

## The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing and Human Impact\*

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**ABSTRACT** Information extracted from 1,520 county annals published after 1987 is used to estimate the timing and impact of the Cultural Revolution in rural China. Outside observers initially concluded that the movement had little impact on remote rural regions, while early post-Mao revelations suggested that the opposite was the case. Adjusting for the tendency of shorter accounts to report fewer casualties, and with additional assumptions about under-reporting in the longer and more detailed accounts, the authors derive an estimated death toll of between 750,000 and 1.5 million, a similar number of people permanently injured, and 36 million who suffered some form of political persecution. The vast majority of these casualties occurred from 1968 to 1971, after the end of the period of popular rebellion and factional conflict and the establishment of provisional organs of local state power.

For more than two decades we have known that our early views of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside need to be re-assessed. An initial understanding was firmly established by Richard Baum's careful analysis of evidence available in 1969, which portrayed the Cultural Revolution as primarily an urban affair. To the extent that it affected rural regions, it did so largely as a spillover from adjacent urban centres: "the many traumatic developments which took place in China's cities during the Cultural Revolution did have their local counterparts in at least some rural communes ... but this was clearly a minority phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> Baum's exhaustive research led him to conclude that "for most of China's 550 million or more rural peasants and basic-level cadres, most of the time, the Cultural Revolution was simply not a particularly salient fact of everyday life."<sup>2</sup>

Early post-Mao revelations quickly cast doubt on this generalization. Evidence of extensive political activity in the rural hinterland accumu-

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1. Richard Baum, "The Cultural Revolution in the countryside: anatomy of a limited rebellion," in Thomas W. Robinson (ed.), *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 367–479, at p. 367.

2. *Ibid.* p. 367. See also Harry Harding, "The Chinese state in crisis," in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15, Part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 209–210, which relies heavily on Baum.

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lated rapidly after Mao's death. The Cultural Revolution had a much more damaging social impact than was once understood, and some of the most startling revelations were about regions far from cities. The first accounts began to appear in newspapers in 1978, and they continued with regularity until the trial of the "Gang of Four" in 1980.<sup>3</sup> *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) informed a national readership that more than 22,000 innocent people were persecuted in rural Xinping xian, Yunnan.<sup>4</sup> In Haifeng xian, Guangdong, more than 100 were killed and 3,000 wounded in factional fights, 400 permanently injured, and 3,200 wrongly persecuted.<sup>5</sup> In Taicang xian, Jiangsu, there were more than 7,500 victims.<sup>6</sup> In Xiyang xian, Shanxi, home of the famed Dazhai production brigade, 141 were killed.<sup>7</sup> Similar accounts appeared in the provincial press.<sup>8</sup> They made frequent reference to events in specific production brigades (or

3. These initial revelations about the Cultural Revolution were part of the campaign that led to the ascendance of Deng Xiaoping and the weakening of opposition to reform in the Party leadership. See Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 58–118, and Lowell Dittmer, "Learning from trauma: the Cultural Revolution in post-Mao politics," in William A. Joseph, Christine P.W. Wong and David Zweig (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991).

4. "Yunnan wei yi dapi yuan'an cuo'an zhaoxue pingfan" ("Yunnan rehabilitates victims of a large number of false cases"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 23 July 1978, p. 1. Xinping is a county populated by members of the Yi and Dai nationalities, roughly midway between Kunming and the Vietnam border.

5. "Yansu chuli fan Peng Pai lieshi de shijian" ("Severe measures resolve case of opposing revolutionary martyr Peng Pai"), *Renmin ribao*, 12 February 1979, p. 4. See the longer account in Fernando Galbiati, *P'eng P'ai and the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), pp. 369–373. Haifeng is on the Guangdong coast, midway between Hong Kong and Shantou.

6. "Taicang xian weishou pohai ganbu pingfan" ("Taicang county rehabilitates abused cadres"), *Renmin ribao* 15 March 1979, p. 1. Taicang is midway between Suzhou and Shanghai.

7. "Xiyang xian pingfan tuixing jizuo luxian zaocheng de yuanjia cuo'an" ("Xiyang county overturns false cases perpetrated under the ultra-left line"), *Renmin ribao*, 13 August 1980, p. 3. Xiyang is in central Shanxi, near the border with Hebei.

8. In one battle in the spring of 1969 in Guan xian, Shandong, more than 5,000 militia from eight nearby counties invaded and killed 63 ("Wei zai 'Guan xian shijian' zhong zhaoshou pohai de ren pingfan zhaoxue" ("Those persecuted in the 'Guan county incident' are rehabilitated"), *Dazhong ribao* (*Masses Daily*), 10 December 1979, p. 2). Guan xian is in far western Shandong, on the border with Hebei, close to Henan. In Fumin xian, Yunnan, in early 1968, five died, 90 were injured and 320 arrested in one incident ("Fumin xian wei 'tong mafengwo' shijian pingfan" ("Fumin county overturns verdict on the 'stirring up a hornets' nest' case"), *Yunnan ribao* (*Yunnan Daily*), 20 September 1978, p. 2.). Fumin is a suburb of Kunming. In Dingnan xian, Jiangxi, seven were killed and 320 arrested in one spurious search for traitors in 1968 ("Ganzhou diwei wei Gumeishan yiqi jia'an chedi pingfan" ("Ganzhou district committee thoroughly rehabilitates all false cases from Gumeishan"), *Jiangxi ribao*, (*Jiangxi Daily*), 18 December 1978, p. 1). Dingnan lies on Jiangxi's mountainous southern border with Guangdong. In Tongguan xian, Shaanxi, 16 people were killed in one factional battle in 1968, and later 3,343 were arrested during the "cleansing of the class ranks" campaign and "many" of them tortured and killed ("Wei 'Dai Ziyang shijian' pingfan, fouding 'Tongguan qingdui jingyan'" ("Dai Ziyang case' overturned, denounce 'Tongguan's cleansing the class ranks experience'"), *Shaanxi ribao* (*Shaanxi Daily*), 30 December 1978, p. 2). Tongguan is on Shaanxi's eastern edge, near the junction of the Shanxi and Henan borders.

villages), suggesting that the Cultural Revolution penetrated deeply into the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

It soon became clear that these accounts, while published for obvious political purposes, were not extreme or isolated cases. The new “county annals” (*xianzhi*), which began to appear in the middle 1980s, often included startling narratives of the Cultural Revolution that made the early public revelations appear comparatively modest. This was true even of relatively remote and poor rural regions. Yangshuo xian, Guangxi, for example, experienced continual political conflict after July 1966. During one month in 1968, 2,513 people were subjected to violent struggle sessions, and a total of 639 people were beaten to death.<sup>10</sup> In Tiandeng xian, also in Guangxi, the Cultural Revolution began in July 1966 with the detention and investigation of 1,632 school teachers. The county experienced the entire range of factional fighting, arrests and torture typical of urban regions, and by the end of 1968 more than 1,651 were dead.<sup>11</sup> The county annal for Baishui xian, Shaanxi, devoted almost 30 pages to the description of a seemingly endless series of arrests, suicides, death under torture and armed battles. The story began with the detention and investigation of 1,340 school teachers in July 1966 and ended with the “*yida sanfan*” campaign in 1971. A total of 2,708 were tortured to confess to political crimes, 182 to the point of permanent disability, and 173 died.<sup>12</sup> In Ankang xian, also in Shaanxi, the Cultural Revolution began with all 1,842 school teachers detained for investigation. By August, Red Guard groups emerged, and in September, other mass organizations. Factions competed to seize power in early 1967, and in July the county began six months of virtual civil war. More than 20,000 were mobilized for armed battles between two factions, and in the fighting more than 3,300 homes, 53 schools and office buildings, and the county’s flood control dykes were destroyed. The battles ended only after intervention by regular army units. By the end of 1969, 11,670 people

9. This impression was reinforced in another genre of revelation literature from the period, “reportage” (*jishi wenxue*), or dramatized accounts of personal misfortunes, based on official investigation reports. See, for example, the accounts of imprisonment, torture and suicide in two production brigades in one of the more famous early compilations: Shanxi shengwei xinfang chu, “Qusan wuyun jian qingtian” (“Dispel the clouds to see blue sky”), *Chunfeng huayu ji* (*Annals of Spring Breezes and Rain*), Vol. 1 (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1981), pp. 55–66; and Lüda shi xinfang chu, “‘Jiangyonghui’ de xin fazhan” (“The new development in the Mao thought ‘study session’”), *ibid.* pp. 349–359. Another early indication of extensive rural political activity was William Hinton’s account of the 1966–71 period in Long Bow village in south-eastern Shanxi province. William Hinton, *Shenfan: The Continuing Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Vintage, 1983), pp. 451–693.

10. Yangshuo xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Yangshuo xianzhi* (*Yangshuo County Annals*) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1988), pp. 11–13, 16. Yangshuo is in the Guilin region, not far from the Hunan border.

11. Tiandeng xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Tiandeng xianzhi* (*Tiandeng County Annals*) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), pp. 14–17, 20. Tiandeng is in western Guangxi, near the Vietnam border.

12. Baishui xian xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Baishui xianzhi* (*Baishui County Annals*) (Xi’an: Xi’an ditu chubanshe, 1989), pp. 438–466. Baishui is in northern Weinan prefecture, on the approach to the Shaanbei plateau. Its account of the Cultural Revolution is the longest and most detailed of any we have encountered.

had been subjected to violent struggle sessions and labelled as class enemies, and 784 died in the process.<sup>13</sup>

County annals drew directly upon materials in local archives, including official investigations completed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the more remarkable accounts to draw upon these closed archives was a detailed chronology for Guangxi province, which provided an extensive account of factional fighting, imprisonment and torture, and mass executions that ranged widely across the rural regions of that province for several years. Perhaps the most notable single item is the account from Binyang xian, where 3,681 people, almost all village residents, were executed and thrown into mass graves in one ten-day period in the summer of 1968.<sup>14</sup> Better known is the account by Zheng Yi of mass killings in several rural counties in Guangxi.<sup>15</sup> While the book's English edition has generated widespread publicity for its carefully documented accounts of cannibalism, the narratives make clear that these events occurred in remote rural regions, and resulted in death tolls that exceeded 1,000 in many cases.<sup>16</sup>

As evidence of this kind accumulated, observers' confidence in the early impression that the Cultural Revolution's impact was limited to regions adjacent to cities waned. Political impulses apparently did not weaken as they radiated out from urban centres. Lack of information about the countryside may have reflected urban isolation from remote rural events rather than rural isolation from national politics. Clearly, earlier understanding requires thorough re-examination. But how far should we go in revising this earlier interpretation, and how can we assess the impact of events in such a vast rural hinterland?

While Baum's analysis is usually remembered only for its overall conclusion that the Cultural Revolution had a limited rural impact, he in fact carefully qualified this point. The first qualification was about timing: "*From its advent in the spring of 1966 until mid-autumn of 1968, China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was primarily an urban phenomenon*" (emphasis added). In other words, Baum was speaking only about the initial two-year period after June 1966. The second qualification was about the *types* of events that he considered: "a substantial majority of

13. Ankang shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Ankang xianzhi* (*Ankang County Annals*) (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1989), pp. 897–916. Ankang is near Shaanxi's border with Hubei.

14. Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao bianxie xiaozu, *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao* (*Chronology of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi*) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1990), pp. 111–16. Binyang is in eastern Nanning prefecture, roughly one-third of the way from Nanning to Liuzhou.

15. Zheng Yi, *Hongse jinianbei* (*Scarlet Memorial*) (Taipei: Huashi wenhua gongsi, 1993).

16. Zheng Yi, *Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China*, translated and edited by T.P. Sym (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996). This source provides details about five widely scattered counties in central and north-eastern Guangxi. Binyang, mentioned above, is one of them. Shanglin is adjacent to Binyang in western Nanning prefecture (see n. 14). Mengshan and Zhongshan are in Wuzhou prefecture; Mengshan is midway between Wuzhou and Liuzhou, Zhongshan borders Hunan. Wuxuan is on the southern edge of Liuzhou prefecture, roughly midway between Nanning and Wuzhou.

China's rural villages ... failed to experience significant Red Guard agitation, 'power seizures,' or internecine struggles." The kinds of student activism and rebellion associated with the first two years of the Cultural Revolution in urban China, Baum observed, were relatively rare. The third qualification was about the pattern of diffusion: political events were concentrated near urban areas and along transportation links. Geographic isolation meant that throughout much of these first two years, China's villages were "effectively insulated from all but the most cursory information concerning the occurrence of events elsewhere."<sup>17</sup>

Jonathan Unger recently began the task of re-assessment in this journal. He acknowledges that it now appears that the Cultural Revolution penetrated deeply into the rural hinterland, but he suggests that its impact was strongest among the non-agricultural population in towns and county seats.<sup>18</sup> Unger limits his re-examination in two ways. First, he makes a strong distinction within rural areas between the county seat and villages, and focuses exclusively on the latter. Secondly, he limits his concern to the period from 1966 to 1968, with the period thereafter treated implicitly as part of the post-Cultural Revolution restoration of order.<sup>19</sup> Unger notes the kinds of accounts summarized above, but he is sceptical of claims that new sources provide unprecedented information about the Cultural Revolution in the countryside, because there are still few detailed narratives of events at the *village* level. Of the new county annals, he notes, "these sometimes include accounts of the Cultural Revolution, but they chronicle the combat in county towns and almost invariably stop short of the villages. A relatively small number of them contain scattered sentences on what occurred within particular villages, but that is all."<sup>20</sup> Because of the rarity of detailed village level accounts, he argues, "the consequence is that the information emanating from China about the Cultural Revolution in the villages has not moved much beyond what was available to Richard Baum in 1971."<sup>21</sup>

We agree with Unger's emphasis on the value of detailed village-level narratives, but we believe there is still much to be learned about rural China from post-Mao sources before beginning to lament their limitations. This article seeks to demonstrate this with a systematic survey of information about the Cultural Revolution contained in over 1,500 county

17. Baum, "The Cultural Revolution in the countryside," p. 367.

18. Jonathan Unger, "Cultural Revolution conflict in the villages," *The China Quarterly*, No. 153 (March 1998), pp. 82–106, at pp. 82–83.

19. For Unger, the Cultural Revolution ended with "the final restoration of order during 1968 after directives from Beijing to enforce the establishment of so-called 'revolutionary committees' in each locale" (*ibid.* p. 84). Baum's view was somewhat different: "it was only with the 'struggle-criticism-transformation' campaign in the autumn and winter of 1968–1969 that the Cultural Revolution became a concrete reality for the majority of China's peasantry" (Baum, "The Cultural Revolution in the countryside," p. 367).

20. Unger, "Conflict in the villages," p. 85. Unger is correct to note that the county annals are county-centred and rarely provide sustained narratives of events in single villages. However, the assertion that they contain little information about events in communes and production brigades is overstated. Such information is in fact relatively common in the longer and more detailed of the annal accounts that we have seen, and which number in the hundreds.

21. *Ibid.* p. 85.

annals. Basic information from these accounts has been read and coded into a data set that permits generalization about the strengths and weaknesses of this source of information, and about the scope, timing and human impact of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside. Emulating the rigour of Baum's early analysis with new sources of information, the article attempts to show which of the original judgements need to be revised, by how much and in what specific ways. One common feature of county annals is the practice of stating specific numbers of people killed, injured or persecuted. They therefore make possible grounded estimates of the magnitudes of these numbers for all of rural China, an important step towards estimating the human impact of the Cultural Revolution nation-wide.

#### *County Annals (xianzhi) on the Cultural Revolution*

In 1988 there were 1,936 counties (*xian*) in China, virtually all of which are considered rural for the purposes of this study. There were, in addition, 248 "county-level cities," the vast majority of which were labelled counties and considered rural in 1966.<sup>22</sup> These counties range from ones directly under the administration of large municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai to remote "autonomous counties" (*zizhixian*) designated for specific minority nationalities. By 2001, the vast majority of these jurisdictions had published their newly compiled county annals, which were to cover the history of the county up to 1985, the year that localities began their preparation in an organized way.<sup>23</sup>

Local compilers of these volumes faced a serious political dilemma. How should they treat the "errors" and "mistakes" of the Mao period? Most sensitive of all was the question of how to treat the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after local writing groups were established in the early 1980s to collect materials and draft sections of these annals, a lively debate erupted over the way in which the Cultural Revolution should be handled. Some of the local scholars and functionaries assigned to work on these sections wanted to detail local events with honesty, accuracy and in detail. Others, however, felt that full accounts of this sort could create serious embarrassment for local political incumbents, and perhaps exacerbate nascent factional tensions.<sup>24</sup> The debate was seemingly settled with

22. Yan Chongnian, editor-in-chief, *Zhongguo shi xian da cidian* (*The Encyclopedia of Chinese Cities and Counties*) (Zhangjiakou: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1991), p. 1. In addition to the three cities directly under the national government, there were 183 "prefectural level" cities (*diji shi*). Unless otherwise specified, this is the source for all information in this article about the location and boundaries of counties.

23. See Edward Vermeer, "New county histories: a research note on their compilation and value," *Modern China*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (October 1992), pp. 438–467. Historians have long used the term "gazetteer" to designate the *fangzhi* of the imperial and republican eras. See Stig Thøgersen and Søren Clausen, "New reflections in the mirror: local Chinese gazetteers (*difangzhi*) in the 1980s," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (January 1992), pp. 161–184, at p. 162.

24. See Vermeer, "New county histories," pp. 445–46, and also Qu Jiang, Da xianzhi bangongshi, "Jixu 'wenhua da geming' yi xi bu yi cu" ("The 'Cultural Revolution' should be narrated in detail, not in broad strokes"), *Sichuan difangzhi tongxun* (*Sichuan Local Annals*



the promulgation of national guidelines in 1985, which specified the principle of “recording in broad strokes, not in detail” (*yi cu, bu yi xi*) when dealing with politically sensitive subjects.<sup>25</sup> This more conservative approach was embodied in the slogan “three proper [methods]”: past political mistakes should be dealt with in “broad strokes” but not in “detail”; coverage should be scattered in different sections of the annals; and the account should be brief. “Politically negative movements” and “political mistakes” were to be dealt with by the local Party, not the compilers of local annals.<sup>26</sup>

As is often the case in China, the interpretation and implementation of these general regulations was in the end primarily a matter for local authorities. Early drafts of county annals were subjected to nervous scrutiny by local officials who demanded extensive cuts before publication. In one case, the book was already at the printers when orders came down from the province to stop the presses and implement further cuts.<sup>27</sup> The process of political vetting of local annals later became regularized and professionalized in order ensure evenhanded local censorship of drafts and also the uniformity and quality of the product.<sup>28</sup>

The conservative spirit of the 1985 guidelines is reflected in the finished products. Many of these accounts are indeed very brief, and provide little detail about the Cultural Revolution. Most of the annals that do provide information about the events of this period scatter it in different parts of the publication, so that a reader must pull together material from the standard “chronicle of major events” (*dashiji*) and separate sections on Party building, government, legal and criminal affairs, political movements and, in some cases, a separate section on the “Cultural Revolution.”

Also reflected in these final products, however, is the remarkably broad latitude exercised by provincial authorities in deciding how exactly to define “broad strokes” and “brevity.” There is wide variation in the amount of material about the Cultural Revolution contained in county annals (see Table 1). Shaanxi province far surpassed all others in its coverage of this period. The vast majority of county annals we have seen from that province provide a lengthy separate section about the events of the Cultural Revolution. The average number of words (characters) devoted to the subject in Shaanxi is just below 11,000 – almost triple the average for the country as a whole. Of the 37 accounts that contain more

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footnote continued

*Newsletter*), No. 1 (January 1982), pp. 7–9; Xuan Ping, Chongqing shi shuli zhi bianji shi, “Zhide shensi de yipian wenzhang – ‘Jixu “wenhua da geming” yi xi bu yi cu’ ” (“An essay worth pondering – ‘The “Cultural Revolution” should be narrated in detail, not in broad strokes’ ”), *ibid.*, No. 5 (May 1982), pp. 40–41.

25. Thøgersen and Clausen, “New reflections in the mirror,” pp. 165–67, at p. 166.

26. Vermeer, “New county histories,” p. 455. See also Zheng Zhengxi, Guangxi tongzhi guan, “‘Cu’ ji ‘wenge’ yu fenshi ‘taiping’ ” (“Recording the ‘Cultural Revolution’ in broad strokes, and ‘presenting a false picture of peace and prosperity’ ”), *Sichuan difangzhi* (*Sichuan Local Annals*), No. 2 (February 1988), pp. 13–14.

27. Vermeer, “New county histories,” pp. 451–52.

28. Thøgersen and Clausen, “New reflections in the mirror,” pp. 169–170.

Table 1: Average Length of Cultural Revolution Accounts, by Province

<i>Province</i>	<i>(1) Average length (characters)</i>	<i>(2) Number of xian in sample</i>	<i>(3) Total xian in province</i>	<i>(4) % coverage of province</i>
Shaanxi	10,689	65	98	64
Shanghai	7,204	10	10	100
Beijing	6,440	2	9	22
Hebei	5,229	91	149	60
Guangdong*	5,198	61	114	55
Guangxi	5,117	66	88	73
Henan	4,652	98	127	76
Guizhou	4,423	64	85	74
Sichuan	4,282	125	194	64
Hunan	4,266	76	103	69
Yunnan	4,111	77	126	58
Gansu	4,022	58	80	70
Xinjiang	3,881	25	88	23
Tianjin	3,872	5	5	100
Jiangsu	3,715	64	76	80
Jilin	3,680	23	47	47
Heilongjiang	3,531	61	81	74
Fujian	3,498	53	69	77
Inner Mongolia	3,263	35	87	36
Liaoning	3,243	31	59	48
Ningxia	3,225	12	20	60
Shanxi	2,744	63	106	57
Shandong	2,653	89	112	73
Jiangxi	2,557	75	91	82
Anhui	2,521	68	83	81
Hubei	2,361	65	81	75
Qinghai	2,187	14	40	35
Zhejiang	2,089	54	80	64
Tibet	—	0	80	0
<i>Total</i>	4,066	1,530	2,388	62

*Note:*

\* Guangdong figures include three counties in Hainan, then part of Guangdong.

than 12,000 characters, 24 are from Shaanxi province (see Table 2). Shanghai, Beijing, Hebei, Guangdong and Guangxi also devote considerable space to the subject. At the other end of the spectrum are provinces that took the conservative national guidelines to heart, providing fewer than 3,000 words: Shandong, Jiangxi, Anhui, Shanxi, Hubei, Qinghai and Zhejiang. Many counties provided virtually no useful information about the events of that period. Not surprisingly, the quality of the information in these accounts varies by their length.



Table 2: **Longest County-level Accounts (over 12,000 characters)**

<i>Province</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Length (characters)</i>
Shaanxi	Baishui xian	37,068
Guangdong	Zengcheng xian	27,040
Shaanxi	Ningqiang xian	24,040
Shaanxi	Ankang xian	23,846
Shaanxi	Baihe xian	21,000
Shaanxi	Zichang xian	20,335
Shaanxi	Luochuan xian	19,860
Shanghai	Shanghai xian	19,840
Shaanxi	Mian xian	19,525
Shaanxi	Xingping xian	19,480
Shaanxi	Fugu xian	19,128
Shaanxi	Chengcheng xian	19,059
Shaanxi	Long xian	18,600
Shaanxi	Ganchuan xian	18,315
Shaanxi	Shenmu xian	18,120
Shaanxi	Fu xian	17,840
Shanxi	Changzhi xian	17,024
Sichuan	Meishan xian	17,024
Shaanxi	Huanglong xian	16,600
Shaanxi	Lintong xian	16,280
Shaanxi	Nanzheng xian	16,120
Shaanxi	Pucheng xian	16,120
Shaanxi	Baoji xian	15,960
Hebei	Shulu xian	15,700
Hebei	Xinji xian	14,960
Shanghai	Songjiang xian	14,840
Shaanxi	Jingbian xian	14,320
Guizhou	Xiuwen xian	13,560
Yunnan	Jinggu Daizu zizhixian	13,369
Shaanxi	Ansai xian	13,332
Hebei	Zhao xian	12,800
Shaanxi	Mizhi xian	12,717
Inner Mongolia	Tumote youqi	12,716
Hebei	Guangping xian	12,440
Shaanxi	Lantian xian	12,240
Jiangsu	Binhai xian	12,008
Shaanxi	Huangling xian	12,000

*The Compilation of a County Database*

The Universities Service Centre Library at the Chinese University of Hong Kong has one of the largest collection of county annals outside Beijing, and its collection is highly accessible. When we began photocopying and coding relevant sections of them in 1996, there were roughly

900 on the shelves. By the summer of 2001 there were close to 1,600.<sup>29</sup> Our aim was to create a database that recorded basic information about the sources themselves, and about the Cultural Revolution. Information about the source was essential to evaluate variation in the quality of the information provided about the Cultural Revolution. We assigned codes for each province and county, which permitted us to identify each record. We then recorded the year of publication, and counted the number of characters devoted to the description of Cultural Revolution political events in three separate sections of the annal: the chronicle of events (*dashiji*), a specialized section on the Cultural Revolution (if any), and “other” sections of the book (Party building, political movements, legal and judicial affairs, and so on). We emphasize accurate recording of the length of the account because the likelihood that a certain kind of event will be reported is directly related to the completeness of the account itself.

We were interested in three kinds of information about Cultural Revolution political events that occurred between June 1966 and December 1971: whether a certain kind of event occurred; the magnitude of such an event; and the date of occurrence. While the annals report a wide variety of specific events, for our current purposes we focus on a small number of common standard types: an attempted “power seizure” by a mass organization; an armed battle between two factions; and the establishment of a revolutionary committee. For each of these reported occurrences, we also recorded the year and month that it took place. To assess the magnitude of these events, we recorded commonly reported information about the number of deaths that resulted from political conflicts or campaigns; the number of injuries; and the number of people imprisoned, subjected to struggle sessions or otherwise accused of political crimes. To the extent that this was possible, we also recorded when such deaths, injuries or persecutions occurred in three time periods defined by two key events: the first attempt at a power seizure in the county, and the establishment of the revolutionary committee. Our aim is to describe the timing and spread of the Cultural Revolution in rural regions, and the magnitude of its impact in each of three periods: an early period, before the first attempt to seize power; a middle period after the first attempt to seize power up to the establishment of a revolutionary committee; and the later period, after the revolutionary committee was established. We wanted to be able to describe *what* occurred, *when* and the *magnitude* of the event. Because this is the way that information is commonly reported in county annals, we settled upon deaths, injuries and numbers “persecuted” as our indicators of magnitude.

The key question in using this kind of source is whether the lack of information about a certain kind of event indicates that it never occurred in the county, or simply that it was not reported. We adopted a strict convention in this regard: we would assume, for purposes of coding, that

29. The library has an online catalogue that permits a user to list currently catalogued holdings of *difangzhi*, by province: [www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk](http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk).

if there was no report of a specific kind of event, it did not occur. For example, if no deaths were reported, we would code “0” for deaths. If the narrative stated, as they often did, that “many people were persecuted to death,” we nevertheless code “0” if the actual number cannot be estimated with any accuracy. Only if the source stated that “several,” “several hundreds” or some similar figure had died did we permit the coder to estimate the amount.<sup>30</sup> As a result, our data are about *reported* events, not actual events. Because these sources never state “no one died” or “no one was persecuted at all” or “there were no armed battles,” we cannot determine directly whether the absence of a reported event indicates that nothing happened, or simply inattention, self-censorship or official censorship. In order to offset partially the likely bias due to under-reporting, we will compare the frequency of reported events with the length of the accounts. To the extent that there is a strong relationship between the length of an account and the likelihood that it reports a certain kind of occurrence, we can draw inferences about under-reporting in shorter accounts. That is the core of our strategy for using the source.

### *The Spread and Timing of Political Events in the Countryside*

We now return to where we began: factual questions about the impact of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside. Did rural counties experience the same range of events as in the cities? Table 3 summarizes the pattern for the 1,530 counties for which we have information. It is immediately clear from this tabulation that power seizures and armed factional conflict were very common in rural regions. Almost 87 per cent of these counties reported an attempt at a “power seizure” by a mass organization, and 73 per cent reported an armed battle between two mass factions. These are extremely high figures, considering that many of the county annals that devote little space to the Cultural Revolution are likely to under-report such events. These figures indicate that no matter how remote from urban centres, rural counties experienced many of the same political events that we long assumed were common primarily in cities.

The timing of such events, moreover, indicates that rural counties experienced these signature events quickly, closely following the pattern observed in cities. Almost all of the first attempts at “power seizures” occurred in January 1967, the same month that the first “power seizure” occurred in Shanghai. The earliest armed battle between factions occurred in August 1966, and the median occurrence of such an event was August 1967, in the middle of the national high tide of factional battles that coincided with the Wuhan incident of the month before. Similarly, the median month for the establishment of a revolutionary committee at the

30. The authors will provide copies of the codebook on request.

**Table 3: Timing and Rate of Occurrence of Key Events, 1966–1971  
(number of reported events, by period)**

<i>Time period</i>	<i>Power seizures</i>	<i>Armed battles</i>	<i>Revolutionary committee formed</i>
June-Dec. 1966	8	8	0
Jan.-Mar. 1967	1,247	52	124
Apr.-June 1967	47	144	124
July-Sept. 1967	14	465	24
Oct.-Dec. 1967	5	175	108
Jan.-Mar. 1968	1	89	399
Apr.-June 1968	0	81	274
July-Sept. 1968	0	26	267
Oct.-Dec. 1968	0	19	107
Jan.-Dec. 1969	2	26	71
Jan.-Dec. 1970	0	0	1
Jan.-Dec. 1971	0	0	5
<i>Summary information</i>			
Earliest event	November 1966	August 1966	January 1967
Median event	January 1967	August 1967	March 1968
Last event	January 1969	October 1969	November 1971
% reporting the event	86.5	72.6	98.3

*Note:*

If there is more than one such event reported in the county, the first reported power seizure and armed battle is recorded, and the last reported revolutionary committee is recorded.

county level was March 1968, one month after the median date for provinces.<sup>31</sup>

This suggests a very different process of diffusion from that described by Baum in 1971. The influence of the Cultural Revolution in rural county seats appears to have been felt very quickly. The temporal pattern of events as they affected county seats mimics closely that of the major cities outside Beijing. If the diffusion process was delayed or weakened, it occurred between county seats and villages – although we cannot investigate this possibility with our information. However, the fact that certain kinds of typical Cultural Revolution events occurred relatively quickly in almost all rural county seats does not reveal much about the *magnitude* or the *character* of these political events, or their temporal pattern. It is to this subject that we now turn.

31. Guangdong was the 15th of 29 provinces to establish a revolutionary committee; it did so on 21 February 1968.

*The Magnitude of the Cultural Revolution's Impact*

How large was the impact of these events on rural society? To gauge this, we turn to our measures of magnitude – numbers of people reported as killed, injured and persecuted – and try to trace patterns of change through time. We employ the same three periods used above to gauge the timing of events. Period 1 begins in June 1966 and ends with the first attempt at a “power seizure” by some faction within the county. Period 2 begins with the first attempt at a “power seizure” and ends with the establishment of the county’s revolutionary committee. And Period 3 begins with the revolutionary committee and ends in December 1971.

These three periods define relatively distinct local political circumstances. In the first, the county leadership is still in power – at least nominally – and is in most cases still struggling for survival. In the second, the county leadership is paralysed or divided, if still in power, and there ensues a struggle for local political dominance. In the third, a political settlement is imposed by the installation of a new leadership group recognized by higher levels of government and usually supported by army units, and there follows a period of suppression of lingering opposition and intensified campaigns to search for class enemies.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 summarize the pattern of reported deaths, injuries and persecutions for each of these three periods, and the totals for the entire period under consideration. These tables explore the relationship between the length of the account and the magnitude of the reported human impact, and provide separate averages for accounts of different lengths. Our assumption about these accounts is that the reported magnitude of events varies according to local censorship and neglect in reporting about the period, and that the best measure of censorship and neglect (or the quality of the account) is the number of words devoted to describing the Cultural Revolution. Simply put, we expect short accounts to be less frank and less detailed, resulting in smaller reported magnitudes. On the other hand, we expect that variation among the longer, higher quality accounts will more closely approximate the actual variation in historical events. If our assumption about the relationship between the quality of accounts and the reported magnitude of events is correct, the longer accounts are the ones that we should rely upon in deriving estimates for the countryside as a whole.

These tables therefore give different averages for accounts of different length: for all counties, for those below 4,000 words, between 4,001 and 8,000 words, and more than 8,000 words. This permits us to examine the relationship between account length and reported magnitude. Column 1 shows the number of counties used in calculating the average for a specific group of counties, column 2 shows the average number of casualties per county for that group, and column 3 shows the projected raw estimate for all of rural China, if that group of counties was used as the basis for the estimate.

All three tables show two remarkably strong and consistent patterns. First, the number of reported casualties grows rapidly with the length of

**Table 4: Estimates of “Unnatural Deaths” due to Cultural Revolution, by Period, 1966–1971, Adjusting for Length of Account**

<i>Basis for estimate</i>	(1) <i>No. counties used in estimate</i>	(2) <i>Reported deaths per county</i>	(3) <i>Corresponding national estimate</i>
<i>Period 1</i>			
All counties	1,530	0.51	1,218
< 4,000 words	962	0.22	525
4,001–8,000 words	448	0.72	1,719
> 8,000 words	120	2.10	5,015
<i>Period 2</i>			
All counties	1,530	16.3	38,924
< 4,000 words	962	9.5	22,686
4,001–8,000 words	448	26	61,372
> 8,000 words	120	36	85,252
<i>Period 3</i>			
All counties	1,530	40	94,565
< 4,000 words	962	22	52,536
4,001–8,000 words	448	59	141,608
> 8,000 words	120	108	257,904
<i>Total, 3 periods</i>			
All counties	1,530	80	191,756
< 4,000 words	962	43	104,117
4,001–8,000 words	448	126	300,888
> 8,000 words	120	206	491,928

*Note:*

National estimate is calculated as reported deaths per county times 2,388 (total number of non-urban county-level jurisdictions). Total averages are higher than the sum of the three periods because many accounts do not provide dates for the occurrence of some or all of the reported deaths.

the account in each of the three time periods. The pattern is accurately summarized in the overall totals for each type of casualty. The average number of reported deaths per county (Table 4, column 2, under “Total”) is 43 for short accounts, 126 for medium-length accounts and 206 for long accounts. The average number of reported injuries per county (Table 5) is 40 for short accounts, 89 for medium-length accounts and 217 for long accounts. And the number of people reported to have suffered from political persecution (Table 6) is 3,871 per county in the short accounts, 7,006 in medium-length accounts and 11,627 in long accounts.

A second pattern is equally clear: the impact of the Cultural Revolution grew enormously through time. By far the most damaging period was the third, after the establishment of the county revolutionary committee. This is true no matter which type of casualty we examine, and no matter what the length of the account. If we examine the reported averages for accounts longer than 8,000 words, for example, we find only 2 deaths



**Table 5: Estimates of Physical Injuries due to Cultural Revolution, by Period, 1966–1971, Adjusting for Length of Account**

<i>Basis for estimate</i>	(1) <i>No. counties used in estimate</i>	(2) <i>Reported injuries per county</i>	(3) <i>Corresponding national estimate</i>
<i>Period 1</i>			
All counties	1,530	1.4	3,273
< 4,000 words	962	0.17	398
4,001–8,000 words	448	2.3	5,377
> 8,000 words	120	8.6	20,107
<i>Period 2</i>			
All counties	1,530	13	29,926
< 4,000 words	962	9.3	21,743
4,001–8,000 words	448	17	39,278
> 8,000 words	120	28	66,399
<i>Period 3</i>			
All counties	1,530	35	81,830
< 4,000 words	962	19.2	44,890
4,001–8,000 words	448	49	114,562
> 8,000 words	120	111	259,518
<i>Total, 3 periods</i>			
All counties	1,530	68	158,984
< 4,000 words	962	40	93,520
4,001–8,000 words	448	89	208,082
> 8,000 words	120	217	507,346

*Note:*

National estimate is calculated as reported injuries per county times 2,388 (total number of non-urban county-level jurisdictions).

per county in period 1, 36 in period 2 and 108 in period 3. For injuries, the respective numbers by period are 8.6, 28 and 111. And for political persecution, we see a slight deviation in the pattern, with the number of persecutions dropping in the second period before rising to extraordinary heights in the third: 862, 229 and 9,944.

In view of this temporal pattern, Baum's initial estimates are not so surprising, nor are they so much at odds with later evidence as might be imagined. In fact, his above-quoted statement that it was only in the winter of 1968–69 that the impact of the Cultural Revolution was fully felt in the countryside is entirely accurate. The most damaging period began just as Baum's article was being edited for publication. Similarly, Unger's unenthusiastic view of the new information contained in post-Mao sources is a product of his more restricted definition of the Cultural Revolution, which ends with the establishment of revolutionary committees.<sup>32</sup> Whether we choose to define this period as part of the Cultural

32. Unger is fully aware of the violence of this later period, because he was among the first to document it: Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The*

**Table 6: Estimates of Political Persecution due to Cultural Revolution, by Period, 1966–1971, Adjusting for Length of Account**

<i>Basis for estimate</i>	(1) <i>No. counties used in estimate</i>	(2) <i>Reported victims per county</i>	(3) <i>Corresponding national estimate (millions)</i>
<i>Period 1</i>			
All counties	1,530	597	1.40
< 4,000 words	962	430	1.01
4,001–8,000 words	448	885	2.07
> 8,000 words	120	862	2.02
<i>Period 2</i>			
All counties	1,530	157	0.37
< 4,000 words	962	112	0.26
4,001–8,000 words	448	234	0.55
> 8,000 words	120	229	0.54
<i>Period 3</i>			
All counties	1,530	4,213	9.85
< 4,000 words	962	2,963	6.93
4,001–8,000 words	448	5,363	12.5
> 8,000 words	120	9,944	23.3
<i>Total, 3 periods</i>			
All counties	1,530	5,397	12.6
< 4,000 words	962	3,871	9.05
4,001–8,000 words	448	7,006	16.4
> 8,000 words	120	11,627	27.2

*Note:*

National estimate is calculated as reported victims per county times 2,388 (total number of non-urban county-level jurisdictions).

Revolution or its aftermath, few will disagree that the events of this later period were the direct consequence of a movement set in motion in 1966, and these consequences would not subside until after the death of Lin Biao in the autumn of 1971. To understand the impact of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside, one misses most of the story if one ends in 1968.<sup>33</sup>

What are the implications of these county-level casualty rates for broader national estimates of the human impact of the Cultural Revolution? The most reliable basis for making such estimates are the 120 counties that contain more than 8,000 words. Our breakdown of reported casualty rates by length of account makes clear that the length of the

*footnote continued*

*Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

33. We do not imply that this temporal pattern differed greatly from urban areas, but a direct comparison is far beyond the scope of our current research.

account is very strongly related to the number of reported casualties. Our most important assumption is that the length of the account is not in itself related to the severity of the local Cultural Revolution. Everything we know about how these county annals were compiled and approved for publication suggests that it is reasonable to assume that places that had a great deal to hide would be as likely to conceal as to reveal. The apparent frankness of Guangxi county annals is notable (Table 7), and there are independent reasons for believing that the Cultural Revolution was unusually severe there. However, Shaanxi is heavily over-represented in this long-account category, and its casualty rate was relatively low for provinces with long accounts. And Guangxi's frankness is offset by many provinces with a reputation for a severe Cultural Revolution and who reported very little activity. Shandong reported only 18 deaths per county, Zhejiang 17, Hubei 11 and Qinghai only 4 (Table 7).

We therefore consider the average *reported* casualties for the long accounts to be a sound basis for computing conservative estimates for rural China as a whole. We compute such estimates in a relatively straightforward manner: by multiplying the per-county rate by the total number of rural counties.<sup>34</sup> The resulting national estimates, extracted from the figures for the long accounts in Tables 4–6, are sobering (see Table 8). At least 492,000 people were killed in rural China during this period, and a roughly equal number suffered permanently debilitating injuries. A staggering 27 million were targeted as political enemies and were variously put through struggle sessions, investigations, imprisonment, beatings and torture. If the figures for deaths are complete, they imply that roughly 2 per cent of those who were designated as targets of the Cultural Revolution did not survive.

### *Refining the Estimates*

These estimates are conservative because they are designed only to eliminate under-reporting due to the brevity (and likely censorship) of the *shorter* accounts. In other words, we have corrected for under-reporting due to the length of the account, but we have also assumed that the long accounts *fully and accurately* report the magnitude of the Cultural Revolution's impact. It is now time to release this assumption, and consider the extent to which even the longest and most accurate accounts under-report these events.

The figures themselves provide reasons to suspect that even these long accounts do not fully report the magnitude of events. The ratio of persecutions to deaths, for example, seems low. There were an estimated 27 million people targeted for persecution, yet fewer than 2 per cent of them reportedly died as a result of this persecution. In light of the events

34. We considered using county population to compute per capita rates as a basis for a national rural estimate, but we lack 1966 population data for too many of the counties. Given the uncertainties involved due to under-reporting, we do not feel that we would gain much in confidence in our estimates by a more precise method of extrapolation.

**Table 7: Average Reported Deaths per County and Average Length of Account, by Province**

<i>Province</i>	<i>Reported deaths per county</i>	<i>Average length</i>
Guangxi	581	5,117
Shanghai	334	7,204
Guangdong	290	5,198
Liaoning	145	3,243
Inner Mongolia	144	3,263
Beijing	101	6,440
Jilin	94	3,680
Shaanxi	90	10,689
Yunnan	81	4,111
Hunan	80	4,266
Hebei	64	5,229
Gansu	58	4,022
Sichuan	49	4,282
Jiangxi	48	2,557
Shanxi	40	2,744
Xinjiang	38	3,881
Fujian	29	3,499
Heilongjiang	29	3,531
Jiangsu	28	3,715
Shandong	18	2,653
Zhejiang	17	2,089
Guizhou	14	4,423
Hubei	11	2,361
Ningxia	11	3,225
Anhui	11	2,521
Henan	9	4,652
Qinghai	4	2,187
Tianjin	2	3,872
<i>Total</i>	84	4,092

described in these annals, where armed battles are widespread, and torture, summary executions and massacres are not unusual, a 2 per cent death rate among political targets seems to be low. Our impression of the sources is that the reports of persecutions are more complete than of deaths and injuries for two different reasons. First, the numbers “persecuted” appear to have been recorded from official records of persecution campaigns conducted before the fall of the Party committee and after the establishment of the revolutionary committee. The higher numbers persecuted in periods 1 and 3 reported earlier bear out this impression: the middle period is one that by definition did not have a fully functioning government to compile records. In the early post-Mao period, committees reviewed these files and rehabilitated almost all of

**Table 8: National Estimates based on Reports of Deaths, Injuries and Persecution, Adjusted for Length of Accounts**

<i>Time period</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Injuries</i>	<i>Persecuted</i>
Period 1	5,000	20,000	2.0 million
Period 2	85,000	66,000	540,000
Period 3	257,000	260,000	23.3 million
Overall (1966–71)	492,000	507,000	27.2 million

*Sources:*

Tables 4, 5 and 6.

these individuals, reporting these figures as evidence both of the perfidy of the “Gang of Four” and that the new leadership was setting things right. Deaths and permanent injuries, however, are much more sensitive. While wrongful persecution can be classified retrospectively as an unfortunate “mistake,” murder is more likely to create political pressure for the punishment of those directly responsible. Moreover, deaths and permanent injuries are less likely to be accurately recorded and less likely to be reported after the fact. The circumstances under which many of the reported deaths occurred – village massacres, casualties in army suppression campaigns or death under torture to confess – were less likely to be detected by authorities or reported initially by those who committed these acts (often authority figures themselves). Moreover, the numbers killed have less public relations value after the Mao period: you can rehabilitate the living, but you cannot bring the dead back to life. For these reasons we suspect that the reported figures for numbers persecuted are far closer to the real numbers than the reported dead and injured.

One direct method to check on possible under-reporting is to compare reports that have emerged from other sources about a specific county to the relevant county annal account. Our ability to do this is currently very limited, but we are able to do it for around a dozen counties, many of which are usefully in Guangxi province. Guangxi is remarkable for the frankness of its reporting of casualties. Of the 24 county annals that reported more than 1,000 deaths, 15 are from Guangxi (see Table 9). Nevertheless, even for Guangxi, there is still a remarkable degree of under-reporting relative to the county archives drawn upon by Zheng Yi and the compilers of the *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao*. Of the five Guangxi counties for which we have the requisite information, only 5.8 per cent of the deaths recorded in local archives are reported in the county annals (calculated from Table 10). Only the annal for Wuxuan xian gives a full accounting of the number of deaths. While it is true that only one of these county annal accounts was over 8,000 characters (Mengshan xian, which records only 1 per cent of the actual total), it is sobering to think what the already-high averages for Guangxi would be if such under-reporting was as widespread as this limited sample suggests.<sup>35</sup>

35. The county annals for Guangxi report an average of 581 deaths per county, which implies a provincial total for rural regions of 51,000. Official sources put the Guangxi total

Table 9: County Annals that Report more than 1,000 Deaths

<i>Province</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Length</i>
Guangdong	Yangchun xian	2,600	6,480
Guangxi	Wuming xian	2,463	6,114
Guangxi	Gui xian*	2,219	6,280
Guangxi	Quanzhou xian	2,216	7,560
Guangdong	Wuhua xian	2,136	2,840
Guangxi	Lingui xian	2,051	5,240
Guangdong	Lianjiang xian	1,851	4,320
Guangxi	Du'an yaozu zizhixian	1,714	9,320
Guangxi	Tiandeng xian	1,651	960
Guangxi	Luchuan xian	1,557	4,760
Guangxi	Luocheng mulaozu zizhixian	1,425	3,680
Guangxi	Rong'an xian	1,416	5,520
Guangdong	Mei xian	1,403	8,440
Guangxi	Mashan xian	1,329	9,080
Guangxi	Lingchuan xian	1,321	8,588
Guangxi	Yishan xian	1,250	9,840
Guangdong	Guangning xian	1,218	3,560
Guangxi	Liujiang xian	1,183	4,600
Hunan	Ningyuan xian	1,093	2,916
Inner Mongolia	Keerqin youyi qian qi	1,070	8,640
Guangxi	Chongzuo xian	1,029	6,000
Guangdong	Lian xian	1,019	9,440
Guangxi	Luzhai xian	1,002	3,920
Shandong	Haiyang xian	1,000	2,394

*Note:*

\* Renamed Guigang shi in 1988.

The remaining counties do not do much better. There are public reports of a minimum of 381 deaths in Dingnan, Hua, Tongguan and Xiyang counties, yet their county annals report none of them. Dao xian, the Hunan county long infamous for its large-scale organized massacre of entire households of “reactionaries” in 1967, reported only 7 deaths that could be counted according to our rules, while internal investigation reports reportedly put the toll at 4,519.<sup>36</sup> Data on “persecutions” are much

*footnote continued*

for urban and rural areas as more than 83,000 dead, which suggests that the per county rural totals are low, especially so if the death tolls were more severe in the countryside. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de Guangxi* (Contemporary China: Guangxi), Vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1992), p. 130.

36. The incident, which took place in 36 communes, one town and ten districts during a 66-day period from August to October 1967, was described in some detail, but nowhere was the number of casualties stated in even general terms. What appears to have attracted such widespread revulsion is the practice of killing entire households, including children. In 1984, official investigations implicated 7,281 people in the crimes, including 402 Party cadres. See



Table 10: A Comparison of Other Sources with County Annal Reports, Selected Counties

Province	County	Other sources	County annal	Annal length
Guangxi	Binyang xian <sup>1,2</sup>	3,951 dead	40 dead	4,880
Guangxi	Mengshan xian <sup>1</sup>	850 dead	9 dead	8,080
Guangxi	Shanglin xian <sup>1</sup>	1,906 dead	171 dead	2,680
Guangxi	Wuxuan xian <sup>1</sup>	524 dead	526 dead	4,480
Guangxi	Zhongshan xian <sup>1</sup>	625 dead	63 dead	4,440
Hunan	Dao xian <sup>3</sup>	4,519 dead	7 dead	5,600
Jiangsu	Taichang xian <sup>4</sup>	7,500 victims	2,027 victims	2,450
Jiangxi	Dingnan xian <sup>5</sup>	7 dead	0 dead	2,400
		396 victims	144 victims	
Shaanxi	Hua xian <sup>6</sup>	217 dead	0 dead	1,520
		1,929 victims	0 victims	
Shaanxi	Tongguan xian <sup>7</sup>	16 + dead	0 dead	5,560
		3,343 victims	3,348 victims	
Shanxi	Xiyang xian <sup>8</sup>	141 dead	0 dead	4,305
Yunnan	Xinping xian <sup>9</sup>	22,000 victims	9,368 victims	2,304

## Sources:

(1) Internal reports in county archives cited by Zheng Yi, *Scarlet Memorial* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), pp. 7–14, 24, 39, 51, 71. (2) *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao* (*Chronology of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi*) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 123; figures refer only to one short period. (3) Zhang Cheng, “The great Dao county massacre” (see n. 36); (4) *Renmin ribao*, 15 March 1979; figures refer to only one case. (5) *Jiangxi ribao*, 18 December 1978; figures refer only to one case. (6) *Hua xianzhi*: “wenhua da geming” zhi, Hua xian, Shaanxi, mimeographed, no date, 50 pp.; figures are overall totals for the entire period. (7) *Shaanxi ribao*, 30 December 1978; figures refer only to one campaign. (8) *Renmin ribao*, 13 August 1980. (9) *Renmin ribao*, 23 July 1978.

more complete, as we suspected, but even so, fewer than half of the cases already reported in public sources are recorded for the five counties with such information in Table 10, and only Tongguan provides a fully accurate account.

## footnote continued

Hunan sheng Daoxian zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Dao xianzhi* (*Dao County Annals*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1994), pp. 156–57. A recent publication cites an internal investigation report compiled by officials in Lingling prefecture, which gives a death toll of 4,519. An additional 4,474 were killed in a similar fashion in the nine other towns and counties in the prefecture: Zhang Cheng, “Dao xian da tusha: 1967 nian Hunan Dao xian sharen shijian jishi” (“The great Dao county massacre: an account of the 1967 killings in Dao county, Hunan”), *Kaifang zazhi* (*Opening*) (Hong Kong), No. 7 (July 2001), pp. 63–80, at pp. 66–67. Dao xian is located on Hunan’s southern border with Guangxi’s Guilin and Wuzhou prefectures, and it is adjacent to both Quanzhou, which reported 2,216 deaths (see Table 9) and Zhongshan, which reported 625 (see Table 10). Two other Guangxi counties are in the general vicinity: Lingui, which reported 2,051 deaths (Table 9) and Mengshan, which reported 850 (Table 10). All of these counties are in or near the Guangdong–Hunan–Guangxi border region where the Taiping Rebellion originated. Mengshan is where the movement originated, and Quanzhou and Dao xian were sites of important early battles as the Taipings made their way north into the Xiang and Chang (Yangtze) river valleys. See Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 112 and 157.

**Table 11: Range of Overall National Estimates Adjusted for Length of Accounts, with Additional Assumptions about Under-reporting**

<i>Assumed under-reporting (%)</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Injuries</i>	<i>Persecuted</i>
0	492,000	507,000	27.2 million
33	734,000	756,000	40.6 million
50	984,000	1.0 million	54.4 million
67	1.5 million	1.5 million	82.4 million
75	1.97 million	2.03 million	109 million

The best estimates to be derived from the county annals depend on our estimate of the rate of under-reporting in the long accounts. Table 11 provides different national estimates for each type of casualty according to the degree of under-reporting that we assume, ranging from 0 (or 100 per cent accuracy) to 75 per cent (or reporting only 25 per cent of the actual number). For reasons already explained, we are more confident in the accuracy of the reports of political persecution. We believe that there is relatively minor under-reporting of these figures in the long accounts – something of the order of 25 per cent – and that the best estimate for the numbers persecuted in rural regions nation-wide is around 36 million. This is a staggering number, but it is arrived at through fairly conservative assumptions about the completeness and accuracy of the sources.

We must give a broader range for the estimate of dead and injured because we believe there is a much higher degree of under-reporting for these items. And we are much more certain about the bottom of this range than the top. We believe it is reasonable to assume that the long accounts under-report the actual number of deaths and injuries by at least one-third. This assumes that the longer accounts are based on relatively accurate local records on such events and that they are reported with a high degree of frankness in the county annals. However, the degree of under-reporting in even the best of these accounts may be considerably higher. Recording such information accurately is intrinsically difficult during the kinds of political circumstances that prevailed at that time. And the extreme sensitivity of such information even after the Cultural Revolution would lead to strong tendencies to under-report. We know from reading many of these long accounts that the numbers reported are partial counts that refer to specific time periods or to specific campaigns. And the evidence available from Table 10 suggests that there may be widespread under-reporting even in longer accounts and in provinces that have reported the highest numbers already.<sup>37</sup> This leads us to suspect that

37. In Inner Mongolia, for example, *Renmin ribao* (17 November 1980) reported that 16,222 people were killed in a campaign against a “New Inner Mongolia People’s Party.” Unpublished Party documents put the toll higher for Inner Mongolia, however: a report by Zhou Hui to the Central Secretariat on 16 July 1981 stated that 790,000 were imprisoned and

the true range of under-reporting in these long accounts is probably between 50 and 67 per cent. This implies that our best estimate for the numbers killed is between 750,000 and 1.5 million, with roughly equal numbers permanently injured.

*The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: A Retrospective View*

There are a number of ways in which initial estimates of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside need to be thoroughly revised. The first is the assumption that distance from major urban political centres dampened the reverberations of the Cultural Revolution. We have seen that urban political events were echoed very quickly even in the most distant county seats. Power seizures and factional conflict were widespread, almost endemic, phenomena, and they occurred on a timetable that did not reflect long delays commensurate with geographic distance. China's county seats, at least, were closely tied into the national political network, and the impact of national events diffused quickly. Still unclear is whether the actual nature of these superficially similar events was the same in rural areas; to answer this would require more detailed mining of some of the longer and more detailed of the county annals. Also unclear is the extent to which such events diffused throughout the villages in a county – but if the county seat was embroiled in conflict, the Cultural Revolution was never far away.

There is already clear evidence in our tabulations, however, that the magnitude of the Cultural Revolution and perhaps its qualitative features differed by region, and to some extent according to distance from major urban centres. Consider, for example, a comparison of two relatively remote but well-documented provinces (Guangxi and Shaanxi), with the suburban counties of Shanghai, whose accounts are also relatively detailed (Table 12). The pattern for each jurisdiction is distinct. In the early

*footnote continued*

interrogated, 120,000 permanently injured, and 22,000 killed. See Michael Schoenhals' introduction to W. Woody (pseud.), *The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia: Extracts from an Unpublished History*, Occasional Paper No. 20 (Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asian Studies at Stockholm University, 1993), p. vi. This was not the entire death toll for the Cultural Revolution, but only for one particularly extensive persecution campaign. We know from official sources that this campaign penetrated deeply into rural regions, where most Mongols live. To accommodate such large numbers, the average number of deaths per county would have been on the order of 160 to 180, somewhat higher than the reported 144. Similarly, our estimate for Yunnan of 81 dead per county implies a provincial total of 10,000, considerably smaller than the overall provincial total of 22,000 provided in other sources. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de Yunnan (Contemporary China: Yunnan)*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1991), p. 175. The most direct test of our estimate is the figure of 30,000 dead reported for rural Guangdong during the cleansing of the class ranks campaign. Our Guangdong average of 290 reported deaths per county translates into a provincial estimate of 33,060 for the Cultural Revolution as a whole, which suggests that our estimates are low. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de Guangdong (Contemporary China: Guangdong)*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1991), pp. 118–19. Sichuan is another province whose county annals probably under-report casualty rates by a large margin. Other sources describe widespread and severe factional battles throughout the province that lasted from May 1967 to August 1969. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de Sichuan*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1990), pp. 154–57.

**Table 12: Course of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi, Shaanxi and Shanghai (reported casualties per county, unadjusted)**

<i>Jurisdiction</i>	<i>Period 1</i>	<i>Period 2</i>	<i>Period 3</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Deaths</i>				
Guangxi	1	86	347	581
Shaanxi	2	46	24	90
Shanghai	8	9	289	334
<i>Injuries</i>				
Guangxi	0	12	62	251
Shaanxi	3	32	22	59
Shanghai	0	64	3.7	67
<i>Persecution</i>				
Guangxi	188	284	11,643	12,234
Shaanxi	395	116	6,458	7,579
Shanghai	17,597	335	7,749	25,680

period, there is much more activity in suburban Shanghai than in the remote provinces. The average numbers dead are four to eight times greater in Shanghai than in the others, and the numbers targeted for persecution were greater than 17,000 in Shanghai, while only a few hundred in the distant provinces.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the middle period – after the power seizure and before the establishment of the revolutionary committee – was relatively mild in Shanghai, while the magnitude of events continued to build in the distant provinces.<sup>39</sup>

If we were tempted to conclude that the Cultural Revolution was more severe in the later period in the more remote regions, however, the tabulations give us pause. The persecution campaigns that occurred in the last period were just as severe in Shanghai as in Shaanxi, and they resulted in ten times the number of reported deaths per county. In fact Shanghai's figure for deaths during this period is not much lower than Guangxi's, despite the fact that Shanghai's death toll was almost exclusively through such campaigns as the "cleansing of the class ranks"

38. Shanghai's higher figures are partially attributable to a larger population. Shanghai's suburban counties averaged 434,000 people in 1966; Guangxi, 310,000, and Shaanxi, 221,000.

39. This primarily reflects the fact that this second period was very short in Shanghai. Shanghai Municipality's revolutionary committee was the third to be approved by the centre (5 February 1967, after Heilongjiang and Shandong). The median date for the establishment of revolutionary committees in Shanghai suburban counties was March, making for a "period 2" that averaged only one month in length. In Guangxi, by contrast, the median date for the first attempt at a "power seizure" was January 1967, and the median date for county revolutionary committees was March 1968 – a "period 2" that averaged 15 months. The median date of the Shaanxi counties' first attempt at a "power seizure" was January 1967; for a revolutionary committee August 1968 – an average "period 2" of 20 months. The longer the "period 2," the longer the period during which there was no authoritative representative of the party-state, a fact that would imply a longer period of factional conflict and higher casualties.

(*qingli jieji duiwu*), whereas in Guangxi wholesale massacres of civilian populations were not unusual.<sup>40</sup> The sharp contrast of Shanghai in the early period with Shaanxi and Guangxi coincides with Baum's early finding that the severity of the Cultural Revolution was much greater early on in cities than in the countryside. But it is clear that this momentum built up steadily in rural regions, until it matched and even surpassed urban events in the later period.

Finally, the human impact of the Cultural Revolution in rural China was enormous – much higher than was suspected before the death of Mao, and indeed much higher than certain post-Mao estimates for China as a whole.<sup>41</sup> Our estimates for the numbers killed alone are more than most estimates for the total number of political victims nation-wide in the 1957 anti-rightist campaign. However large these figures, it is clear that the Cultural Revolution as a demographic event pales in significance next to the more than 20 million who died in the Great Leap Forward famine of 1959–61. Our estimated 36 million “persecuted” according to the standards of post-Mao authorities – detained, subjected to struggle sessions, interrogated or tortured – is extraordinarily high, however, and these numbers alone make clear that the Cultural Revolution had a broad and deep impact on ordinary rural residents.

The timing of this human toll permits us to draw strong preliminary conclusions about how it grew to such large proportions. Only 20 to 25 per cent of those who were killed or permanently injured, or who suffered from political persecution met with such misfortune before the establishment of their county revolutionary committee. This means that the vast majority of casualties were not the result of rampaging Red Guards or even of armed combat between mass organizations competing for power. Instead, they appear to have been the result of organized action by new organs of political and military power. As they consolidated and exercised their power, often in very remote regions, they carried out massacres of innocent civilians, crushed organized opposition, and conducted mass campaigns to ferret out traitors that routinely relied on interrogation through torture and summary execution.<sup>42</sup> The history of this period has

40. Perry and Li cite a 1990 article in the journal *Shanghai dangshi* (*Shanghai Party History*) that reports more than 5,000 deaths among the 169,000 investigated in Shanghai in 1968 during the “cleansing of the class ranks” campaign. See Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai During the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), pp. 172 and 224. This figure constitutes just under half of all the 11,510 “abnormal deaths” reported for Shanghai during the entire Cultural Revolution. See *Dangdai Zhongguo de Shanghai* (*Contemporary China: Shanghai*) Vol. 1 (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1993), p. 280. The same source reports a total of more than 1 million political victims in the city (p. 282).

41. See, for example, John Fairbank's summary of the received view at the end of the 1980s: “Estimates of the victims of the Cultural Revolution now hover around a million, of whom a considerable number did not survive.” John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 402. This figure referred to both rural and urban China.

42. See, for example, Michael Schoenhals, “The Yunnan ‘political frontier defense’ of 1969–71,” paper prepared for the conference “Ethnicity, Politics, and Cross Border Cultures in Southwest China,” Lund University, 25–28 May 2000. Schoenhals argues that the events in Yunnan's border regions were much harsher than in Kunming, because they “telescoped”

yet to be written, and there is much in the longer county annals with which to begin this task.

### *Conclusion*

The ultimate arbiter of our estimates of the impact of the Cultural Revolution in rural China rests in more than 2,000 local archives, where the material used by the compilers of the county annals is deposited. Until the time when scholars can gain broad access to such materials, we will not know how accurate our estimates are. We suspect that they are more likely to be low than high, but nevertheless it is clear that the impact of the Cultural Revolution was enormous in rural regions, and after 1968 was arguably more severe in rural regions than in the cities. And it is clear that to understand the full magnitude of the Cultural Revolution's impact, we need to look carefully into the period from 1968 to 1971, which often has been treated as an afterthought by chroniclers of the subject.

We strongly suspect that to explain events of this magnitude, village-centred issues by themselves will turn out to be relatively unimportant. Unger's typology of village-level conflict in the two years after mid-1966 describes events that can be divided into two types: local conflicts that are expressed in Maoist political rhetoric, but which are essentially intra-village or inter-village conflicts; and "urban spillover," as when rebels or Red Guards arrive from the county seat or nearby city to recruit followers, foment conflict or take unilateral action. We suspect that the massive toll of the years after 1968 could only have been sustained by large-scale military and bureaucratic organization that spanned entire counties and rural prefectures. It is unlikely that such casualty rates were generated simultaneously and independently in hundreds of thousands of villages throughout China. It is also unlikely that this occurred without active participation by politically active villagers in townships and villages. The key to the story for this later period would appear to lie in a pattern of interaction between power-holders at all levels of the regional political hierarchy, in which village residents are alternately – or variously – mobilized and suppressed.

In this massive process of destruction and re-assertion of local state power, political impulses emanating from cities appear to have been magnified rather than dampened. This process occurred in a time and a place that has been routinely passed over in accounts of the Cultural Revolution. To be able to describe and identify it now, and raise these new questions, might lead some to celebrate how far we have come in our understanding of the events of these years. To us, however, it serves only to illustrate how inadequate our understanding of key aspects of the Mao era remains more than a quarter-century after its end.

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*footnote continued*

or compressed into a brief period a process that began earlier in the capital and other cities of Yunnan (p. 2).