Language and Violence During the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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ABSTRACT

Did violent rhetoric help to cause the widespread resort to physical violence during the Cultural Revolution? Or was the rhetoric, as some have assumed, merely a dependent variable — an 'option' which people 'chose' to express anger originating in social and institutional tensions which were the 'true' cause of the violence? This article argues that the rhetoric was an independent variable, and causally important. It was not chosen by the Chinese people, but *imposed* on them by the Maoist leadership as part of a great program of linguistic engineering designed to manipulate thought. The rhetoric changed attitudes through 'primitive affective and associational processes', and it undoubtedly fostered violence. At the same time, the effects of violent language, like the effects of all other causes, were mediated by contextual variables. While the language influenced everyone, some people partially neutralized its effects by interpreting it figuratively. They reduced it to a rhetorical attempt to arouse enthusiasm for a campaign based on non-violent criticism.

I. EXPLANATIONS OF THE VIOLENCE OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

No one knows how many people died as a result of the Cultural Revolution. J.K. Fairbank puts the number at about 400,000; Ann Thurston cites estimates of over a million; R.J. Rummel raises the figure to more than 1.6 million; and Jean-Luc Domenach thinks that it could be anywhere between one and three million.[1]

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1 J.K. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution* (London: Picador, 1988), 320; Ann Thurston, 'Urban violence during the Cultural Revolution: Who is to blame?', in *Violence in China: Essays in Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Jonathon N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 149; R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 98; Jean-Luc Domenach, *Chine: L'Archipel Oublié* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), cited by Jean-Louis Margolin, 'China: A Long

Whatever the true figure, the deaths represent only a tiny fraction of the violence, for most of those attacked were beaten or tortured, but not killed. The victims included disproportionate numbers of teachers, intellectuals, people with 'bad' class backgrounds, and cadres — of whom some 60-80 percent were purged.[2] The Red Guards who attacked these groups also suffered terribly. Many were killed or injured in battles with opposing factions; and very large numbers died, often coldly executed, when Mao used armed force to restore centralized control from mid-1968.

There is no doubt that the causes of this violence were in part political, social and institutional. Five explanations of this sort seem particularly important. First, the Communist Party had long taught the Chinese people that violence was an essential part of revolution. As Mao put it, in words cited countless times to justify violence during the Cultural Revolution, 'a revolution is not a dinner party . . . A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.'[3] The Party taught people to hate class enemies and to act on that hatred, and it led by example. During the land reform that followed its victory in 1949, the Party publicly executed perhaps a million class enemies, and during the Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries Campaign in 1950-51 it executed at least several hundred thousand more.[4] It inflicted humili-

March into Night', in Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 513.

2 The figure is from Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch 1949-1981* (California: University of California Press, 1987), 96. On violence in the schools, see amongst many other sources Gong Xiaoxia, "'Wenge'" zhong qunzhong baoli xingwei de qiyuan yu fazhan: pohuaixing jiti xindong de luoji' ['The origin and development of mass violence in the Cultural Revolution'], *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, 7 (1996), 92-121. Gong interviewed people from 76 schools and found that in every one of them teachers were beaten.

3 'Report on an investigation into the peasant movement in Hunan', in *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 30.

4 Estimates of the numbers executed differ widely. For the land reform, the figures commonly given range from one million to five million, and for the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries they generally range from seven hundred thousand to over three million. However, Stephen Shalom, *Deaths in China Due to Communism: Propaganda versus Reality* (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1984), has cogently criticized the higher estimates and suggests — with less conviction — that even the lower ones may be exaggerated. The lower estimates are given by Jonathon D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 517 (for the land reform), and Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: the Post-Liberation Epoch 1949-1981* (California: University of California Press, 1987), 47 (for the Campaign to Suppress Revolutionaries). The higher estimates are given by Margolin, 'China', 479-85, 790 n. 51; Rummel, *Death by Government*, ch. 5; and Jürgen Domes, *The Internal Politics of China 1949-1972* (London: Hurst & Co., 1973), 51-2. The most recent and detailed study of the Campaign to Suppress Counter-

ation and lesser degrees of brutality on alleged class enemies in many other campaigns, and it took great pains to ensure that local people shared responsibility for the violence. So when Party work teams sanctioned student attacks on suspected class enemies during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, they were acting in their accustomed fashion. And when Mao removed the Party's control, inviting the revolutionary masses to conduct the revolution themselves, the resulting violence was entirely predictable. The masses were just doing what Mao and the Party had taught them.[5]

Second, Mao and the Party had deliberately kept the class struggle alive by creating what became in effect a hereditary class system. They gave special privileges to people with 'good' or 'red' class backgrounds, since they regarded them as natural supporters of the revolution, and they discriminated against members of the 'bad' classes.[6] In successive political campaigns, they targeted the bad classes as potential class enemies, and they encouraged people to establish their revolutionary credentials by victimizing them. When Mao gave the 'revolutionary masses' their head, this carefully cultivated class hatred exploded as red-class Red Guards led a 'Red Terror' directed mainly at the bad classes. However, when Mao demanded attacks on the Party, which was dominated by the red classes, most revolutionaries with good class backgrounds were

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revolutionaries puts the number of executions at between eight hundred thousand and two million, and stresses that the evidence is fragmentary and contradictory. Julia C. Strauss, 'Paternalist terror: the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries and regime consolidation in the People's Republic of China, 1950-1953', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 44 (1), (2002), especially 87-9, 102 n. 26.

5 For interpretations which emphasize the role of the Party in teaching violence, see Thurston, 'Urban violence', 151-161; Alan P.L. Liu, *Political Culture and Group Conflict in Communist China* (California and England: Clio Books, 1976), 68-9, 115-21; and Anita Chan's excellent *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

6 All Chinese were allocated to class categories based on the class status that they, or their fathers, had enjoyed prior to 1949. The 'good' classes consisted of those who were regarded as natural supporters of the revolution: revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary martyrs, industrial workers, and poor and lower-middle peasants. The 'middle' classes, whose political loyalties were regarded as uncertain, consisted of people like middle peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, clerks, and intellectuals. The 'bad' classes consisted of those regarded as natural enemies of the revolution: landlords, rich peasants, and capitalists. Capitalists initially occupied an ambiguous position, in part because the Party needed their skills. However, during the Cultural Revolution, they were effectively treated as members of the bad classes, as were higher intellectuals. For purposes of persecution, the bad classes were usually lumped together with unfortunates who had officially been given opprobrious (but non-hereditary) political labels that described them as 'counterrevolutionaries', 'Rightists', or 'bad elements'.

reluctant to make war on their own kind. They lost the initiative to 'rebel' Red Guards, whose members were drawn largely from less privileged strata. The viciousness of the rebels' attacks on the Party reflected the fact that most of them belonged to groups that had largely been excluded from it.[7]

Third, while some people used the Cultural Revolution as an excuse to settle personal scores, much of the violence was linked to tensions within the Chinese authority structure. Students with grievances against teachers were able to humiliate and beat them, resentful workers were able to attack their superiors and sometimes take their jobs, and the children of local cadres who had been disciplined by higher authorities were able to label those authorities 'capitalist roaders' and attack them. Above all, people were able to avenge grievances linked to the system of tight Party control that existed until August 1966. Cadres who headed work units (*danwei*) had extensive powers to give or refuse permission, to dispense or deny patronage, to mobilize criticism or to force self-criticism. Inevitably, even the best of them made enemies. Moreover, the cadres were responsible for enforcing unpopular policies and were often blamed for the widespread starvation of the Great Leap Forward. When Mao called for criticism of the Party, people who had grievances against particular cadres or who had a more generalized resentment of authority took a savage revenge.[8]

Fourth, with the breakdown of established authority, an anarchic situation emerged in which Red Guards, workers and cadres who did not use violence could not compete in the battle for survival with those who did. Successful use of force to gain power in one's own city or province became the key to personal safety. Those who succeeded were able to punish their opponents as 'counterrevolutionaries'; those who failed were suppressed, humiliated, beaten and sometimes killed. The self-interested pursuit of violent strategies of survival created a situation in which no one was

7 Cf. Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: a Case Study* (California: University of California Press, 1978); Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathon Unger, 'Students and class warfare: the social roots of the Red Guard conflict in Guangzhou (Canton)', *The China Quarterly*, 83 (1980), 397-446; and Gordon White, *The Politics of Class and Class Origin: the Case of the Cultural Revolution* (Canberra: Contemporary China Centre, Australian National University, 1976). On the Chinese class system more generally, see Richard C. Krauss, *Class Conflict in Chinese Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

8 The role of organizational tensions is a leading theme of Lynn T. White's *Policies of Chaos: the Organizational Causes of Violence in China's Cultural Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). See also Liu, *Political Culture*, 115-21.

safe. So individual rationality produced collective insanity and China descended into low-grade civil war until Mao eventually demanded an end to the fighting and used force to restore order.[9]

Fifth, while Mao and his associates in the Central Cultural Revolution Group warned against violence when it suited their interests, at other times they encouraged it or regarded it with benign indifference. In August 1966, for example, the Minister of Public Security, Xie Fuzhi, gave the Red Guards what amounted to a license to kill: 'I do not approve [the] masses killing people, but if the masses hate bad people so much that we cannot stop them, then let us not insist on [stopping them] . . . The people's police should stand on the side of the Red Guards'.[10] Then in 1967 the Central Cultural Revolution Group, the Maoist organization in charge of the Cultural Revolution, told the People's Liberation Arm to 'arm the Rebels for self-defense'. Different units adopted opposing interpretations of who the 'Rebels' were, so both sides ended up acquiring arms more easily. Mao commented: 'It is not a bad thing to let the youth have some practice in using arms — we haven't had a war for so long.'[11]

These five explanations are not contradictory, but complementary, highlighting different aspects of a complex web of interacting causes. Taken together, they have a lot of explanatory power. However, they are by no means exhaustive. One question that they do not address is whether the violent *language* of the Cultural Revolution contributed to the physical violence. Most scholars have assumed — or even stated — that this hate-filled language had no independent causal efficacy, but simply reflected social and institutional tensions which were the 'true' cause of the violence. Lynn T. White, for example, notes that the violent 'linguistic symbols' were used to attack opponents, then suggests:

> People chose these symbols to express the intensity of their frustration at having been manipulated by government categories, bosses, and threats. They were mad. Pastels would not do; so they chose red. Quiet sutras and relaxed muscles could not let out enough of their anger, after their lives had been exploited so

9 The most vivid account of red Guard conflicts as a struggle for survival is Ken Ling, *The Revenge of Heaven: Journal of a Young Chinese* (New York: Putnam, 1972), especially chapters 24-30.

10 Quoted in Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 76).

11 Quoted in Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (London: Flamingo, 1992), 471.

> egregiously for years; thus they shouted loud slogans and clenched their fists, instead. A formal consistency of many symbols in the Cultural Revolution is evident. This pattern came not because uniformity is natural, or because such things are random, but because of the need for a language to express intense motives among people who felt sharp pain at specifiable kinds of state coercion.
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> These symbols were just options. Different, quietistic emblems have been sometimes chosen by Chinese people. Symbols do not cause events. Their selection is a thing to be explained . . . not an explainer. Their availability tells us nothing, because their opposites were also available.[12]

White's position deserves serious consideration, if only because many social scientists share his skepticism about the explanatory power of language. In what follows, I will offer a critique in three stages. First, I will question White's assumption that during the Cultural Revolution the Chinese people's use of violent language was an 'option' — his supposition that people were free to choose 'pastels' rather than 'red'. Second, I will analyze the language used to condemn class enemies, showing that it was itself a form of violence, that it dehumanized potential victims, that it fostered hatred of them, and that (if taken literally) it encouraged violent attacks on them. Third, I will explain the mechanisms through which language can affect attitudes and actions, then show how the violent language of the Cultural Revolution could trigger those mechanisms and lead to physical violence. Finally, I will clarify my argument by demonstrating that the effects of violent language, like the effects of all other causes, were mediated by contextual variables, so that language was one of a number of *influences* on thought, but not the *sole determinant.*

II. Language, Choice, and Linguistic Engineering

If White is correct in supposing that the violent 'linguistic symbols' used during the Cultural Revolution were just 'options' that people 'chose' to express their anger at state coercion, then language did not help to cause the violence; rather, it was a dependant variable — 'a thing to be explained . . . not an explainer.' If on the other hand, people were not free choose their own words but had to recite violent scripts dictated from above, language was an independent variable which may not have reflected their attitudes at the time they started to use it. This opens up the possibil-

12 White, *Policies of Chaos,* 270-71.

ity that, as people used the imposed language, it slowly exercised an influence on their thought. So we need to ask whether the language was freely chosen or forced on people from above.

In fact, the answer to the above question is perfectly clear. In Mao's China, the language of political movements was always dictated from above: people were never free to choose their linguistic symbols. Use of the correct, officially prescribed language was an outward sign of correct thought, and failure to use that language was an act of rebellion. So everyone used whatever linguistic formulae were attached to the current political movement. This was not an 'option', but a condition of survival.

The centralized control of political language in Mao's China was part of a wider pattern of linguistic engineering in the communist world. All the great Marxist regimes of the twentieth century saw linguistic manipulation as essential to their efforts to create what Leon Trotsky called 'a new, "improved version" of man'.[13] They believed that language and thought were two sides of the same coin, or at least that they were so closely connected that it was possible to re-make people's minds by controlling what they said, heard, wrote and read. Communist governments suppressed the use of words which were linked to 'incorrect' thought; they compelled everyone to learn a new, revolutionary vocabulary to express 'correct' thought; and they enforced the use of a multitude of linguistic formulae — slogans and other fixed expressions which served revolutionary purposes. They hoped that, over time, the constant repetition of officially prescribed words, phrases and scripts would have a massive effect — that revolutionary linguistic symbols would sink into people's minds and create new, revolutionary human beings. They were also aware that even when control of language failed to transform attitudes, it was a powerful instrument of coercion. So when the Chinese Communist Party compelled former landlords and capitalists to recite the same revolutionary phrases as the poorest peasant, it gave a striking demonstration of its ability to impose a new social and political order; and when it made well known counterrevolutionaries recite standard revolutionary scripts, it showed its power by forcing them to disseminate

13 Leon Trotsky, *Sochineniia*, XXI, Moscow, 1925-27, 110-112, quoted in Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 734.

precisely the revolutionary attitudes which everyone knew they despised.[14]

The Communist Party cadres who enforced the linguistic revolution in China after 1949 were themselves molded by techniques of linguistic engineering in Yan'an, where Mao and his lieutenants built an independent communist state between 1935 and 1947. There, the Party leadership created a revolutionary 'discourse community' — a community united and empowered by the constant repetition of Maoist myths, a common body of revolutionary theory, and a shared language.[15] That language included the technical vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, and an extensive array of slogans and other linguistic formulae that epitomized correct thought. Among the Yan'an cadres its use was compulsory and its effects were profound. In particular, it enforced revolutionary conformity, fostered revolutionary community, activated powerful persuasive mechanisms, and 'provided a logical grid for the collective interpretation of experience'.[16]

It was the Yan'anites who, under Mao, dominated the Party until the Cultural Revolution. It was they, and those whom they trained, who ensured that ordinary Chinese repeated all the latest slogans and spoke the language of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This linguistic revolution was orchestrated from the top levels of the Party. Michael Schoenhals summarizes the methods of prescribing and proscribing words, phrases and slogans ('formulations'):

> Information concerning changes in appropriate formulations . . . is constantly being communicated from higher to lower levels within the CCP. Sometimes it is merely in the form of a casual remark from a Politburo member during an inspection tour of the provinces. Sometimes it is in the form of special lists of new formulations, published after events like Party congresses or Central Committee plena. More often, it is in the form of intrabureaucratic Party circulars. In circulars dealing specifically

14 These themes are elaborated in my *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). For a good account of linguistic engineering in the Soviet Union with some information on other communist states, see John W. Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell's Newspeak and Its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

15 David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

16 *Ibid.*, 265. I outline some of the persuasive mechanisms activated by linguistic engineering below. For a more detailed explanation, see Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, chapter 1; chapter 2 of the same book surveys policies that activated these mechanisms in Yan'an and the People's Republic down to 1965.

> with formulations, the official whys and wherefores of preferred choices and changes in wording are spelled out.[17]

Very important linguistic directives, especially those involving major campaigns, were sometimes promulgated through circulars issued in the name of the Central Committee itself. Most, however, emanated from the Central Committee's servant, the Central Propaganda Department, from agencies that it supervised, or from other Party-controlled organizations.[18] The resulting uniformity of expression was neither spontaneous nor mysterious, but achieved largely 'by bureaucratic means.'[19]

Before the Cultural Revolution, Party cadres made sure that people in all walks of life complied with the latest directives on language. They ensured that everyone memorized political formulae expressing correct attitudes, and they turned the Chinese people into language police who monitored words — their own and everyone else's — for signs of incorrect thought. During the Cultural Revolution, however, Mao turned the 'revolutionary masses' against the Party, destroying its power and authority. In the process, he incapacitated the bureaucratic machine that had enforced China's policies of linguistic engineering. Under these circumstances, we might have expected centralized control of language to collapse as well. However, this is not what happened. In fact, linguistic engineering became even more all-pervasive and norms of linguistic rectitude were even more strictly enforced.

How can we explain this new phase of 'linguistic engineering without the Party'? It was based in part on Mao's control of the national press and the Party's propaganda organs. Through the Defense Minister, Lin Biao, Mao had the support of the *Liberation Army Daily*; then early in the Cultural Revolution he prepared the ground for his assault on the Party by purging the Central Propa-

17 Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), 31-32.

18 *Ibid.*, 32-33, 40-44.

19 *Ibid.*, 51-52. The imposition of new linguistic forms between 1949 and 1976 has been documented in a series of very useful monographs. They include Li Chi, *Studies in Chinese Communist Terminology*, No. 3 (Berkeley: East Asia Studies, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1957); T.H. Hsia, *Metaphor, Myth, Ritual and the People's Commune* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1961); H.C. Chuang, *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: a Terminological Study* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1967); H.C. Chuang, *The Little Red Book and Current Chinese Language* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1968); and Lowell Dittmer and Chen Ruoshi, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1981).

ganda Department and placing his closest aides in charge of *Red Flag, the People's Daily*, the *Guanming Daily*, the Beijing Party newspapers, and the New China News Agency.[20] This gave him total control of discourse emanating from the 'Party Center'. It also ensured that he and his aides could manipulate political discourse in the country as a whole, for the provincial press continued to adopt the language and line of publications connected with the Party Center. Provincial newspapers still carried title articles from *Red Flag* on their front pages, they reprinted countless other articles from the national press, they reproduced all the latest slogans and metaphors, and they quoted Mao more than ever before. Further down the hierarchy, the Red Guard publications showed far more independence. However, they always worked within the boundaries of Maoist discourse, they copied revolutionary language from the official press, and they ensured that even their most original wordsmiths confined themselves to variations on standard themes. Finally, ordinary people not only used the standard political formulae, but increasingly they tried to use Mao's own words, speaking 'a language of his quotations, a language after him.'[21]

What drove this linguistic conformity was fear. Everyone knew that correct language was the outward form of correct thought, and by the time of the Cultural Revolution the Chinese people had become self-policing. Moreover, their political awareness had been sharpened by participation in a great revolutionary upheaval whose goals were ideological renewal, political rectification, and the rooting out of class enemies. So they scrutinized other people's language, noticing the least sign of incorrect thought. Sometimes they offered comradely reproof; sometimes they treated the lapse as a serious political matter; and sometimes they said nothing, hoping that no one would discover that they had overlooked the offence. They all knew that 'one character mistake' (*yi zi zhi cha*) — a single 'counterrevolutionary' slip of the pen or tongue — could ruin their lives, so they tried to keep themselves safe by speaking in official formulae and quotations from Chairman Mao. Under these circumstances, the collapse of centralized political control

20 For analysis of Mao's strategy in organizing the attack on the Party, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 3: The Coming of The Cataclysm 1961-1966* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press and Columbia University Press, 1997); see also Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, chapter 3.

21 Chen Ruoshi, in Dittmer and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric*, 29. Chen lived in China from 1966 to 1973.

did not bring any relaxation of control over language. Indeed, as the paranoid hunt for class enemies intensified and China descended into low-grade civil war, people sought to avert suspicion by ensuring that their language was above reproach. While political authority crumbled during the Cultural Revolution, linguistic totalitarianism flourished as never before.

III. Language, Dehumanization, and Violence

Within the inner circle of Maoists, five people exercised a disproportionate influence on the language of the Cultural Revolution. They were Mao himself, who made crucial interventions and whose writings were mined for imagery; his wife, Jiang Qing, a leading member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group who dominated the cultural sphere and for a time had links with the *Liberation Army Daily*; Chen Boda, Mao's secretary and Chairman of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, who in 1966 led the Maoist purge of the *People's Daily* and took over as editor-in-chief of *Red Flag*; Yao Wenyuan, a member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, who succeeded Chen Boda at *Red Flag* and wrote the attack on Wu Han which launched the Cultural Revolution; and Qi Benyu, yet another member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, who was the deputy-editor of *Red Flag* and the main author of the trend-setting attacks on the Beijing Party Committee and Liu Shaoqi.

These symbol-makers and their teams of writers devised a language of class war that drew on existing revolutionary rhetoric, but sharpened and extended it. They based the language, in traditional fashion, on interrelated dichotomies of good and evil. As Lowell Dittmer has pointed out, the fundamental dichotomy was between the World of Light and the World of Darkness.[22] The all-pervasive metaphor of the forces of light was the color red, which symbolized joy, success and revolutionary ardor. Everything revolutionary was metaphorically, and sometimes literally, red, with Mao himself the reddest object of all — the 'red, red, sun' in the Chinese people's hearts.[23] The forces of darkness, by contrast, were

22 Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution*, 80-90, whose argument has influenced this paragraph and the next.

23 'Red' imagery, long a symbol of revolution, had always been prominent in Mao's China. Many writers have noted the 'cult of red' among the Red Guards, which is obvious from even a cursory examination of their tabloids, leaflets and posters collected in the twenty volumes of *Red Guard Publications*. 'Red' imagery in the official press is surveyed in Chuang, *Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, 6-9.

associated with the color black, a traditional metaphor for evil involving treachery or hidden designs. So the official press and Red Guard tabloids attacked 'black gangs' that held 'black meetings' in 'black headquarters' while secretly following an anti-socialist 'black line'; and they warned against an 'underground black party' that owed allegiance to a 'black flag', issued 'black instructions', published 'black books' and manipulated 'black backstage supporters'.[24]

Linked to the dichotomy of light and darkness was another crucial polarity: that between appearance and reality.[25] The inhabitants of the World of Darkness were the class enemies, who appeared to be human beings when they masqueraded in the World of Light, but who in reality were demons, spirits and savage beasts. The official press, as usual, gave the revolutionary masses their cue:

> The enemy in Daylight look like men, in darkness devils. To your face, they speak human language, behind your back, the language of devils. They are wolves in the skins of sheep, man-eating smiling tigers . . . The enemies without guns are more hidden, cunning, sinister and vicious than the enemies with guns.[26]

Such enemies disguised their deadly intent with 'sugar-coated bullets'. They were 'poisonous snakes' who, according to Mao, avoided detection by changing themselves into 'beautiful women';[27] they were 'foxes' who sought to go unrecognized by hiding their tails; they were 'jackals and wolves' who emerged from their 'lairs' to savage unwary revolutionaries; and they were 'parasitic worms' and 'injurious vermin' who silently sapped their victims' strength. Lesser enemies were 'harmful insects' or 'flies', as well as the 'talons and fangs' of people like Liu Shaoqi who manipulated them from behind the scenes. All these terms had traditional associations with deceit. People who had no chance of hiding their villainy, such as members of the 'black categories' or rival factions

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24 These terms, and others like them, are a constant theme in the materials collected in *Red Guard Publications*. The above terms are taken from vol. 5, pp. 1035, 1040, 1042, 1095, 1138, 1181; vol. 16, 5001, 5006; vol. 17, 5435, 5436, 5438, 5439; vol. 18, 5441, 5855, 5857. The official press, which started 'the attack on black', used the same terms and is surveyed by Chuang, *Cultural Revolution*, 17-19.

25 Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution*, 83-90.

26 Ibid., 83, quoting *Liberation Army Daily*, 23 August 1966.

27 *Liberation Army Daily*, 22 July 1967, quoted in Wang Yi, "'Dapipan' yu zuzhou wrshu: wenge xiang yuanshi wenhua 'fanzu' de shizheng yanjiu" ["'Mass criticism' in the Cultural Revolution and ancient China's curse sorcery"], *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, 7, (1996), 122-139.

of Red Guards, were often called 'dogs' — a scornful term with no connotations of deception. Rebel Red Guards labeled their pro-Party opponents 'Loyalist dogs', and all Red Guards said that their enemies had 'dog's heads', that they became 'mad dogs' when cornered and that they would end up as 'dead dogs'. Red-class Red Guards referred to children of the black categories as 'whelps' or 'sons of bitches'. Without exception, these terms were intended to degrade and dehumanize those to whom they were applied.[28]

Although the Cultural Revolution was directed, on one level, against feudal tradition, on another level it used ancient superstitions to foster hatred of class enemies. Mao himself actively promoted this. Before the Cultural Revolution, he had supervised the selection and editing of a book of ghost stories called *The Story of Not Afraid of Devils*, making changes designed to turn it into 'a tool of political struggle and thought struggle'. Its purpose was to warn that the people's enemies both in China and abroad were like ghosts, that they had the ability to take human form, that some people were 'half-man-half-ghost', and that all enemies with ghostly characteristics had to be unmasked and wiped out.[29]

Taking their cue from Mao, the revolutionaries identified class enemies with the whole pantheon of evil spirits mentioned in folklore and Buddhist mythology. The official press led the way, calling class enemies 'devils' (*muogui*), 'demons' (*guiguai*), 'vampires' (*xixie*), 'apparitions and specters' (*wangliang guimei*), 'monsters' (*muoguai*) and Yama (*yanwang ye*) — the King of the Dead.[30] The most common description of class enemies, however, was *niugui sheshen.* Literally this means 'cattle-ghosts and snake-gods', but it is often translated freely as 'monsters and demons' or 'ghosts and monsters'. In Chinese mythology, *niugui sheshen* were evil spirits which took human shapes to perform evil tricks, but when unmasked reverted to their ghostly forms. The term became popular after Mao used it during the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957, when it became a standard description of intellectuals who had pre-

28 These terms are taken from *Red Guard Publications*, vol. 5, 1035, 1040, 1168; vol. 17, 5438, 5441, 5574; vol. 18, 5855, 5858; vol. 19, 6077. The Red guards took their lead from the official press, whose use of this imagery has been noted by Chuang, *Cultural Revolution*, 24.

29 The book was published in February 1961 to meet the needs of 'cadre rectification'. An English translation, with a revealing preface, was published by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, in 1961. On the book's background, see S.M. Guo, *Wo Jianzhong de Mao Zedong* [*Mao Zedong through My Eyes*] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei People's Press, 1990).

30 Chuang, *Cultural Revolution*, 22-3.

tended to support the Party only to be unmasked when they launched a barrage of criticism during the Hundred Flowers Campaign.[31] It epitomized the dichotomy between appearance (human form) and reality (demonic nature) that underpinned the paranoia about hidden enemies during the Cultural Revolution.

To combat *niugui sheshen* and other spirits, Mao and his symbol-makers revived the ancient art of curse sorcery. This involved attacking the evil spirits with curses that were verbal representations of a ferocious physical onslaught.[32] Many of the curses were deliberately cruel, and the intention was to frighten the spirits so badly that they would reveal themselves then die of terror. 'Deep fry the devils!' shouted the revolutionaries, knowing that creatures of the world of darkness could not stand light and heat. 'Smash the dog's head!' they yelled as they forced hapless victims to the ground. *Red Flag* told those struggling against Wu Han to 'strip off his skin and cut his bones', while a Red Guard ballad warned Liu Shaoqi 'we will ferret you out, pull out your tendons, strip off your skin and kick your head like a ball!'[33] But the most popular curse was a quote from Mao, 'Sweep all *niugui sheshen* away!'[34] It expressed contempt for its targets, as well as faith in the magical ability of Mao's words to expose and destroy evil spirits.

Military terms had always been common in Mao's China, for the Communist Party was dominated by soldiers who had won power after more than twenty years of fighting. However, during the Cultural Revolution people spoke the language of war as never before. As usual, the initiative came from the top. Jiang Qing set the fashion with an article in the *Liberation Army Daily* titled 'Open Fire at the Black Anti-Party and Anti-socialist Line!';[35] Lin Biao's rhetoric rang with martial imagery, including his instruction to 'turn literary criticism into dagger and grenade';[36] and Mao himself told the revolutionary masses to 'Bombard the headquarters' of the capitalist roaders within the Party.

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31 See Mao's 'Speech at the Chinese Communist Party's National Conference on Propaganda Work', in *Selected Readings From the works of Mao Tsetung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 496, where *niugui shesheni* is translated as 'ghosts and monsters'.

32 Wang, 'Kapipan'; and B.Z. Li, *Zhou yu Ma* [*Cursing and Swearing*] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei People's Press, 1997).

33 Ibid., 130.

34 *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 10-11, 119.

35 *Liberation Army Daily*, 8 March 1966, quoted in H.C. Chuang, *Evening Chats at Yenshan, or the Case of Teng T'o* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1970), 19.

36 Quoted in *Red Guard Publications*, vol. 16, 5005.

The Red Guards took up Mao's military metaphor and extended it. One Red Guard tabloid answered his call by saying: "Bombard the Headquarters" is like a bugle call directing mighty revolutionary contingents . . . We'll follow your great strategic plan, galloping ahead with swords drawn, carrying all before us'.[37] The Red guards styled themselves as Mao's 'little generals', they labeled their newspapers 'battle news', and they formed themselves into 'Divisions', 'Brigades', and 'Fighting Squads'. Their language was not only martial, but savage. One of their newspapers thundered, 'Aiming at the heads of the capitalist roaders, fiercely hack! Aiming at their throats, shoot!';[38] and another cried, 'We want gunpowder and the smoke of gunpowder . . . We want violence! We want to seize power! We are against reconciliation and compromise.'[39] The language of war, like the imagery depicting opponents as savage animals and treacherous demons, reduced the Cultural Revolution to a life or death struggle between polar opposites. If people took the words literally, then any cruelty was possible.

IV. Language, Causal Mechanisms and Violence

We have seen that the violent language of the Cultural Revolution was not an 'option', but was dictated to the Chinese people by their Maoist rulers. Everyone used it because it showed the correct revolutionary spirit, and because refusing to use it was a suicidal, counter-revolutionary act. So the language was not merely a dependent variable chosen to convey the attitudes of those who used it, but an independent one. It influenced thought through a number of 'primitive affective and associational processes', including the following:[40]

Mere exposure: The more often people are exposed to some target (words, shapes, pictures or nonsense syllables), the more they tend to like it. Although excessive repetition can lead to a degree of 'wear out', most people still like the target more than they did at first exposure. This is especially true when the target is relatively complex, when it appears in a variety of contexts, and when each

37 *Xin Hui Bao*, 8 March 1968, in *Red Guard Publications*, vol. 5, 1146.

38 *Zhi Nong Hong Qi*, no. 7, Jan. 1968, in *Red Guard Publications*, vol. 3.

39 *Zhan Di Wen Yi*, no. 8, in *Red Guard Publications*, vol. 2.

40 The phrase 'primitive affective and associational processes' is taken from a key work on the links between language and attitudes: Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1986), 9.

exposure is brief.[41] The new political terms and slogans promoted during Chinese political campaigns met all these conditions. So the more people read, heard and used them, the more they liked them.

Modeling: We learn many things, including attitudes, by watching others and listening to them. We are particularly likely to adopt attitudes that others model for us if the models capture our attention, if we mentally rehearse then express the attitudes, and if we see that the attitudes are rewarded.[42] In totalitarian societies, linguistic engineers can ensure that these conditions are met. By making the entire population model 'correct' attitudes, they ensure the everyone pays attention to them, that everyone rehearses and expresses them, and that everyone observes correct attitudes being rewarded. Widespread attitude change, especially amongst the young, is almost guaranteed.

Reference group effects: We all tend to dismiss views espoused by groups that we regard as uninformed, prejudiced or unlike ourselves. However, we are heavily influenced by the views of groups with which we identify, which we respect, or whose approval we want. These are our 'reference groups' — groups to which we 'refer' for cues when we are deciding what to think, groups whose 'frames of reference' we adopt as we analyze the world.[43] Often enough, our reference groups agree, but in pluralist societies this does not always happen. Children can be caught between the conflicting views of parents, teachers and friends, and adults may have to decide whether they are going to follow the lead of their church, their political party or their trade union. In societies with totalitar-

41 For a discussion of the evidence, see Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993), 57-62.

42 For versions of modeling theory and debates about its mechanisms, see Albert Bandura, ed., *Psychological Modeling: Conflicting Theories*. Chicago and New York: Aldine Atherton, 1971; and for subsequent elaboration and application of the theory, see Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), and Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1986).

43 H.H. Kelly and C.L. Woodruff, 'Members' reactions to apparent group approval of a counternorm communication', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 52, (1956), 67-74; and Daryl J. Bem, *Beliefs, Attitudes and Human Affairs* (California: Brooks/Cole, 1970), 79-88. Reference groups 'model' attitudes, so there is a degree of overlap between 'reference group effects' and 'modeling'. However, modeling is not confined to reference groups, and reference group theory goes beyond modeling theory when it explains why we adopt attitudes modeled by some groups but reject attitudes modeled by others. That is why the two theories need to be distinguished.

ian tendencies, however, linguistic engineers can eliminate such conflict, at least on politically important issues. They just need to make every reference group address those issues repeatedly, using prescribed slogans and stock phrases, which express the official view. And when all reference groups speak with a single voice, even silent dissent is difficult.

Higher order conditioning. This is a form of classical conditioning. It occurs when we learn an emotional response to words or things through their repeated association with other words or things that have already acquired positive or negative connotations. For example, if we regularly link the word 'capitalism' with words like 'poverty', 'disease' and 'oppression', the negative connotations of those words will tend to attach themselves to the word 'capitalism' itself — and to the economic system that it signifies. Moreover, the newly acquired negative connotations of 'capitalism' will spread to semantically related words like 'profit' — and to their referents.[44]

Operant conditioning. This occurs when we modify people's attitudes or beliefs through reward or punishment. For example, if linguistic engineers get people to make statements that express 'correct' attitudes, then reward them with approval, those who make the statements become more inclined to believe that they are true. And if people who make 'incorrect' statements suffer disapproval or other forms of punishment, their belief in those statements tends to suffer.[45]

Cognitive Dissonance. Dissonance is a state of psychological discomfort that occurs when a person becomes aware of holding two beliefs that are psychologically inconsistent, or of holding a belief that is psychologically inconsistent with his or her behavior. For example, when revolutionary idealism leads people voluntarily to denounce their colleagues, they may experience severe dissonance

44 The classic studies are C.K. and A.W. Staats, 'Meaning established by classical conditioning', *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 54, (1957), 74-80; and A.W. and C.K. Staats, 'Attitudes established by classical conditioning', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 57 (1958), 37-40. See also the summary of subsequent research by Perloff, *Dynamics of Persuasion*, 63-9. On the spread of attitudes by 'semantic generalization', see Bem, *Beliefs*, 43-5.

45 W.A. Scott, 'Attitude change through reward of verbal behaviour', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 55 (1957), 72-75; R.N. Bostrom, J.W. Vlandis and M.E. Rosenbaum, 'Grades as reinforcing contingencies and attitude change', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 52 (1961), 112-115; and C.A. Insko, 'Verbal reinforcement of attitudes', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2 (1965), 621-23.

for two reasons: because of the conflict between their revolutionary idealism and their commitment to traditional norms of personal loyalty and benevolence; or because their behavior, which is almost certain to cause terrible suffering, threatens their self-image as good and kind people. Dissonance theory predicts that, if they cannot undo the damage caused by their denunciations, they will reduce their psychological discomfort in two ways: by intensifying their revolutionary idealism at the expense of their commitment to personal loyalty and benevolence; and by blaming their victims — telling themselves that they deserve their fate, that they are hateful, that they are less than fully human, and so on. The theory also predicts that the most dramatic shift towards callous and hostile attitudes will occur amongst kind people who genuinely abhor suffering, for these are the people who experience the strongest dissonance. People who are already callous and unprincipled will experience little dissonance and little attitude change. The theory is a very powerful one, whose predictions have been confirmed in numerous experimental and real life contexts.[46]

The way in which the language of the Cultural Revolution activated these mechanisms can be illustrated from the honest and reflective autobiography of Zhai Zhenhua, a Red Guard who was the daughter of revolutionary cadres.[47] She was a modest girl whose best friend was from a non-red background, and when she became a Red Guard she promised 'to make more friends and to unite all students.' However, as a Red Guard she was subjected to new pressures and new linguistic influences. The Red Guards at this time were all of red-class origin — the sons and daughters of revolutionary cadres, soldiers, martyrs, workers, or poor or lower-middle peasants. The more arrogant and class-conscious spirits amongst them composed a well known Red Guard anthem which took up, and exaggerated, a theme which Mao and the Party had drummed into them: that the children of 'good class' fathers were the standard-bearers of revolutionary virtue, while children of 'bad class' fathers were politically suspect. The first and the last verses of the anthem went like this:

46 For the original statement of the theory, see Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (California: Stanford University Press, 1957). There is an excellent summary of subsequent debate and research in Perloff, *Dynamics of Persuasion*, chapter 10.

47 Zhai Zhenhua, *Red Flower of China* (New York: Soho Press 1992).

> The old man a true man, the son is a hero,
> The old man a reactionary, the son is an asshole.
> If you are revolutionary, then step forward and come along,
> If you are not, damn you to hell. . ..
>
> Damn you to hell!
> Depose you from your fucking post!
> Kill! Kill! Kill![48]

All the Red Guards in Zhai's school learned the song, and she did too. At first she sang it softly, embarrassed by the crude language, but soon she was singing it confidently along with all her red-class friends. Every time she sang, mere repetition made the shocking words less distasteful. Every time she sang, she modeled class prejudice for those who looked up to her. Every time she sang, she associated bad-class students with words like 'asshole' and 'hell', so higher order conditioning diminished her respect for them. Every time she sang, she experienced a reference group effect as she took her cue from her comrades' denigration of the black categories. And every time she sang, she was 'rewarded' by feelings of camaraderie and elation that strengthened her belief in the hate-filed lyrics through operant conditioning.

Within a couple of weeks, she recalls, the song 'had already begun to take root in me. My sympathy towards students from non-revolutionary families was rapidly disappearing.' Soon she was intimidating and abusing students from the black categories, menacing them with her belt and shouting as they sat with their heads bowed before her:

> This is called the "proletarian dictatorship!" It is the opposite of the "capitalist dictatorship" your parents imposed on the working people before liberation . . . Let's imagine how it would have been if we were still in the old society. How would you have treated us? . . . You would ride roughshod over us, starve us, and make us child laborers![49]

'My imagination carried me away and aroused a strong indignation in me', she recalls. 'I liked that because I really wanted to prove that our actions [in abusing them] were justified'.[50] She needed to persuade herself that her actions were 'justified' because her bullying language was inconsistent with her values and self-image, arousing severe dissonance; and she 'liked' the 'strong indignation' because it eased the dissonance. As she continued her harangue,

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48 *Ibid.*, 81.
49 *Ibid.*, 105.
50 *Ibid.*

her language became even more extreme, her face contorted, she swung her belt ferociously towards her audience, and she began to make herself distraught. This behavior, so inconsistent with her self-image, produced an even more extreme attitude shift. 'Oh, how I hated my classmates at that moment', she said, 'only because of my own flights of fancy.'[51] In the short space of a month, a popular and mild-mannered student had become the 'fierce enemy' of her bad-class fellow students, 'vilifying them and trampling their dignity.'[52] She was even able to prove her political consciousness by beating people from the black categories. The transition to physical violence produced more dissonance, which she eased by reciting scripts that made her hate and blame her victims:

> In the beginning I dared not look at the person under my feet. I had to stiffen myself mentally to continue. I kept thinking, "These are class enemies, bad people. . .. They're only getting what they deserve. I shouldn't feel sorry for them. In class struggle, either you die or I do." . . . After a few beatings, I no longer needed to rehearse the rationale behind them. My heart hardened and I became used to the blood . . . The Cultural Revolution had transformed me into a devil.[53]

Zhai was just one of countless idealistic and personally kind young people who were transformed into 'devils' by the Cultural Revolution. And a crucial element in that transformation was the language promoted by the symbol-makers — a language which 'took root' in their hearts through 'primitive affective and associational processes' like modeling, conditioning, reference groups effects and dissonance. These young idealists adopted more negative views of their victims not only because of what they *heard* about them, but because of what they themselves *said* about them; and many of them said those terrible things, not because they at first really believed them, but because they wanted to be good revolutionaries. It was only after their language helped to *change* their attitudes that it was able to *express* them.

The invective of the Cultural Revolution not only produced attitude shifts in those who used it, but it was itself a form of violence. It degraded its victims, dehumanized them and terrified them. When it labeled them 'class enemies', they became outcasts with no rights, no future, no friends; their families were persecuted and pressured to disown them; and they were subjected to 'militant

51 *Ibid.*
52 *Ibid.*, 106.
53 *Ibid.*, 96-7.

struggle' (*wu dou*) by 'the people', a process involving physical coercion. If they were not killed, they were treated as enemies with the natures of snakes, vermin, flies, jackals, vampires and *niugui sheshen*; and because deceit was their special skill no one believed their protestations of innocence or repentance. They had been labeled class enemies, and their future was hopeless. Every memoir of the Cultural Revolution mentions the people who committed suicide. No one who lived through those times is puzzled about why they did it.

When the language of denunciation inflicted such torture on its victims, attacking them physically was not a big step. It was the natural concomitant of the vicious condemnations. When revolutionaries beat, kicked, tortured or killed, they were simply taking the language of their curses literally, then carrying out their proclaimed intention to 'strike down', 'crush', 'trample' and 'exterminate' class enemies. Everyone knew that when this language had been used in earlier revolutionary struggles, Mao and the Party had orchestrated the humiliation, physical abuse and often the execution of alleged class enemies. So when the official media made the language of class war the prescribed language of the Cultural Revolution, it was inevitable that many people would place it in the context of earlier violence and interpret it as a call to violent struggle.

While it was easy to take the curses literally, understanding them as commands to beat and maim, other interpretations were possible. Some people read them figuratively, reducing them to harmless metaphors designed to express hatred of class enemies and arouse enthusiasm for a campaign based on non-violent criticism. For example, when Neale Hunter asked moderate students in Shanghai what they thought of some especially blood-curdling slogans, 'they laughed uncomfortably and mumbled that the slogans, though "admirably strong," were "of course not to be taken literally."'[54] Such people played down the violent Mao, who had sanctioned repeated terrorization of class enemies. Instead, they focused on the peaceful Mao, who spoke up periodically when violence did not serve his purposes. This was the Mao whose Sixteen Points said that debate 'should be conducted by reasoning, not by coercion or force', the Mao who once told the Red Guards to 'con-

54 Neale Hunter, *Shanghai Journal: An Eyewitness Account of the Cultural Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 132-3.

duct civil struggle and refrain from physical violence'.[55] Moderates interpreted these injunctions broadly — as an instruction that the Cultural Revolution should focus, not on the eradication of class enemies, but on the peaceful correction of sincere but erring comrades. They then invoked the peaceful Mao as their interpretive context, using him to justify reducing the most ferocious words to innocuous figures of speech.

When Mao could be quoted on both sides, people had to decide which Mao was relevant to the current situation. The crucial question, of course, was whether those accused were erring comrades, who could only be criticized, or class enemies, who deserved to be subjected to violent 'struggle'. Answers to this question were often arbitrary, and once someone had suggested that the accused was a class enemy, adherents of the peaceful Mao were always at a disadvantage. Consider Jung Chang's account of her attempt to stop Chian, an army officer's son, from administering a merciless beating:

> Now I murmured, trying to control the quaking in my voice, 'Didn't Chairman Mao teach us to use verbal struggle [*wen-dou*] rather than violent struggle [*wu-dou*]? Maybe we shouldn't . . .?'
>
> My feeble protest was echoed by several voices in the room. But Chian cast us a disgusted sideways glance and said emphatically: 'Draw the line between yourselves and the class enemy. Chairman Mao says, "Mercy to the enemy is cruelty to the people!"' If you are afraid of blood, don't be Red Guards!' His face was twisted into ugliness by fanaticism. The rest of us fell silent . . . we could not argue with him. We had been taught to be ruthless to class enemies. Failure to do so would make us class enemies ourselves. I turned and walked quickly into the garden at the back.[56]

Fanatics like Chian became the dominant voice of the Cultural Revolution because they drew strength from the pervasive violence of its slogans, and because moderates were afraid to defend anyone accused of being a class enemy. Under these circumstances, people were reluctant to stand up for the scattered maxims of the peaceful Mao, and like Jung Chang they walked away. Genuine freedom to choose the rhetoric of non-violent criticism simply did not exist.

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55 *CCP Documents of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution 1966-1967* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1968), 46-9; Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, 378.

56 Chang, *Wild Swans*, 407-8.

Why were people like Chian so anxious to label other people as class enemies, rather than erring comrades? Why did they so obviously prefer the violent Mao to the peaceful one? And why did they choose contexts of interpretation that led to literal readings of the curses, whereas people like Jung Chang chose contexts that yielded figurative ones? Very likely, literal interpretations appealed to those who wished to legitimize the acting out of sadistic or criminal tendencies,[57] to those most anxious to gain prominence as uncompromising revolutionaries, to those with the most intense hatred of potential victims, to those who saw violence as an essential strategy of survival, to those who had resorted to physical violence and needed to justify it, and to those who thought that they would come out on top. Conversely, figurative interpretations probably appealed mainly to people who abhorred violence, to those who lacked the ambition which drove others to displays of revolutionary extremism, to those who felt little animosity towards potential victims, to those who did not need to use violence in order to survive, to those who had never used violence and therefore felt no need to justify it, and to those who felt that they were more likely to be the victims of violence than its perpetrators.

Sometimes, no doubt, the choice of interpretive context was a cynical, calculated act. More often, it was innocent and automatic. When people's needs were served by violence, the maxims of the violent Mao came more readily to mind and seemed especially relevant. However, when people for some reason opposed the violence, they could not believe that Mao would countenance it. They knew that he often *had* approved violence, but they told themselves that he had done so only when it was directed against *real* class enemies and only when the situation actually required it. Investing an idealized Mao with their own moral values, they did not believe that he would approve the arbitrary, excessive and misdirected acts of violence that they witnessed in their daily lives. So it was the maxims of the peaceful Mao that sprang most readily to their minds, supplying a context of interpretation that turned the most savage language into a figure of speech.

It is clear, then, that we cannot explain the violent attitudes and actions of the Cultural Revolution as a simple product of violent language. That language could be read as an incitement to actual physical violence only with the aid of contextual assumptions that

57 For evidence of sadism and criminality, see *ibid.*, 436-7, 479-80; and Ling, *Revenge of Heaven*, 58, 250, 324-6, 333-4.

some people selected and others ignored.[58] Those assumptions must count as co-determinants of the contrasting meanings that people gave to the language, as must the personal interests, dispositions and situations that explain the choice of contextual assumptions. This constitutes a compelling objection to full linguistic determinism, which has to place exclusive emphasis on language as the determinant of meaning and hence of thought. That, for students of linguistic engineering, is one significant lesson of the Cultural Revolution.

A second lesson is that a 'weak Whorfian' position — that the language we use *influences* our thought — is thoroughly sustainable.[59] Many people *did* interpret the violent words as a call for physical violence. The fact that they did so only because they brought to the words particular contexts of interpretation does not mean that the words were unimportant. If the words had been different — if the officially prescribed slogans had insisted that the only targets of the Cultural Revolution were erring comrades in need of gentle correction — there would have been no violence. So both appropriate words and appropriate interpretive contexts were necessary before revolutionaries could believe that Mao was asking them to unmask and brutalize class enemies.

It is clear, too, that violent words promoted violent attitudes and actions, even among many who at first tried not to interpret them literally. Violent metaphors could stimulate 'primitive affective and associational processes' like modeling, conditioning, reference group effects, and dissonance among those who used them. And, as the case of Zhai Zhenhua demonstrates, these processes could fuel a spiral of escalating hostility towards 'class enemies', so that even people who disliked violence sometimes lost control and began to beat those whom they had cursed, dehumanized, and come to hate. At that point, if not before, they must have begun to interpret the curses literally, for they could then believe that they were just good revolutionaries carrying out Mao's instructions.

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58 The selection and role of contextual assumptions are treated in one of the great works of modern linguistics: Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; second edition, 1995).

59 Benjamin Lee Whorf is widely regarded as the classic exponent of linguistic determinism — a doctrine that attracts little support from modern linguists. However, some scholars believe that Whorf meant only that the language we use *influences* our thought. This 'weak Whorfian' position is supported by a growing body of evidence. For Whorf's views, see his *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. J.B. Carroll (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1956).

There was no single cause of violence during the Cultural Revolution, but the ferocious rhetoric prescribed by the Maoist elite played its part. It was the language of violent revolution, and many took it as a signal that they should treat suspected class enemies as ruthlessly as Mao and his comrades had done when carrying out *their* revolution a generation earlier. When novice revolutionaries found it difficult to steel themselves for violence, the language came conveniently to their aid. It denied the humanity of the 'class enemies' who kneeled helplessly before them, it substituted hatred for compassion, and it fostered callousness and contempt. Thus assisted, once-gentle revolutionaries all too often acted out the literal meaning of their words and beat their victims to a pulp. Words, it is clear, do not just have meanings. They have psychological consequences as well.