

## Introduction

(Extract from *Violence, Periodization and Definition of the Cultural Revolution: A Case Study of Two Deaths by the Red Guards*, by Joshua Zhang and James Wright.)

The Cultural Revolution (CR hereafter) is an important event in China's modern history. Beginning in 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, as it was originally known, was Mao Zedong's attempt to extend and solidify the personality cult that had grown up around him, to purge allegedly "bourgeois," capitalist, and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to seal his authority as the ideological leader of the Community Party of China (CPC hereafter). The "revisionists" who were allegedly infiltrating government, polity, the economy and society at large were to be removed through violent class struggle, an ideological trope that justified the wanton, brutal murders of millions of Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This book tells the story of two such murders, the murder of Mr. Wang Jin on September 29, 1966 by 31 Red Guards in the Nanjing Foreign Language School (NFL School hereafter), where the senior author was a young student at the time; and the earlier murder of Mrs. Bian Zhongyun on August 5, 1966. These two murders mark the beginning and the end of old Red Guard violence in the CR. The book is thus a history of two small incidents in a massive social injustice and also an attempt to understand the CR within the framework of modern social movement theory. The book is composed of three parts: the history of the two incidents, the sources of violence in the CR, and the definition and periodization of the CR (that is, what was it, and when did it begin and end?).

The book begins with a detailed recounting of two deaths caused by old Red Guards in the early stages of the CR. The Bian Zhongyun murder has been widely discussed in the literature on the CR for almost thirty years in part because the incident was connected to the highest level of leadership in China at the time. On the other hand, the death of Wang Jin has unfortunately been forgotten. Nevertheless, thanks to the rebellion that Wang Jin's death spawned in the CR, a thorough investigation was conducted at the time and the investigative report has miraculously survived. The details surrounding Wang Jin's death are thus revealed in the first part of the book to the Western readers for the first time. And there is still a cloud of uncertainty over certain details of the death of Bian Zhongyun. Due to various reasons that we discuss, those responsible for her death are still unknown to the public and may remain so forever. The controversy over the details and interpretation of the Bian incident is also recounted and analysed in the first part of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of victims of the CR is contested, of course, with estimates ranging from 750,000 to 3.5 million (Song Yongyi, 2011; Jin Zhong, 2012; Cheng Tijie, 2016: 130).

It has been 50 years since the inception of the CR and the focus of research on the CR has shifted from trying to understand why Mao initiated the CR to trying to explain the mass violence that ensued. The second part of the book offers an explanation of the violence by the Red Guards in the Wang Jin Incident. The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) by the American psychologist Philip Zimbardo is often referred to as a “real-life” experiment but it is only a pseudo real-life experiment. The experiment took place in a psychology laboratory, after all. The Wang Jin Incident recounted in the first part of the book was not a laboratory experiment. The players were real, the situations were real, and the ensuing death was real. No social science experiment could ever be carried out in equally real-world circumstances. But there are deep similarities between the behaviors of experimental subjects in the Zimbardo prison experiment and the behaviors of the Red Guards, similarities that reveal and sustain important social science generalizations.

The SPE revealed some discomfiting lessons. Zimbardo (2008) argued that we very much want to believe that good people can resist external pressure, reject situational temptation, and maintain morality and rationality. We want there to be a solid wall between Good and Evil. But most of us can and do undergo significant character and personality transformations when caught up in the crucible of social forces. Zimbardo was thus heavily influenced by the “transformation” explanation for mass violence. That is, the influence of the crowd “transforms” the moral basis of behavior. This situational effect is undeniably an important factor for participants in collective actions but we argue on the basis of the Wang Jin incident that it is not the only factor.

The various real world conditions can be parsed with a metaphor derived from electrical conductivity. Electrical conductivity depends on how easily electrons can move through a substance. Without outside forces acting upon them, they stay in position. Electrons in metals are easy to move out of position while the electrons in insulators are not easy to move. Now let the “insulators” be the morality, temperament, personality, and rationality of a person; let the voltage be the intensity of the situation in which people are embedded; and let the breakdown stand for the occurrence of violence. It is immediately obvious in this metaphor that strong insulators will resist stronger voltage. We propose an insulator breakpoint explanation for the violence of the CR in the second part of the book.

An important and sometimes overlooked point is that not all insulators broke down even in the intense times of the CR. The very large majority successfully resisted. Those that did not resist had to be willing to be violent, that is, they had to embrace a moral sense that justified violent behavior in at least some circumstances. Being violent has to be understood as a choice.

Otherwise, the concept of moral behavior becomes an empty construct. Like different electrical

insulators, some students and Red Guards could only resist very low voltages, some could withstand medium voltages, and many were even able to resist extremely high voltages. In the end, the 31 Red Guards of the NFL School chose to beat Wang Jin to death while many other Red Guards and students chose not to.

The decision on what to do and how to do it is made by people through rational calculation of costs and benefits. Some persons are cruel enough (have weak moral insulators) that they can strike another violently but others (stronger moral insulators) could never be driven to such behavior. Some persons might encourage violent behavior but not be violent themselves. Still other might silently sneak away. These differences do not change the fate of the victims of the CR but they do serve to explain why some people were caught up in the waves of violence while others were not.

The violence in the CR did not stem from any single source but was a function of several factors. One important source of violence, of course, is the now-undisputed lack of an insurmountable boundary between good and evil, as suggested in a long line of philosophical anthropology and confirmed by the experiments of Zimbardo. A related question is, "Are we born good or bad?" The Chinese mostly believe "People at birth, are naturally good." Rousseau's Western equivalent is that "People are born free but everywhere they are in chains." Most Chinese believe in the innate goodness of humans. They explain away incidents where good people become bad by referring to the bad influences of the larger society. Their logic is that people are originally of good nature, so it must be bad guys and bad social influences that make good people do bad things. Influenced by Christian beliefs, most Westerners believe that people are born with original sin, or in other words, are born "naturally bad" and are redeemed, if at all, through religious piety or by society.

Zimbardo's experiments suggest a third alternative perspective. That research shows that each of us has the capacity to be a saint or a sinner, altruist or selfish, gentle or cruel, dominant or submissive, perpetrator or victim, prisoner or guard. It is the social situations in which we find ourselves that determine which of our many potential mental and personality templates are activated. Thus, we are shaped by broad systems of social structure, dictates of culture, and specific social situations that come to engulf us. The broad systems include wealth and poverty, geography and climate, historical epoch, cultural, political and religious dominance. Those forces work on us to affect our biology, personality, morality and humanity. The inclination toward good and the impulse toward evil express the fundamental duality of human nature.

People have the capacities to be both angels and devils. What they in fact become, which of their dual potentials is realized, depends on a combination of personal predispositions, the will to resist, situational effects, power in hand, and a political context that either glorifies or condemns violence. In the framework of the breakpoint explanation, the breakdown (i.e. violence occurrence) depends on not only the amount of voltage

flowing through the system (e.g. situational effects and power in hand) but also the inherent level of resistance of the insulator to voltage (e.g. morality and rationality).

In the third part of the book, we discuss the grassroots movement triggered by Wang Jin's death. This part is a close and natural extension to the first part of the book. Wang Jin was one among millions of victims in the CR. Many of the victims died an even more horrific death than Wang Jin did. What makes the Wang Jin Incident remarkable is what happened after his death. Hundreds of thousands of rebels and residents of Nanjing exerted tremendous pressure on the Chinese authorities. As a result, three Red Guards responsible for the death were arrested and kept behind bars for almost two years. This was unprecedented at the time across the entire country. The implication of the victory of the rebels cannot be too strongly emphasized. How to evaluate the mass movement that followed Wang Jin's death is closely related to the issue of how to evaluate rebel movements in the CR more generally and in turn how to evaluate the CR per se. How to evaluate the CR, we argue in the third part of the book, is equivalent to how to define and periodize the CR. Unfortunately, researchers have not come to terms with these two issues despite a half century of trying. Our effort to do so is found in the third part of the book.

Effectively all previous research on the definition and periodization of the CR has been qualitative and as a result arguable and even contentious. In the third part of the book, we employ quantitative methods to see if they resolve, or at least shed useful light on, these issues. The formulae and statistical models used in our analysis might seem forbidding but the results and our discussion are easy to understand. And a new and (we think) improved understanding of the CR is the result.

The quantitative classification of the Party campaigns and grassroots movements has an important implication, namely that the rebel movements were different from the Party campaigns. Undoubtedly, the rebel movements did not aim to overthrow the Communist regime; they worked within the strict limits set by the leader Mao. In addition, the targets of the rebel movements were only capitalist roaders and counter-revolutionary revisionists. But in spite of these facts, rebels no longer targeted ordinary people and second-class citizens, as the Party always did. They attacked the Party cadres and that was unprecedented.

In regard to the seven indicators we used for classification purposes, the rebel movements were totally different from the Party campaigns. The rebel movements had different goals (i.e., to reform the current system) and a certain degree of independence (that is, they were not tightly controlled by the Party committees, as was usually the case); they were initiated as grassroots organizations; and they targeted different objects (elites and cadres vs. ordinary citizens). The rebel movements were similar to the pro-democratic movements after the CR in China and to the American civil rights movement. Recognizing these facts promotes a more objective

understanding of the CR.

The conclusion regarding the similarities between rebel movements and democratic movements both in China and elsewhere reveals an important relationship between rebel movements and democratic movements in China itself. Responding sincerely to the calls by Mao, the rebels who participated in the CR were flush with democratic ideals. Many present-day pro-democracy activists in China were rebels during the CR and they continue to cherish democratic ideals. In other words, the large scale democratic movements in China in the 1970's and 1980's and since were a continuation of the CR. And the CR was a prelude for these democratic movements.

Quantitative analysis of the periodization of Party policies indicates that the Party did not change its policies during the CR. Even though Mao temporarily granted the Chinese people some freedom in order to defeat his political enemies, there was no essential policy change for the Party. After he finished eliminating his rivals, Mao immediately restored his former policies and principles. From the viewpoint of Party policies, the 3-year (1966 to 1968) and 7-year (1968–1976) time spans belonged to the same period. Undoubtedly, hundreds of millions of the Chinese people participated in the grand and spectacular rebel movements and enjoyed freedom of speech and organization to some extent during the 3-year period. However, the fundamental nature of the Communist regime never changed. To the vast Chinese masses, the state apparatus was always the same.

Superficially, the third part of the book seems somewhat distant from the first two parts, but in fact, the third part is a natural extension of the questions raised by the Wang Jin Incident in the first part. The two deaths committed by the old Red Guards more than 50 years ago that are recounted in this book bear many similarities and differences. Among the differences between the two deaths, the aftermaths of the deaths were the most prominent. Mrs. Bian died quietly at the time. No one even dared to openly complain. In contrast, the Nanjingers staged massive protests asking for justice. The ensuing grassroots movement after Wang Jin's death forced the authorities to concede and arrest three Red Guards responsible for the killing. If the violence is the dark side of the Wang Jin Incident, then the grassroots movement after his death is the bright side. This is like a day: without both dark and light, a day is not complete. The violence against Wang Jin only lasted one day (24 hours to be exact) while the movement seeking justice for Wang Jin continued for more than five months before its temporary success. It would be a remiss only to analyze the dark side of the Wang Jin Incident while ignoring its bright side—the mass movement triggered by it. Violence is only a part, if not a small part, of the incident.

The differences between the two deaths boil down to a fundamental question: how to evaluate the mass

movements in the CR. Therefore, the analysis of the mass movement after the death of Wang Jin is not only a natural extension of the incident but an indispensable part of it. The spectacular mass movement of hundreds of thousands of the rebels and Nanjingers against the violence by the Red Guards raises a profound, important and as-yet unsolved question: What *was* the CR? We try to answer this question using a new approach and a novel perspective.

The appendices at the end of the book include the rebels' original Investigation Report of the Wang Jin Incident circulated 50 years ago. The Report carries critical details, including the course and timeline of the incident, Wang Jin's personal history, autopsies, meeting minutes and reports by the city and provincial Party secretaries, criticism papers by the rebels, the self-criticism report by the Municipal Party Committee of Nanjing, and a complete and detailed chronicle of the incident. Readers can see how vehemently the rebels were criticizing the authorities and how humble the Party Committee was to admit its errors to the rebels. Before now, this important document was not available to the English-speaking world and is included in the appendices to preserve the historical record.

The CR had an enormous impact on the Chinese population at the time and has retained its impact on the generations that have come since. One cannot know modern China unless one understands the CR. At the time, the CR paralyzed the Chinese economy, nearly destroyed the political and social structure, and left China a backward nation. Today, China is an economic powerhouse, the second largest economy in the world, and the vanguard nation in what some have tagged the Asian Century. The road to the present-day successes of China runs straight through the Cultural Revolution.