watchers' to try and piece together the meaning of events from the information made available through official sources such as the *People's Daily*. These scholars generally took the view that the Red Guard was simply an instrument used by Mao and his supporters to purge those elements within the Communist Party that they considered 'revisionist.'

One of the first Western works that explored the Red Guard movement was Juliana Pennington Heaslet's 'The Red Guard's: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution.' Heaslet argues that, "the Red Guard movement grew out of Chairman Mao Tse-ung and Minister of Defense Lin Piao's need to create a powerful new body of political supporters to purge the Communist Party from without."¹ She supports

¹ Heaslet, Juliana Pennington, 'The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution.' *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 12, The Cultural Revolution and its Aftermath {Dec, 1972.} pg 1032.

this claim by citing earlier instances of Party-directed 'mass campaigns.' Her work also stresses the importance of the intense period of indoctrination that China's youth went through during their schooling.

Although Heaslet argues that the Red Guards were a creation of the Maoist faction Communist Party, her work contends that they were only useful in the role of Mao's troublemakers. She states that, "the strength of the Red Guards to serve their political masters rested in their ability to destroy."² After the Red Guard had succeeded in unseating the Party bureaucracy they lacked the administrative expertise and organizational control to assume the task constructing new forms of government. Heaslet considers this weakness to be a byproduct of Mao's inability to control the course of the movement. In her opinion, Mao conceived the Red Guards as a select group of young radicals who would serve as his factions troublemakers in spearheading political assaults in Peking and the provinces.³ As the ranks of Red Guards expanded into a mass movement, however, they lost their organizational structure and the movement began to suffer from internal infighting.

W Richard and Amy A Wilson's 1970 article, 'The Red Guard and the World Student Movement' also characterize the Red Guard movement as an instrument of the Maoist Party leadership. Their piece warns against the tendency of several Western scholars to lump the Red Guard movement with the other student protest movements. From their perspective; these scholars are guilty of oversimplifying a highly diverse societal phenomenon. They argue that the global youth movement is, "clearly a many faceted phenomenon, differing in many parts of the world both in content and implications for particular societies."⁴

The conclusion that Richard and Wilson reach is that the Red Guards' anti-authoritarian campaign was carried out under the guise of authority. For all of the Red Guard rhetoric against conformity, they argue that one of the movement's key features was its conformity to Maoist principles. This point is clearly stated in their observation that, "at no time did one sense that any significant body of Chinese youth was in flat rebellion against the basic principles of communist society or Mao Zedong Thought."⁵ Indeed, those authority figures that were attacked by the Red Guard were members of the non-Maoist faction of the Communist Party.

In Hans Granqvist's *The Red Guard: A Report on Mao's Revolution*, this view of a revolution directed from above is challenged. Granqvist, a veteran 'China Watcher' with years of experience working for Scandinavian newspapers in Hong Kong, argues that the Red Guards were not created by the order of Party leaders.⁶ Instead, he contends that the Red Guards developed as a grass-roots student movement within the universities. These students were influenced by the writings of Chairman Mao and shared the same goals, but they developed independently from Party supervision. He cites the importance

² *Ibid.* pg 1046.

³ *Ibid.* pg 1035.

⁴ W. Richard & Wilson, A Amy, 'The Red Guards and the World Student Movement.' *The China Quarterly*. No. 42{April-June 1970} pg. 88.

⁵ *Ibid.* pg 101.

⁶ Granqvist, Hans. *The Red Guard: A Report on Mao's Revolution*. New York: Fredrick, Praeger Publishers, 1967. Pg. 87.

of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and continuing legacy of traditional Mandarin practices within the Chinese educational system as evidence to support his thesis.

His thesis argues that Chinese students had been thoroughly preconditioned to radical anti-intellectualism during the attacks of 'rightist' during the Hundred Flowers Movement. In addition, he contends that the youth of China had become disenchanting with the pervasive influences of the traditional aspects of the Chinese higher education. Granqvist states that, "among the students the efforts of the Communist regime to eradicate the old attitude holding that intellectuals constituted an upper-class had backfired."⁷ He further argues that the emphasis placed on technical and bureaucratic training during the 1950's, created a situation where the elevated positions of the intellectual elites became more entrenched. Therefore, the Red Guard movement developed as a reaction to a legitimate case of intellectual elitism.

K.S.Karol's *The Second Chinese Revolution*, also argues that the Red Guard movement represented a form of legitimate student protest. Karol bases his work on first hand experience gained during two trips to the PRC in late sixties and early seventies. In his work, he criticizes the mainstream Western scholarship on the GPRC for being one-sided and poorly documented.⁸ Dismissing the notion that the Red Guards were created by the Maoist faction of the party, Karol contends that the students were the logical group within Chinese society to mobilize against reactionary tendencies. Like Granqvist, Karol points to the lingering influences of traditional educational practices. He states that, "the Red Guards demanded above all that young people should be freed from this 'slavery' and allow learning in the school of society."⁹

According to Karol, the violent aspects of the Red Guard movement lay in its ultimate incorporation into state run institutions. His argues that the momentum and revolutionary élan of once independent youth movement was 'high-jacked' by politicians to serve their own ends. He considers the People's Liberation Army's decision to provide the students with military training in 1967 was means of incorporating the youth movement in the inner Party struggle between Mao and the supporters of Liu Shaoqi. The student movement began to devolve into a toy in the hands of ambitious leaders and notably of hidden protectors in very high positions.¹⁰

Probably the most sympathetic account of the Red Guards can be found in Jean Esmein's *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*. A French Marxist historian, Esmein is a good example of the left-wing scholars of the early seventies. Influenced by the contemporary trend towards student activism, Esmein is openly sympathetic to the aims of both Mao and the Red Guard movement. He concludes that the Red Guard movement did represent a case of student agency. Although he stresses Mao's role in energizing the Red Guard movement, he argues that the students took it upon themselves to destroy what were described as the 'Four Olds.'¹¹ Whereas the peasantry was the vanguard of the first phase of the revolution, the students would be the decisive element of societal change during Mao's drive against bureaucratization. In essence, Mao placed his confidence in the youth to overturn society and purge the establishment of revisionist tendencies.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg.76.

⁸ Karol, K.S., *The Second Chinese Revolution*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1973. pg 5.

⁹ *Ibid*, pg 199.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. pg 263.

¹¹ Esmein, Jean. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973. pg 107.

An interesting facet of Esmein's thesis is the attention he pays to the Red Guards role in Mao and Lin Biao's plans for China's civil defense. Esmein makes the point of stating that China was a nation threatened by the two most powerful military powers in the world, the United States and the USSR. The ongoing conflict in Vietnam and the border clashes on the Amur River, made the threat of invasion even more real. Using the strategy of 'People's War' they he had applied during the years of struggle with the Kuomintang, Mao and Lin saw the military potential of the Red Guard as a reserve army in the case of a foreign invasion.¹² Correspondingly, the ranks of the Red Guards could provide the Peoples Liberation Army with a core of ideologically reliable leaders following Lin's purge of the non-Maoist officers during the mid-sixties.

Another sympathetic account of the Red Guards can be found in Victor Nee's *The Cultural Revolution at Peking University*. A case study of the early phases of the Cultural Revolution on the campus of Peking University, or Peita, the work is written from a clearly pro-Maoist perspective. Nee argues that the Red Guard movement in Peking developed as a reaction to the increasingly elitist structure of the Chinese educational system. He supports his thesis by a detailed examination of the Chinese education during the years of Li Shaoqi's premiership, which he considers a blend of the traditional Chinese and the Soviet model. According to Nee, "as a result of the emphasis on a technical education, the system favored competitive, research-oriented intellectuals who largely came from bourgeois backgrounds."¹³

Nee concludes that this shift from a socialist-oriented system reflected the increasingly bureaucratic structure of the Communist Party. A new aristocracy was beginning to be created within the Communist Party, as the children of the party nomenclature were given substantial advantages over the children of proletarian or peasant backgrounds. This new social hierarchy was to be reinforced during the years of higher education, as the children of the party elites would be taught the skills needed to take over the reins of government. For those coming from lower social ranks, their education would train them in the skills of lower-level technicians and engineers needed to staff modernization projects.¹⁴ As a result, the Chinese educational system would preserve and strengthen class boundaries rather than eliminate them. In Nee's view, Mao's campaign anti-bureaucratic campaign was a means of allowing students to redress these social divisions and prevent the creation of a Soviet style 'hereditary' Party elite.

Many of the ideas stressed in Nee's work can also be found in Neale Hunter's *Shanghai Journal*. Whereas Nee restricted his exploration to a single university campus, Hunter focuses his exploration on the Red Guard movement in Shanghai during the years 1966-67. Hunter argues that the Red Guard activity in Shanghai constituted an actual political revolution, 'a battle for real power at every social level.'¹⁵ It gave the Chinese youth their first real taste of political responsibility after years of rule from a Party bureaucracy that had lost its revolutionary élan. In addition, he argues that it opened up the Chinese educational system, which had never really been thoroughly reformed after the revolution of 1949. The intelligentsia had continued to hold on to the elitist practices

¹² *Ibid.* pg 74.

¹³ Nee, Victor. *The Cultural Revolution at Peking University*. New York: The Monthly Review Press, 1969. pg. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg38.

¹⁵ Hunter, Neale. *Shanghai Journal*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969. pg. 292.

of the old Manchu system. It had, much like the Communist party, developed bourgeois tendencies during the years of Sovietization following the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

Hunter's account of the events in Shanghai from 1966-67, however, is not a completely positive portrayal of the Red Guards. He makes it clear that the violence and eventual infighting between rival Red Guard factions and the workers ultimately sidetracked the movement. His statement that, "most of the Red Guards, whether students or workers, were completely unprepared for the intensity of the battle and for the responsibilities that came with victory"¹⁶, admits to the failure of the movement to achieve a lasting victory. Hunter's opinion is that the movement lost its focus and consequently destroyed itself.

This first acknowledgement of the negative aspects of the Red Guard movement was a sign of things to come. Most of the latest works dealing with the Red Guards have taken a negative view of their anti-authoritarian campaign. These scholars consider the Cultural Revolution to have been a disaster on an unprecedented scale. They describe it as a failed social experiment imposed from above, that China is still attempting to come to grips with. Goa Yuan probably puts it best in his work *Born Red* with the statement, "individual Chinese will bear for life the social wounds that will not heal in a generation."¹⁷

One of the major themes that has been explored in these revisionist accounts is the diversity within the Red Guard movement. Whereas most of the earlier works on the subject tended to view the Red Guards as a 'monolithic' movement, the latest scholarship has stressed the ideological and social distinctions between different Red Guard factions. An early work dealing with this issue of Red Guard diversity is William Hinton's *Hundred Flowers War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University*. Although written from a Marxist perspective, this case study takes a sober view of the Red Guard movement's ability to effect change.

Hinton's work explores the fracturing of the Red Guards into two separate camps during the course of the Cultural Revolution. There were students who from the start rebelled against the administration and the Work Teams, and there were those students who were critical of the privileged but defended their rights.¹⁸ He argues that this conflict between the 'ultra-left' and more moderate students limited the success of the Red Guard movement and created a situation akin to a mini-civil war.

Hinton tends to reserve most of his criticism for the 'ultra-left' students. He argues that the tendency for many radical Red Guards to consider their faction 'as the only real revolutionaries' to have been counterproductive during their struggle with the establishment. In an ironic twist of fate, those students who considered themselves the most 'anti-elitist' began to take on elitist tendencies associated with being part of a vanguard movement. His conclusion that, "this line of thinking leads to arrogance, isolation, and finally to crimes against the people with other ideas,"¹⁹ is presented as a warning for the student movements in the West.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 293.

¹⁷ Goa, Yuan. *Born Red*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987. pg.6.

¹⁸ Hinton, William. *Hundred Days War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972. pg 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pg.8.

Hong Yung Lee's 'The Radical Students in Kwantung during the Cultural Revolution', also explores the diversity of the various Red Guard factions. He concentrates his exploration on the social origins of radical Red Guard factions. His thesis challenges the notion that the Red Guard movement grew out of student concerns about educational elitism. Indeed, Lee concludes that the Chinese educational system was becoming less bourgeois during the course of the early 1960's. Basing his findings on quantitative data, Lee's research indicates between the years 1962-63 the number of university students coming from bourgeois backgrounds actually declined.²⁰

Lee further challenges the arguments found in the older literature by his assertion that students of bourgeois backgrounds generally joined the more 'radical' Red Guard groups. According to Lee, the prejudice these pupils encountered during their educational careers set them apart from the majority of the student population. During their schooling, they were always the first to be singled out for punishment because of their social backgrounds. Their social backgrounds were also a serious handicap in getting a position in the new Communist Party bureaucracy. One way to overcome this discrimination was to become ultra-active or ideologically correct in the Cultural Revolution following the prudent rule of "better to be on the left rather than to be right."²¹

An additional study of the social composition of the Red Guard movement is Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger's 'Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou.' Like Lee's work, they base their findings on quantitative data found in the Guangzhou {Canton} city archives.²² As a consequence of China's opening -up to the West, however, they also had the opportunity to interview several former Red Guards. Their research shows that the splits within the Red Guard movement usually reflected social divisions.

The children of high-ranking Party cadres tended to take on the leadership roles in the early Red Guard organizations. This was partially the result of the so-called 'blood line' theory. In essence, "these children were supposed to be the most revolutionary and so they felt it important to show more 'class hatred' than any of the other students."²³ The students of worker-peasant origins, however, generally were denied leadership positions within the Red Guard organizations because they were blocked by the children of the elite. As a consequence of this hierarchal elitism, they established rival groups that attempted to 'out Red, the Reds.' These splits within the ranks of the Red Guards usually led to violent exchanges, including the takeover of one organization's headquarters by a rival faction.

Another theme that has received considerable attention amongst revisionist scholars is the notion of the Red Guards as pawns in an inter-Party power struggle between Mao and his rivals. These works tended to concentrate on the idea that the youth of China had been manipulated from above. Therefore, much of the contemporary literature has placed particular emphasis on the power of the "Mao Cult" and the

²⁰ Lee, Hong Yung. 'Radical Students in Kwantung during the Cultural Revolution.' *The China Quarterly*. No. 64. {Dec. 1975.} pg. 675.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 679.

²² Chan, Anita, Rosen, Stanley, & Unger, Jonathan. 'Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou.' *The China Quarterly*. No.83. {Sept. 1980.} pg. 397.

²³ *Ibid.* pg. 430.

irrationality surrounding it. It documents how the Chinese masses were made to believe they were fighting against authority, while simultaneously worshipping Chairman Mao the supreme symbol of authority.

One of the newer works detailing the theme of the 'Mao Cult' is Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao's *Turbulent Decade*. A standard political history of the Cultural Revolution, written by two Chinese scholars, the *Turbulent Decade* is a good example of the revisionist literature that has appeared in the last few decades. For example, they do not confine the Cultural Revolution to the traditional chronological period of 1966-69. Instead they argue that it continued until the death of Mao in 1976. In addition, they revisit some of the earlier assumptions about the Red Guard movement. Their work places a particular amount of stress on the importance of the intense political indoctrination during the years before the Cultural Revolution.

Yan and Gao argue that the cult of personality surrounding Mao paved the way for the violent excesses committed by the Red Guards. This cult of personality was carefully cultivated by Mao and his political allies in preparation for another mass campaign directed against their enemies within the Communist Party. In their view, "Mao had engineered the Red Guard movement, hoping to correct the ills and deficiencies and to augment his dictatorial powers."²⁴ Therefore, during the Cultural Revolution the enthusiasm and idealism of the youth of China was exploited by the Maoist faction within the Party leadership. Jiaqi and Gao even go as far to compare the activities of the Red Guards in 1966 to the book burnings of Nazi student organizations in Berlin during the 1930's.²⁵

Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro's *Son of the Revolution* also explores this theme of exploited idealism. A memoir of Liang's childhood, it is written from the perspective of a victim of the Cultural Revolution. Coming from a 'bad family' background, Liang's family was forced to relocate to the countryside to 'learn from the peasantry.' His account highlights the negative aspects of the Red Guard Movement. In particular, his work focuses on the self-destructive aspects of the Red Guard movement. Like many of the children of his era, Liang was caught up in the excitement of the Cultural Revolution and desired to join the Red Guards. The irony of the situation, however, was that these youth were participating in a movement that would eventually pit them against their parents and each other.²⁶

The actions of Liang's older sister, Liang Fang, provides a good example of the societal conflicts created by the Cultural Revolution. A model Red Guard, Liang Fang was openly encouraged to attack the symbols of the old order. This brings her into conflict with her father, who voices moderation. At one point she accuses him of 'following the Revisionist line and refusing to change.'²⁷ Besides creating a generational conflict between Liang and her father, her dedication to the movement opens up conflict with students coming from other class backgrounds.

Gao Yuan's *Born Red* also explores the theme of the Red Guards as pawns in a wider political struggle. A former Red Guard, his work is a reflection of the mistakes that

²⁴ Yan, Jiaqi & Gao, Gao. *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution: A History of the Cultural Revolution*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1996. pg. 60.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pg 1.

²⁶ Liang, Heng & Shapiro, Judith. *Son of the Revolution*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff., 1983. pg 67.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg 71.

his generation made during the sixties. One of the major themes that run through Gao's account is the atmosphere of fear that gripped China during the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, it reinforces the view that China's youth had been manipulated from above. Gao details how he and many of his fellow university students were at first taken-in and then destroyed during the course of the Cultural Revolution.

Among the major incidents in the work, one in particular illustrates the extent to which this hero worship led to irrational behavior. When a student points out that a portrait of Chairman Mao has only one ear, the entire class suspects a conspiracy on the part of their professors. From this point on, the students began to imagine things such as a snake on Lenin's face and a sword over Mao's Head,²⁸ further increasing the atmosphere of paranoia. Any supposed deviation of Maoist principles, no matter how irrational its basis, could mean being denounced as a counter-revolutionary. Gao's father, a loyal Communist, was even denounced by his own son. According to Gao, this practice some not uncommon during the sixties.

Besides examining the 'Mao Cult', Gao goes into considerable detail describing the difficulties ex-Red Guards faced during the years after the Cultural Revolution. According to Gao, "in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution former Red Guards were written off as a 'lost generation' and often consigned to inferior jobs because of their inadequate education."²⁹ The former vanguards of Mao's second revolution are largely portrayed as outcast, abandoned by both state and society. Although, some have begun to reap the benefits of China's economic boom, their pasts still remain impediments to their effective reintegration into society.

The concept of the Red Guards as China's 'lost generation,' is a central feature of Michael Yahuda's 'Political Generations in China.' Like Gao, Yahuda details the hurdles that former Red Guards have faced in the post-Maoist China. The low standard of education that they received during the Cultural Revolution has inhabited many of these individuals from reaping the benefits of China's restructured economy. With the new premium put on technical expertise, the Red Guard generation has found it difficult to find jobs. From the perspective of the Communist Party leadership, "the Red Guards generation amounts to the loss a generation of well-trained young scientists, linguists, and so forth."³⁰

In addition to the economic disadvantages of the Red Guard generation, Yahuda's work details the problems of reintegrating these individuals into society. In the aftermath of Mao's death and the arrests of the 'Gang of Four', many former Red Guards felt that they had been both betrayed and manipulated by their leaders. According to Yahuda, this sense of disenchantment has led many former Red Guard activists to enter themselves into almost complete self-isolation. On the other hand, Yahuda points out that many ex-student activists have taken the lead in public demonstrations to redress their grievances.³¹ In addition, this generation has used the arts as a means of coming to terms with their experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

One of these works is Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro's *After the Nightmare*. A follow-up to their earlier *Son of the Revolution*, this work deals almost exclusively with

²⁸ Gao, pg. 40.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 357.

³⁰ Yahuda, Michael. 'Political Generations in China.' *The China Quarterly*. No. 80{Dec. 1979} pg. 802.

³¹ *Ibid*, pg 803.

Chinese society's continuing attempts to come to terms with the turmoil of the 1960's. In doing so, they interview several former Red Guards. In almost every case, those interviewed looked back on the Cultural Revolution as a monumental disaster. However, the lessons learned from this traumatic experience varied from each individual.

One former Red Guard activist took the lessons of the Cultural Revolution to mean, "democratic foundations have to be built gradually, because if you handed democracy to the Chinese people now, they wouldn't know what to do with it."³² His reaction is the same as that of the Communist Party since the death of Mao seems to favor. To them the Cultural Revolution was a failure, but the scared reputation of Chairman Mao cannot be tarnished. There still exists an official silence when it comes to placing any blame for the excesses of the 1960's directly on Mao.

Another perspective examined in *After the Nightmare*, is that of the one time hero of the Red Guards, Peng Ming. When interviewed, Ming had only just been recently been allowed back into the Party following Deng Xiaoping's purge of the Maoist faction. Ming is described as man attempting to come to grips with his role in the excesses perpetrated by the Red Guards. His comment that "China under Mao was fascist feudalism, which oppressed the people and made them slaves,"³³ is a clear admission of the faults of system he once served. He is also more open in his criticism of Chairman Mao than many of his former comrades.

In conclusion, the historical literature on the Red Guard movement has undergone a considerable amount of revision over the course of the last three decades. In the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, left-leaning scholars stressed the democratic aspects of the movement. They tended to view the Red Guards anti-authoritarian campaign as part of the global student movement of the late 1960's. Since the late 1970's, however, a new generation of scholars have pointed to the negative aspects of the Red Guard movement. These scholars have explored the long-term societal and psychological impact of the Cultural Revolution. Their works have characterized the Red Guard movement as tools of totalitarian system. As China moves further away from Mao's radical interpretation of Marxism; it appears that this revisionist school will continue to dominate the field for the foreseeable future.

³² Liang, Heng & Shapiro, Judith. *After the Nightmare*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff. 1986. pg.93.

³³ *Ibid*, pg 33.

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