

The Red Guard Generation: Societal, Political, and Economical Impact of the Red Guard Movement in Communist China

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Introduction

"Red Guard comrades of Tsinghua University Middle School ... the two big character posters you wrote on June 24th and July 4th express your anger and denunciation of all landlords, bourgeois, imperialists, revisionists and their running dogs who exploit and oppress the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals and revolutionary parties and groupings. You say it is right to rebel against reactionaries. I enthusiastically support you!"

— Mao Zedong, 1966 [1]

Mao Zedong's letter to the red guards at Tsinghua University Middle School in August 1966 sparked one of the most turbulent periods of Communist China. The red guards were a student-led paramilitary social movement instituted at the start of the Cultural Revolution with the intention of cementing Maoist ideology and purging the country of capitalist thought (see Fig. 1). The movement quickly descended into chaos, causing irreversible damage to the country's fragile political and social-economical status. The movement was also increasingly violent, causing frequent bloodshed and social unrest from warring factions and clashes with the People's Liberation Army. Throughout this paper, we investigate the impact of the red guard movement on the country's political, economical, and societal well-being and analyze its impact on ordinary civilians living through the period.

The remainder of this paper are organized as follows. We first introduce the history and background of the red guard movement. Next, we analyze in turn the impact of the movement on the country's societal structure, political hierarchy, and economic well-being, with the emphasis put on its impact to ordinary civilians living through the period. Finally, we conclude this paper by discussing the aftermath of the whole ordeal, and its link to the wider Cultural Revolution.

Historical Background

The red guard movement were a series of student-led paramilitary social uprisings primarily orchestrated by Mao Zedong during the latter half of the 1960s. The movement first appeared in Beijing during the spring of 1966, in which middle school and university students expressed dismay over academic institutions through a series of "big character posters" (see Fig. 2)[2]. Social unrest quickly ensued following the shutdown of all schools in June 1966, with the movement gaining further momentum in August with Mao's letter to Tsinghua University Middle School students endorsing the



FIGURE 1: Red Guards Gathering in Tiananmen Square, Beijing circa. 1966 [4]



FIGURE 2: Big Character Poster at a Middle School circa. 1966 [5]

revolutionary movement [1, 2]. Later that month, the Central Committee issued the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” officially recognizing the revolution [3].

The uprising quickly descended into chaos due to the lack of central leadership. Rivaling factions began to emerge, believing themselves to represent the “true Communist” and were encouraged to destroy the “Four Olds” — old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking [3]. The process led to the looting and destruction of many invaluable historical buildings and artifacts as well as physical and verbal abuse against anyone they deemed to be “reactionaries”. The violence climaxed during the “Wuhan Incident” in the first half of 1967. An estimated 120 separate armed

incidents occurred involving over 500,000 red guards from rivaling factions and factory workers, and resulted in an estimated 2,000 casualties [6].

The red guard movement began to subside in the spring of 1968, with the People's Liberation Army wresting power away from the students in most provinces. Mao personally met the leaders of rivaling red guard factions in July and criticized their actions [7]. In its aftermath, an estimated 18 million former red guard students were sent to rural areas to undergo "re-education" as part of the "sent-down youth movement" [3]. However, the turmoils of the country would not end here. The red guard movement instigated the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and would continue to bring social-economic and political unrest for the better half of the next decade. Many contemporary historians believe the movement was instigated by Mao Zedong to consolidate his power against his political enemies. In particular, Mao especially detested the reformist economic policies initiated by Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai [3]. Most modern historians believe that Mao used the red guard movement and the subsequent Cultural Revolution to purge the reformists from the Communist party and return the party ideology to that envisioned by Mao.

Societal Impact

The red guard movement caused considerable social upheaval and unrest during its active years. All middle schools and universities were shut down during the summer of 1966, and many would not regain normal functionality until after the end of the Cultural Revolution some 10 years later [2]. Students during that time period on average lost upwards of 4 years in education (see Fig. 3) [8]. The red guards used this time period to travel across the country free of charge to participate in local revolutionary activities. Often this meant verbal and physical clashes with rivaling factions that occasionally descended into violence [2]. Many societal entities were non-functional during that time. One of the most severe cases was Wuhan in 1967. Two warring factions, one comprising mostly of red guards and the other of skilled workers, state and local party employees, effectively paralyzed the city due to constant armed incidents [2].

The red guard movement also saw the erosion of traditional family values and humanity. In one severe incident, a member of the red guard (Zhang Hongbing) accused his mother of being a counter-revolutionary, and ultimately led to her execution [10]. After the ordeal, the former red guard repented that he "will never be able to forgive myself". Yet such actions cannot be undone, and dead people cannot be brought back alive. Such cases depict the insanity of the actions done by the red

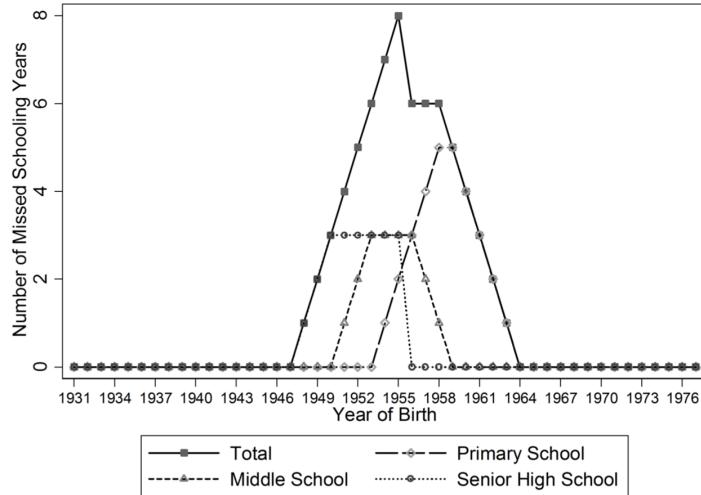


FIGURE 3: Number of Interrupted Years of Schooling by Year of Birth [8, 9]

guards. An absolute disregard of humanity and family love. The Wuhan Incident similarly depicted such insanity. A complete disregard of their fellow countryman's livelihood due to differences in the interpretation of Maoist ideology can only be described as lunacy and exemplars the social unrest due to Mao's insecurity against party contemporaries he viewed as enemies.

The period also saw increasingly radical patrimony ideology. Coined "Bloodline Theory" (*xuè tǒng lùn*), individuals were classified as either "red" (good), "gray" (mediocre), or "black" (bad) on the basis of family heritage and political status of his/her parents. The classification would stick with the individual for life, and would affect all aspects of life, from their educational opportunities to the jobs they could get, effectively dividing society based on their perceived patronage to communism [11]. A common quotation during the time were as follows:

*If the father's a hero, the son's a great fellow;
If the father's a reactionary, the son's a rotten egg.* [11]

Such radical race ideology shares a striking resemblance to the radical Nazism ideology of the "Aryan race" being genetically superior than all other races. The communist patrimony ideology shares this similarity: if your family was a revolutionary, then you are considered "good" blood, and enjoyed many societal benefits [11]. On the contrary, if your family was a capitalist before the Chinese Civil War or were intellectuals, then your whole lineage was condemned to be third-class citizens and shamed upon (see Fig. 4).



FIGURE 4: Red Guards Ridiculing Principal of Tsinghua University Attached High School [5]

The theory was not without contention. Yu Luoke challenged the “Bloodline Theory” with his essay titled “On Family Background, Theory of Class Pedigree” (*chū shēn lùn*) published in the *Journal of Middle-School Cultural Revolution* in January 1967¹ [11]. In his essay, he challenged the prevailing ideology and that the theory resembled the feudal caste system of capitalist societies. However, in what can only be described as tragedy, he was swiftly accused of being a counter-revolutionary and was sentenced to death in a “show trial” and swiftly executed [12]. This again displays the fanatical ideology of the red guard movement. Any ideas that contrasted the extremist ideology of the different factions of the red guards were labeled as counter-revolutionary, with its authors and collaborators often receiving verbal and bodily harm.

Political Impact

As argued by many contemporary historians, the red guard movement was used by Mao and his supporters to purge the reformists from the Communist party and return the party ideology to that envisioned by Mao. Evidently, the period saw many high ranking Party officials purged and beaten by the red guards. Ref. [2] estimates that in the years that the red guards were active, 29 provincial Party committees were purged and over 80% of the Central Committee members were discredited or attacked through the use of “big character posters”. A similar study by Ref. [13] quotes that out of 22 very senior ranking Party members, almost 70% were purged during the red guard movement and in the subsequent Cultural Revolution. With provincial Party

¹ Although the article was published in 1967, the original essay was written in July 1966 and had limited circulation before publication.

leadership virtually eliminated, the red guards were free to seize power in the provinces. Their so-called “justice” was handed down with impunity, and condemned anyone with a different political ideology other than theirs.

And of different political ideology they did have. Ref. [2] reports that hundreds of different factions operated throughout the country, and each had their own loyalties and ideologies. However, all the factions did have one aspect in common: they all revered the political indoctrination manifesto by Chairman Mao, aptly named the “Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung” (*máo zhǔ xí yǔ lù*) or the “Little Red Book” as it was commonly referred to. Over the period between 1966 to 1970, an estimated 4.2 billion copies of the book was printed and distributed [11]. The book nurtured an image of personal reverence for Chairman Mao and cultivated a cult of personality around the Chairman, encouraging patriotism through acts of the red martyr [11].

Through different interpretations of the “Little Red Book”, the varying factions of the red guards adopted different political ideologies with the intent of embodying the “true Communist”. Not only did this factioning bring significant societal unrest, ordinary civilians were also targeted for their political views. One such extreme case was the “Mango Incident” (see Fig. 5). In 1968, Chairman Mao was gifted a crate of mangoes by Pakistan’s foreign minister, Mian Arshad Hussain. The box was then gifted by Mao to the workers stationed at Tsinghua University. Soon, the mango phenomenon had a cult-like following. When one doctor remarked that the mango looked like a sweet potato, he was soon found guilty of blasphemy and swiftly executed [14]. This incident again highlights the intertwined nature of Chinese society with politics. The tyrannical nature of the red guard’s ideologies meant that one politically incorrect word could get you swiftly persecuted, and even executed in the unfortunate case of the doctor.

Economical Impact

On the basis of Western metrics of determining the productivity of an economy, the red guard movement caused tremendous setbacks to the growth of the Chinese economy. The movement effectively reversed the economic reform policies initiated by Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai in the first half of the 1960s, and also effectively halted econometric data collection during the years of the Cultural Revolution by labeling the statisticians as anti-revolutionists [8]. Premier Hua Guofeng famously quoted:



FIGURE 5: Workers at Tsinghua University Posing In-front of the Gifted Mangoes by Chairman Mao [14]

[During the Cultural Revolution] *the nation lost about 10 billion yuan in the total value of industrial output, 28 million tons of steel and 40 billion yuan in state revenue and the whole economy was on the brink of collapse.*

— Hua Guofeng, 1978 [15]

Later statisticians from the Office of the Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs also estimated that during the years of the red guard movement, Gross Domestic Product growth declined by 5.7% in 1967 and by 4.1% in 1968 [8]. More shocking was the decline in industrial output over the period. Ref. [16] tabulated the estimated change in industrial output over the first three years of the Cultural Revolution, although the reader should be warned that accurate economic data is almost impossible to ascertain during this time period, and the declines are almost certainly understated. This data is presented below in Table 1.

Year	Total		Light Industry		Heavy Industry	
	Billion Yuan	% Change	Billion Yuan	% Change	Billion Yuan	% Change
1966	152.6	19.7	77.0	13.7	75.7	26.6
1967	130.2	-14.7	70.5	-8.4	59.7	-21.1
1968	122.3	-6.0	66.3	-6.0	56.0	-6.1
1969	162.5	32.9	82.4	24.3	80.1	43.0
1970	210.0	29.2	96.7	17.4	113.3	41.4

TABLE 1: Gross Value of Industrial Output by Light and Heavy Industry [16]

Additionally, the “Wuhan Incident” discussed in the societal impact section also sheds light into the economic impact of the red guard movement on civilians. It is estimated that over 2,400 factories in the city suspended production or dropped below half

capacity, with some 500,000 workers taking up arms in the conflict against various factions of the red guards [2, 6]. It is an understatement to say that the movement was a significant destroyer of economic wealth, in which the peasantry ultimately bears the burden of the economic chaos instigated by high ranking officials of the Communist Party. The econometric data and the “Wuhan Incident” paints a gloom picture for the ordinary citizens during that time. Fresh from the memories of the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962) and the Great Chinese Famine (1959 to 1961), the red guard movement once again brought significant social-economic hardship to the peasantry and hindered the economic development of the country instigated by Party reformists such as Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai.

Conclusion

In spring 1968, the student led red guard movement began to subside. Provincial People’s Liberation Army garrisons slowly regained control of the situation, while many red guards became disillusioned with the constant infighting between factions [2]. The final blow came on the 28th of July 1968 when Chairman Mao and Vice Chairmen Lin Biao personally summoned representatives of the red guard factions and denounced their actions [11].

The entire ordeal brought upon profound hardship to the ordinary civilians of the country. Contemporary historians estimate the number of direct deaths caused by the red guard movement to be in excess of 100,000. Although paling in comparison to the deaths of the Great Chinese Famine (estimated 15+ million) or the Cultural Revolution (estimated 500,000+), it nevertheless caused great social-economic hardship to the peasantry over these years [17]. Societal functions essentially ceased in many cities due to the constant clashes between rivaling red guard factions [6]. Schools and universities were shut down and would not reopen until after the Cultural Revolution [3]. Many civilians born into a “black” blood family or intellectuals such as scholars and doctors were publicly humiliated as anti-revolutionaries and paraded in the streets [5]. Economic and industrial output also had a steep decline during the period, owing primarily to the reversal of reformist economic policy and suspension of factories, again exemplifying the social-economic impact of the movement on civilians. Political theory was also extremely radicalized during the movement. A cult of personality evolved around Chairman Mao and anyone daring to speak against him were swiftly persecuted and purged [14].

The end of the red guard movement did not conclude the civil unrest in the country. On the contrary, it preludes the greater atrocities committed during the Cultural

Revolution (1966 to 1976). The whole ordeal caused tremendous political, societal, and economical hardship both to high-ranking Party officials and ordinary civilians. The red guard movement and the Cultural Revolution ultimately lead to millions of unnecessary deaths, with social unrest and economic stagnation plaguing the whole country for years to come.

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