

## The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History: An Introduction

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The Cultural Revolution had a riveting impact on the fledgling field of contemporary China studies. When the red guards first made their appearance, research on the People's Republic was still in its infancy. Early studies of its polity, economy, and society described the organizations put in place near the end of the 1950s to mobilize the population for political campaigns and rapid economic growth. They also emphasized the distinctive ideology that shaped these organizations and the regime's efforts to indoctrinate the population and conduct ambitious political and economic campaigns. Divisions among the elite were already evident, and were expressed in several purges and campaigns against intellectuals. The operational codes of party and government bureaucracies—which struggled to balance the tension between political loyalty and professional expertise—were just becoming clear.<sup>1</sup>

Yet shortly after these distinctive institutions were established, they were torn apart in the unprecedented upheavals that began in June 1966. The nation was rent by waves of civil strife that lasted more than two years, followed by harsh military repression and campaigns of political persecution that accelerated in intensity until they began to wane in the early 1970s. China remained unsettled politically in the immediate aftermath. Continued jockeying among elite factions coincided with frequent strikes and protest movements in the period prior to Mao's death in September 1976, and aftershocks reverberated into the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The effect on China scholarship was immediate. Franz Schurmann's monumental study of the regime's systems of internal communication and

control, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, appeared in 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution began. He immediately amended his influential synthesis in an expanded edition two years later. His lengthy “Supplement” to the new edition began with a self-criticism, and is worth quoting at length:

The forces of Chinese society are equally as important as those coming from the structure of state power. I do not believe that this indicates a resurgence of the old social system, but rather that China’s major social classes (workers, peasants, and intellectuals) exert great pressure on the ideology and organization which direct that country. If revolution makes ideology and organization necessary to refashion society, the passage of time leads to a resurrection of the forces of society. . . . If I were to give the book a new title today, I would call it *Ideology, Organization, and Society in China*. The original title testifies to the weight I assigned ideology and organization, and to China’s Communist character. However, due weight must now be given to the resurgence of the forces of Chinese society.<sup>3</sup>

Michel Oksenberg concurred with this assessment and articulated a research agenda that guided much of the next fifteen years of social science scholarship on contemporary China, most of which focused on the decade after 1966.

The Cultural Revolution provided a remarkable opportunity to view the structure of Chinese society in the 1960s. Prior to 1965, that view was obscured by the carefully nurtured image of a monolithic society led by a unified, cohesive elite. In 1966–67, the image was destroyed, revealing that the rulers were deeply divided and locked in bitter struggle. As the rulers lost their ability to provide unified, coherent guidelines to the nation, the various segments of society became more able to pursue their own interests. As a result, the Cultural Revolution made it possible to analyze the concerns of the major groups in society and their relative abilities to achieve their interests.<sup>4</sup>

This new emphasis was already evident in Ezra Vogel’s *Canton under Communism*, an account of the new regime’s efforts to consolidate political control and reorganize the society and economy of Guangdong: the book culminated in a chapter on the Cultural Revolution that interpreted the upheaval in precisely these terms.<sup>5</sup>

While few doubted the sharp divergence of China under Mao from the patterns of Soviet Communism, students of the Soviet bloc were already critical of scholarship that emphasized regime ideology and mechanisms of

political control. Independently of events in China—and before the Cultural Revolution—they called for attention to the conflict and pluralism behind the façade of totalitarian conformity.<sup>6</sup> Without dramatic material of the kind provided by the Cultural Revolution, however, students of the Soviet bloc could fully pursue this agenda only in studies of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, or periodic upheavals in Poland.<sup>7</sup> Among students of China, the Cultural Revolution bred a more intense engagement with the organization of society and the political forces that sprang from it.

Work inspired by this agenda continued to appear well into the 1980s. Scholarship about China during the Mao era was notable for its emphasis on the structure of society and what would later be termed state-society relations. Students of political participation examined the ways in which individuals and groups could pursue their interests within the evident constraints of political institutions.<sup>8</sup> Students of political institutions looked closely for evidence of bargaining among bureaucratic interests and mass constituencies, both in the process of policy making and policy implementation.<sup>9</sup> Students of the educational system and the occupational structure examined the career incentives that drove individuals into patterns of cooperation with or withdrawal from regime-sponsored political activity.<sup>10</sup> Students of grassroots politics and economic institutions explored the ways that state institutions bred social networks and personal loyalties that served to extend the power of the state while at the same time blunting or diverting it.<sup>11</sup> Others looked more closely at earlier periods of the People's Republic for evidence of collective protest of the variety that was so evident in the late 1960s.<sup>12</sup> The result was a specialized scholarly literature that looked remarkably unlike anything connected with the term totalitarianism.

Although these studies were decisively shaped by the Cultural Revolution, they did not deal directly with the Cultural Revolution itself. This became a thriving sub-topic that focused particularly on the upheavals of 1966–68, and especially on the most visible protagonists: student red guards, worker rebels, and the mass organizations engaged in factional struggles. A major theme of this work—which appeared with greatest frequency from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s—was that the political struggles of the late 1960s expressed the conflicting interests of identifiable groups in Chinese society. Schurmann himself signaled this new emphasis on the importance of social forces when he spoke of the red guards: “in the Cultural

Revolution, I believe that, no matter how much the students were guided from above, they basically expressed forces deriving from their own social class."<sup>13</sup> Gordon White elaborated the idea in his lengthy analysis of a red guard tabloid that created controversy by taking aim at the political class labels employed by the regime and the hierarchy of status and privilege that they created.<sup>14</sup> Hong Yung Lee found that the class background of students shaped their factional affiliation in the political struggles of the late 1960s, and Chan, Rosen, and Unger further elaborated the argument while taking issue with some of the specifics of Lee's formulations.<sup>15</sup> This work inspired detailed studies of the structure of the educational system and the pattern of educational attainment, and in particular the system of class labels and its impact on education, student strategies, and careers.<sup>16</sup>

Hong Yung Lee synthesized the underlying conception that united work in this vein: the Cultural Revolution created an opportunity for social groups to pursue their interests, and the conflicts expressed social differences that had emerged under Communist Party rule.<sup>17</sup> Lee's work was firmly in the tradition of interest group politics: elite factions representing radical versus conservative tendencies made common cause with mass groups whose interests were aligned with elites seeking either to transform or preserve the status quo. Mass factionalism therefore expressed a struggle between the "haves" and "have nots": conservative factions were drawn from those close to the regime or who had benefited the most from its policies, and radical factions were drawn from those alienated from the regime or relegated to subordinate or disadvantaged positions within it.<sup>18</sup> The significance of the Cultural Revolution was that it provided a window of opportunity for these underlying tensions to surface, and the conflicting interests to be expressed—even though the pursuit of group interests was masked in a political rhetoric that sought to justify private ends in the language of political ideals.

This agenda was pursued enthusiastically throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The Cultural Revolution proved a rich source of material on disadvantaged groups that briefly mobilized to redress their grievances: demobilized soldiers who had been shipped to remote state farms instead of receiving the urban job assignments they had expected;<sup>19</sup> urban youth who had been part of the first wave sent down to the countryside in the early 1960s;<sup>20</sup> and contract and temporary workers who were excluded from the pay and benefits enjoyed by those permanently attached to urban work units.<sup>21</sup> Intellectual life was portrayed as a continuing contest between critical voices

with patrons in the top leadership and establishment intellectuals with different patrons who encouraged their attacks on the critics.<sup>22</sup> This was a portrayal of a China seething with social divisions and conflicts, with citizens eager to seize available opportunities to express their interests, mobilize to advance or protect them and, if necessary, do battle with their opponents. In order to penetrate to this underlying reality, one had only to look beneath a rather fragile façade of political rhetoric and totalitarian control.

In hindsight, there are two striking features of this first wave of scholarship on the Cultural Revolution. The first is how firmly “society-centered” it was, and its sensitivity to the ways in which Chinese citizens at all levels consciously pursued their interests and participated willingly in the conflicts of the period. These conflicts were used as a window through which one could “read backwards” to the structure of the underlying society and its hidden tensions.

The second is how remarkably thin the evidence was for these interpretations. One has to admire the ingenuity with which authors reconstructed patterns of inequality and conflict from a relatively small number of interviews with émigrés, and from scattered copies of red guard tabloids, critical wall posters and pamphlets, transcripts of radio broadcasts, and rare issues of local newspapers.<sup>23</sup> All of this work proceeded without the benefit of the kinds of sources that scholars take for granted today: direct local interviews and oral histories with key participants; extensive collections of tabloids, pamphlets, speeches, and wall posters; published local histories, reference works, and official compendia of social statistics; and even survey research with retrospective questions.

Events in China after Mao soon pushed the study of the Cultural Revolution off center stage. For more than a decade it was the most topical of subjects, highly relevant to questions about the nation’s current condition and future prospects. But after Mao’s death China’s unfolding transformation redirected the attention of the field: first to the tumultuous events from the Democracy Wall movement of 1978 to Tiananmen Square in 1989, and then to the accelerating economic and social transformation of China into the present century.

*New Trends in Cultural Revolution Research*

In the decades since the initial heyday of Cultural Revolution scholarship, the landscape for research on the subject has shifted dramatically, largely due to changes in China. Taken together, five trends have laid the foundation for a vigorous new scholarship on the Cultural Revolution that inevitably will look very different from the research of the first generation. First, there has been a steady increase in the documentation relevant to the activities of the elite in central and local bureaucracies: publications of entire series of formerly internal documents, organizational histories, diaries and chronologies of important officials, transcripts of their speeches and of meetings, and related reference works, diaries, and biographies. It is now possible to bring the political elite—and its extensive and intensive connections to grassroots organizations and individuals—back into the picture in a way that was never before possible. The regime-centered agenda of pre-Cultural Revolution scholarship can be pursued much more successfully than ever before, while synthesizing insights from this with the later society-centered perspectives. Second, there has been a steady cumulative increase in the availability of all the highly prized and once-scarce unofficial sources of information—“red guard materials” and accounts by ordinary participants—that were the staple of the first generation of research. The quantity of available documentation of this type has increased by several orders of magnitude. The third trend is the outpouring of revelations that began in the late 1970s and continued well into the 1990s about violence, torture, and murder. The victims, whose experiences were remarkably obscured in the first wave of research, have been forced back into the center of our attention, requiring extensive changes in our understanding of the politics of the Cultural Revolution and its social impact. Fourth, thousands of official histories and chronologies of provinces, cities, counties, districts, and universities have been published since the mid-1980s, and many of these cover in some detail the events of 1966–76. And last, but not least, a significant Chinese-language scholarship on the Cultural Revolution has appeared in recent years in the form of research articles, academic monographs, and reference works.

DOCUMENTATION OF ELITE ACTIVITIES AND  
BUREAUCRATIC OPERATIONS

Although the Cultural Revolution provided students of contemporary China with their first insights into the structure of society and its underly-

ing social tensions, it also provided researchers interested primarily in the organization of the regime and its internal politics with an unprecedented view of this subject. Red guards and rebels dug deeply into official archives and published accounts of past debates and policy disputes designed to illustrate the perfidy of those being purged as capitalist roaders. These materials were the staple of the scholarly literature on regime-level politics for much of the next decade.<sup>24</sup>

One of the unfortunate yet unavoidable features of scholarship on contemporary China is the relentless demand for a present-centered kind of “relevance”: the need to understand where China is today and where it will likely go in the future. China has changed so rapidly that events even a few decades old soon appear irrelevant to the present. Leadership splits and maneuverings in the late Mao period seemed increasingly arcane in a rapidly unfolding political scene under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, with most of the principals long since imprisoned or dead. The subject seemed even more remote in the post-Deng, post-Jiang era.

It is largely for this reason that social scientists have generally failed to take advantage of the increased availability of information about the workings of the regime in the late Mao period, particularly the structure of the bureaucracy, mobility and career patterns, and the activities, conflicts, and maneuverings behind the scenes that were almost completely obscured twenty years ago.<sup>25</sup> The late 1980s and 1990s saw an upsurge of publication of organizational histories, documentary collections, and biographical materials of a kind never enjoyed by the first generation of scholars. These materials permit researchers to construct a clear picture of the structure of government and party organizations, the membership of key committees, and the movement of individuals via promotions and purges through specific party and government posts. The most noteworthy are the hundreds of organizational histories (literally, “Materials on Organizational History” or *zushi shi ziliao*) published at the national, provincial, and local level. These compendia cover the periods from the first activities of the Communist Party in the region to the late 1980s or early 1990s.<sup>26</sup> They describe in minute detail the successive reorganizations of party and government, and provide complete lists of those in leadership posts and members of leadership committees, figures on the number of personnel in various bureaus and commissions, compilations of documents that issued from the work of these committees, and statistical tables on party and government personnel, often tabulated by year according to age, educational level, and gender.<sup>27</sup> Al-

though less extensive in their coverage, similarly detailed materials on such subjects are often found in local gazetteers (*difang zhi*) published at the municipal, county, city district, and even organizational level.<sup>28</sup> More specialized reference works attempt to convey this kind of information in more abbreviated form.<sup>29</sup> Somewhat different in focus are biographical dictionaries that provide capsule summaries of the background and careers of individual office-holders.<sup>30</sup> These materials afford scholars a clear view of the offices held by individuals at specific points in time, their careers through the bureaucracy, who they worked with, and who was promoted and who was purged in successive political campaigns. All of these things were obscure in the first generation of scholarship on regime-centered politics. The guesswork and speculation that once characterized work on the topic are largely a thing of the past.

A different range of sources focuses on the daily activities of specific prominent individuals. Detailed “chronological biographies” (*nianpu*) of the professional lives of such key leaders as Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, He Long, Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Wang Jiaxiang, and Chen Pixian, for example, have been published in recent years.<sup>31</sup> A similar type of source is the “collected manuscripts” of such figures as Mao and Zhou Enlai: a record of their letters, directives, and written comments on reports on a day-by-day basis.<sup>32</sup>

More vivid and detailed are memoirs that have been published with increasing frequency in recent years by some of the key actors on both sides of the political struggles of the period. Wang Li, Liu Zhijian, and Mu Xin, key early members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group who were purged in 1967 for various errors, have published memoirs or detailed accounts of specific episodes.<sup>33</sup> Li Xuefeng, acting first party secretary of Beijing in the summer of 1966,<sup>34</sup> and Wu De, a party secretary and mayor of Beijing from 1966,<sup>35</sup> have left accounts of key episodes during the Cultural Revolution that they observed first-hand. Wang Dongxing, the head of Mao’s security detail,<sup>36</sup> and General Yang Chengwu, appointed acting chief of the general staff of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1966,<sup>37</sup> have both left accounts of key episodes. Zhang Chengxian, a member of the Hebei Province Secretariat and leader of the work team sent to Beijing University in 1966,<sup>38</sup> and Guo Yingqiu, party secretary of People’s University who succeeded Deng Tuo after his May 1966 suicide and who was put in charge of the work teams sent to schools in June and July 1966,<sup>39</sup> have recently recorded



their accounts for posterity. Xu Jingxian, an associate of Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, who became the chairman of Shanghai's Revolutionary Committee in 1967, has published a book-length memoir.<sup>40</sup> A related genre are memoirs published in remembrance of major political figures by their personal secretaries, relatives, or other associates. Recent examples are accounts of the activities of Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai during the Cultural Revolution written by their aides.<sup>41</sup>

More tendentious but often revealing are the internal case histories of the activities of individuals denounced after Mao's death for their "anti-party activities" during the Cultural Revolution. These materials often resemble the denunciations of leading "capitalist roaders" during the Cultural Revolution, but they are more detailed, more voluminous, and more widely available. Excerpts were published in mass circulation venues in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but compendia compiled as study materials by regional party schools in the 1980s contain detailed accounts of specific factional activities that greatly deepen our understanding of elite politics in the period.<sup>42</sup>

A final type of source is the transcripts of talks by national and local leaders at rallies, meetings, and receptions during the period from mid-1966 to late 1968. Scattered samples were available to researchers during the first wave of Cultural Revolution research. By the late 1990s, however, hundreds of them were widely available, affording a much more complete and detailed portrait of the interactions of top officials with mass organizations. Some of these speeches are carried in the larger collections of red guard tabloids that have been published in recent years (more on this below). Others are available in bound collections of leaders' speeches or "reference materials" widely published and circulated at the time.<sup>43</sup> Many of these collections are readily available at second-hand book stalls in China, and some of them have formed the basis for collections compiled independently and produced for sale abroad. One of the most useful is the book-length index and CD-ROM produced by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which contains the text of close to 2,000 such meetings and speeches and which can be searched with keyword phrases.<sup>44</sup>

These materials promise a clearer understanding of the role of officials in the Cultural Revolution, both as active political agents and as victims.<sup>45</sup> More important, however, is the potential implication of these sources for past portrayals of mass politics as relatively autonomous expressions of so-

cial forces. The intensive interaction between elites and masses suggests a more nuanced interpretation of mass politics and the course of the movement as a product of the unpredictable interplay between elite and masses, determined neither by the structure of the regime nor the interests of any of the parties to the conflict.<sup>46</sup>

#### THE ACCUMULATION OF UNOFFICIAL SOURCES

The second development is an exponential increase in the availability of the same unofficial materials that were the staple of the first generation of Cultural Revolution scholarship: wall posters, handbills, newspapers, pamphlets, and reference collections compiled by work units and red guard and rebel organizations. In the mid-1970s all extant copies of such materials available in government archives and libraries in English-speaking countries were collected in a twenty-volume library edition that contained 6,743 pages of material.<sup>47</sup> Two eight-volume supplements issued in 1980 and 1992 added another 8,822 small-format pages of material, although this came too late to benefit the first wave of scholarship on the Cultural Revolution.<sup>48</sup>

Two massive reprint collections have recently multiplied several-fold the available materials of this type. The first, a twenty-volume collection of red guard newspapers from Beijing and other regions, added 9,644 large-format pages in 1999.<sup>49</sup> The second, a forty-volume collection of newspapers exclusively from Beijing, added 15,926 pages in 2001,<sup>50</sup> and another collection of similar magnitude from the provinces is being prepared. If we restrict our count solely to the material available in these standard library reprint editions, students of the Cultural Revolution now enjoy access to more than six times as many pages of material as researchers at the end of the 1970s.

This, however, is only a fraction of the sources of this type that are now accessible. Other reprint services offer hundreds of documentary collections for sale to libraries and individuals.<sup>51</sup> Used book stores and dealers of Mao-era memorabilia in China have provided another source, and purchases from these sources have been photocopied and informally circulated among researchers. Private collections held by individuals and work units in China are occasionally available, and significant collections of internal documents from the period, including written confessions by those accused of crimes, are held in the archives of many universities, research institutes, and government agencies. Although these materials are not yet widely accessible, their existence is well known.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most valuable sources of information in the first generation of Cultural Revolution scholarship was interviews with former red guards and other participants in the events of the period. Conducted almost exclusively in Hong Kong, the scholarship that resulted focused heavily on events in Guangzhou.<sup>53</sup> This same source of information is far more widely available today, both in China and abroad. Thousands of former red guards have emigrated abroad after completing their higher education, and the faculties of universities and office staff of work units throughout China are filled with a generation of individuals—now more than fifty years old—with direct experience in the events of those years, an abiding interest in those formative years, and often real enthusiasm about sharing their recollections. Although such oral histories are inevitably affected by the vagaries of memory and often colored by self-serving reconstructions internalized over the course of decades of political study, it is now much easier to do retrospective interviewing within China of the kind conducted among émigrés in Hong Kong thirty years ago. Potential informants are far more abundant and it is much easier to test the veracity of accounts by finding several people to report about a single place or event.<sup>54</sup>

Published memoirs by red guards were also an important source of insight for the first generation of researchers. Those available through the 1980s were based exclusively on the accounts of politically active but relatively marginal figures in the provinces about what they personally witnessed, and they were indeed valuable.<sup>55</sup> These individuals, however, were never able to report directly about key events in well-publicized struggles in the nation's capital of the type that captured the attention of those chronicling the subject. This has begun to change. Some of the key participants in these events have been interviewed and their accounts published either in China or abroad, and some have begun to publish books of their own.<sup>56</sup>

In short, the same unofficial sources that fueled the first wave of Cultural Revolution scholarship are far more abundant than ever before, and will become more so as archives in China gradually become more accessible. This material will permit a far more concrete, detailed, and textured portrayal of the events of those years. This will inevitably lead scholars to confirm, elaborate, correct, or challenge the line of interpretation established by the first generation of scholars who worked with far more limited sources of information, and will surely lead to new lines of historical interpretation or social science inquiry.