

From Adoration to Rebellion

Looking Back on Mao Tse-tung's Reception of the Red Guard During China's Cultural Revolution—1966–1969

Huang Ho Group (Hong Kong)

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Introduction

The article below is part of a series of discussions that took place in Hong Kong in the early part of 1977, in which the participants (all ex-Red Guard members) attempt to make clear their reaction to Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution.

During the three years that mark the most active period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69), Mao Tse-Tung executed perhaps one of the most alarming examples of George Orwell's "doublethink." In an attempt to regain control of the Party and purge the bureaucracy, Mao called upon the students to build a society along the lines of the Paris Commune (1871), but quickly labeled such actions "counter-revolutionary" when it became apparent that he and the Party were losing control over the situation. The Peoples Liberation Army was then used to crush the general uprisings in blood.

The article traces the changing ideas within the Red Guard as some of its members moved from being the blind followers of Mao Tse-Tung to libertarians standing in complete opposition to the "Helmsman" and his Party.

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The Reception

SHI HEI FUANG: It had been 10 years since the reception of the Red Guards by Mao Tse-Tung. The incident had played an important role in promoting the Cultural Revolution and had revealed the psychological state of youths. Those who had participated in the reception and taken part in the Cultural Revolution had gathered here today to reflect and review the incident.

JIN CHUNG YAN: I participated in the 11th Nov. reception (the 7th one). Thinking back it was rather amusing. I am near-sighted but I lost my spectacles on the train. The 2nd day in Peking, I went to make another pair. Usually it takes about 5 days, but two days later, on the morning of the 11th, we were notified that our unit was arranged to attend the reception on that day. I was dismayed at the thought of my spectacles. After we arrived at our designated spot I hurried to the optical shop and told the shopkeeper that I could not do without my spectacles that day as Mao

Tse-Tung would be receiving me. The shopkeeper was most sympathetic, saying that it was my honor and that he would see to the matter at once. And to be sure he had the spectacles ready in a short time. I did not even check the focus, paid the man and hastened back to the reception spot.

The people waited in line on both sides of Tien An Men square. They were allocated 2 eggs and one bun each. The Liberation Army was out front keeping order. Mao Tse-Tung was to ride by in a jeep, one among several methods of reception.

We waited for a long time. People started to leave the lines to get something to eat, to go to the toilet or just fool around. At midday, the trumpets suddenly blared out the "East is Red." Everyone thought that Chairman Mao had arrived. They returned to their lines and stretched their necks, but they could see nothing. Then everyone relaxed again.

Finally "The East is Red" sounded again. We at first did not believe that the reception had started. We saw far away the Liberation Army on motor cycles riding in 2 straight lines of about 10 each. I could not remember whether it was two military trucks or 4 full of guards holding the red book of Mao's writings behind the motorcycles. Mao Tse-Tung and Lin Piao's- jeep was right behind the trucks.

The mass of people started to surge like the ocean. Everyone cried out excitedly "Chairman Mao has come", "Long live Chairman Mao." I was in the ninth or tenth row. The people in front of me kept jumping up and down. With a quick turn of mind, I clambered on the back of the person in front of me and saw clearly Mao Tse-Tung and Lin Piao. The person whose back I was on tried to shake me off, elbowed me, but I was unaware of anything else at that time. At last when I jumped down, a youth from the north grabbed my hands and shook them hard, crying "I have seen Chairman Mao, I have seen Chairman Mao." I was somewhat bewildered for I did not know him. He was like mad, shaking my hands and shouting. I was similarly excited but my response had not been as strong as his.

The ground was littered with trodden eggs, buns, apples, berries and shoes. But I am sure that the response of the people had been spontaneous. It was this way after waiting for half a day that I finally caught a glimpse of Mao Tse-Tung and Lin Piao, even for a few seconds.

HO YIEN TSAI: I participated in one that was very disciplined, unlike the unorganized situation just mentioned.

That time I was staying with an engineering unit in Peking. Every day we underwent drilling at the Peking University for Teachers' Training. We marched, shouted slogans, recited the writings of Mao Tse-Tung. Training was strict in that the citations must be as of one voice, singing must be in unison. Songs chosen were East is Red and Sailing the Oceans Depends on the Helmsman etc. We-trained-for about three days.

On the day of the reception, we drove to Tien An Men Square. The people were seated in a zigzag way. Mao Tse-Tung would be riding by in a jeep to receive people on both sides. The Liberation Army were seated in front but I did not notice they were armed. After we were in line, we were searched, and had to search each other's pockets for any hard objects which temporarily were held by the authorities. One school-mate had to hand over his spectacle case. Then apples, eggs, buns were distributed. I remembered that toilets were everywhere. It was man-holes in the middle of the Square, like those in Hong Kong, and surrounded by a cloth to make a toilet. There was music all the time. It was noisy. Several hours went by, and Mao Tse-Tung did not appear. People at the back started to push forward so that the front line became tightly packed. The P.L.A. in the front would sometimes stand and sit down again. Each time they did so, they caused a commotion in the crowd till they sat down again.

Finally, I heard people shouting "Long live Chairman Mao." My school-mate and I believed the time had come, and shouted loudly with the rest of the people. The P.L.A. all stood up to maintain order.

Very soon, Mao Tse-Tung appeared in a jeep 500 yards from us. He passed by very quickly. I saw that he was well-built, with rosy cheeks. I did not believe he wore makeup for he was healthy then.

The people pushed forward with all their might, and the P.L.A. frantically held them back. When Mao Tse-Tung's jeep drove by me, the driver stepped on the brake. I discovered that Mao Tse-Tung seemed not to be subject to the law of motion. People normally would fall forward when a car braked, but Mao Tse-Tung did not even budge a hair. I was not purposely studying these details, but just got this impression from paying too much attention to him.

People around me were frantic in their excitement with tears and all. I was no different. It was difficult to describe the scene. There were some girls from Kweichow beside me. They were small, and as they could not jump high enough to see, they tugged at other people's hands like it was going to make them taller.

HO YIEN TSAI: I was overwhelmed at that time, even lost my voice. Frankly I was not that crazy over Mao Tse-Tung, but I could not help being excited along with the rest of the people.

WUN YIN: In mainland China, situations take over the individual. Everyone tried to behave in the same way so that they can feel they are doing the right thing.

TIEN MAN LING: There is bound to be some kind of unconscious resistance in spite of the circumstances. I had not seen Mao Tse-Tung, but I had been to Shao Shan. When I saw the bed Mao Tse-Tung slept on, I felt it was a sacred thing, but on the other hand, I suspected the genuineness of the bed. Communist propaganda had mentioned that before the communist party took over the country, the graves of Mao Tse-Tung's ancestors were almost demolished, how could the bed survive? I felt it was pretentious and it made me uneasy. I returned to my senses at once, but nevertheless that thought flew through my mind.

HUANG CHEUK BIN: I felt the same. When I saw those bamboo chairs and bed at the Canton Farmers' Movement Training Centre I doubted whether they were genuine. This doubt hinged on suggestion of deceit.

SHI HIE FENG: I felt the same at Shao Shan. When the guide introduced the bed in which Mao was said to be born, he said that this was the place where the Red Sun rose. I immediately felt nauseated. How could the sun have risen from a bed?

But returning to the point, I think that among the people at the reception, the majority of the youths admired and adored Mao Tse-Tung, including myself.

Why worship Mao Tse-Tung?

JIN CHUNG YAN: There were quite a lot of people who were out of their minds, especially those who came from the countryside and those who were 12 or 13 years old. Their only purpose and satisfaction was to see the red sun—Mao Tse-Tung—in Peking. Before they came to Peking, they had never seen any big cities. Their seeing Mao Tse-Tung was like going to the Vatican to see the Pope.

NGWEI CHI WA: I think that the enthusiasm was linked with the propaganda Communist China had been spreading for over 10 years, that only heroes could see Mao Tse-Tung. Therefore when a person had a chance to see Mao Tse-Tung, his status would rise and wild enthusiasm followed.

JIN CHUNG YAN: From the moment we started to read and write, this value had been instilled into us through newspapers and magazines. Those who had seen Mao Tse-Tung had to make a report at the city/ district meetings. In our heart, the person who had seen Mao Tse-Tung was more glorified than being a hero.

LI MUA HAI: I did not see Mao Tse-Tung, but my sister did. She was very young-13, and very naive. The moment she set foot in the house she burst out announcing that she had seen Mao Tse-Tung. As she went to Peking from the outskirts of the country with her school-mates, she was treated as a minority group and given front seats. They had a very good view and all of them broke into tears.

Later the reception became one of her strengths in an argument. When she got herself in an unfavorable situation in a quarrel, she would just pull out the "she had seen Mao Tse-Tung" bit.

WEN YING: Even before the Cultural Revolution, the people had regarded cadres as a kind of god. They felt important in meeting a mayor of a city, not to mention Mao Tse-Tung.

JING CHUN YEN: Among the thousands of youths who rallied at Tien An Men Square, many admired Mao Tse-Tung out of "rational understanding," especially the city youths like I was. I believe that the image of Mao Tse-Tung's righteousness and greatness (in our hearts) had greatly influenced me, especially after the propaganda by Lin Piao.

Young people usually imitate their heroes. Communist China manipulated this tendency to propagate hero worship. A difference could be seen before and after Lin Piao's advocacy of Mao's writings. Before, heroes like Huang Kai Kwong, Law Shing Kau etc. were said to be loyal to their country, their people, their party and their leader. Mao's power had not been emphasized yet. But after Lin Piao publicized Mao's writing, heroes like Lui Feng, Wong Kit, Chao Yu Lu, the 8th Battalion on Nanking Road etc. revealed that their source of strength came from Mao's thoughts and writings. To imitate these heroes, first it would be necessary to study Mao's thoughts. Therefore Mao's halo became deeply stamped in the hearts of youths.

WEN YING: This kind of pre-Cultural Revolution propaganda had been forced into our minds without maturing into any kind of stable grounds for further development. Should Liu Shao-chi overthrow Mao and blame everything on him at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Liu might have taken the place of Mao in the hearts of young people.

NGEI CHI WA: There is little possibility of this. I rebelled at the start of the Cultural Revolution and was regarded as counter-revolutionary and ambitious. I believed I was right then, and the Communist Party was good except for a few bad people around. My first thought was that Mao Tse-Tung would support me. Why had not I thought of Liu Shao Chi or Chou En Lai? The Cultural Revolution had just started and I had not known that Liu Shao Chi would be overthrown.

TIEN MAN LING: Mao Tse-Tung did not leave much impression on me before the Cultural Revolution. But during the revolution when I became the target of struggle and assistance was nowhere in sight, I wept before the picture of Mao Tse-Tung. After I was “liberated,” my enthusiasm for him soared to infinite heights. I even wanted to walk to Peking to see him, as if my loyalty could not be proved otherwise.

SHI HAI FENG: My admiration for Mao Tse-Tung was not blind ardor. I was labelled counter-revolutionary, rightist during the start of the Cultural Revolution and was dismissed from the working team. After “liberation”, I felt that it was Mao Tse-Tung who saved me, and also, his slogans touched those thoughts which were in my mind. I regarded him as symbol of a revolutionary.

WEN YING: This image of a revolutionary had a lot to do with the wild enthusiasm at Tien An Men Square. Many Chinese youths were given the “positive” side of communist education before the Cultural Revolution. They wanted to build a utopia in China through communism. But the Chinese government did not allow democracy or freedom. For example, even if they desire to become a night soil worker, the assignment of service had to come from a labor unit, If no work had been assigned to you, you would have to stay jobless. When these youths pointed out the loop-holes in the system, they were accused of being dissatisfied with the organization. Their ardor came to nothing but bad feelings.

Mao Tse-Tung blamed everything on the capitalist roaders. He pointed out that the “capitalist counterrevolutionary line” was distrust of the masses and extortion of the people. His line was belief in the masses, reliance and respect for the people. With this spirit he called upon young people to rebel against anything that was unreasonable. All the young people were inspired as I was. From the editorials of Red Flag, the People’s Daily, I thought Mao Tse-Tung would lead China toward a prosperous future. I joined Mao Tse-Tung and the destiny of China together, and proclaimed him from my heart. Most of the people I knew were like this. We cheered and leaped for Mao Tse-Tung, and even died for him in the movements and campaigns which followed. This ardor for the future of China mixed with blind devotion and worship could be seen at Mao’s reception. During the development of the Cultural Revolution to its final stages, Mao Tse-Tung developed the blind devotion part but the revolutionary part which so many young people fervently waited for never came. The young people had to reevaluate the situation again.

SHI HEI FENG: I am of the opinion that China had been successful before the Cultural Revolution in creating the image of Lui Feng which modelled a new personality for young people. On one hand it was setting up an image of Mao Tse-Tung and on the other it stresses that Lui Feng was constantly undertaking self-evaluation and self-criticism, and regarded the self as unimportant. Only through working for the Communist project, the communist party, Mao Tse-Tung, could life be meaningful. Everyone was affected by this to different extents.

There was a certain group, including myself, who had not completely undergone a re-modelling of our personality, but the effect was definitely felt, when we went through some meaningless self-criticism. But our admiration for Mao Tse-Tung out of some misconception was no less than those blind devotees. This misconception was caused by limited outside stimulus. China was shut in by iron curtains. All we knew was that everything was attributed to the strength of Mao Tse-Tung. This distortion of the rational mind was no different from religious worship.

The Change from Follower of Mao to Against Mao

JIN CHUNG YAN: I believe that Mao had it coming when his great image shook on the pedestal in young people’s hearts. I remembered when Mao Tse-Tung agitated young people against Liu Shao Chi, he had made an issue out

of Liu's divorce of Wong Chien to marry Wong Kwong Mei, in that it was surrender to capitalism. But from Snow's "Red Star Over China", which I read before the Cultural Revolution, I found that Mao Tse-Tung had a wife, Hu Tse Ching. She had even hosted Snow at dinner. But Mao's marriage to Chiang Ching must have resulted in his divorce with Hu Tse Ching. I at first thought it was the need of the revolution as well as it was the personal life of the leader. But creating an issue out of Liu's case as infringement of revolutionary principles made me think about Mao himself. His marriage with Chiang Ching was no more innocent than Liu's marriage with Wong Kwong Mei. If Liu Shao Chi disowned the proletariat as a result, Mao's character was no better. He renounced himself when he renounced others.

LIU FONG FONG: I had a colleague, Young, at the Chinese People's University who died at a military struggle. He was utterly loyal to Mao Tse-Tung and Chinese Communism. His diary and poems, later published as a booklet, were full of enthusiasm for Mao Tse-Tung and Chinese Communism. In our group of students and teachers he was considered the martyr for Mao's revolutionary ideals and we laid a memorial stone in the university for him.

When the workers propaganda team came to the People's University, Young was labelled to be a tool of the class enemy and he was criticized. This sudden shift in emphasis shocked us. For whom had Young shed his blood and was it worthwhile?

LIU MUA HEI: In the early stages of the movement, Mao Tse-Tung set down 16 guidelines for the cultural revolution. One of them pointed out that the leaders of the Revolution should be elected according to the principles of the Paris Commune, elected by the people and supervised by the people. The People's Daily, Red Flag, pointed out that the principle should apply to all institutions of power, that it was a basic guarantee of anti-revisionism and prevention of revisionism. I had accepted it then.

But at the setting up of the Kwangsi Revolutionary Committee, this principle was lost. Wei Kwok Ching was appointed by the Central Committee to establish a provincial revolutionary committee, and he in turn appointed the subcommittees. There was no election of any kind. A few schoolmates and I brought up the 16 guidelines and the pronouncements of the People's Daily to oppose this violation of the principles of the Paris Commune. The struggle was fierce and many died.

Finally, the Central Committee made an announcement that this method of setting up Revolutionary Committees was a strategy formulated by Mao Tse-Tung and those who were against it were against Mao Tse-Tung. We had become counter-revolutionaries. The principles of the Paris Commune had been advocated by Mao Tse-Tung and now it was discarded by he himself. Maddened, we queried among ourselves—could revolutionary principles be changed at will? What kind of trick was it?

DING CHUNG YAN: Comparison made the difference. When the workers propaganda team came to our school, they assisted one group to persecute another student of another group, hung him on a tree and flogged him. It upset us for the 'capitalist reactionary' work teams sent by Liu Shao Chi did not beat people up in the school. Now these workers propaganda teams brought with them Mao's mangoes and beat people up. Would it be the revolutionary line of Mao Tse-tung.

NGEI CHI WA: From the start to the end of the movement to 'grab the few in the army,' Mao Tse-tung had become too much to bear. We went to the military district to struggle against the officers who refused to support the people.

HUANG CHEUK BIN: Near the end of the Cultural Revolution, young people were outrageously treated. Singing during work was regarded as capitalistic, and became one of our crimes during the "one strike three antis" campaign.

WEN PING: The change in our generation would be said to be brought about by Mao Tse-Tung himself. He wanted the young people to overthrow Liu Shao-chi and gave them the four freedoms: to speak out, to let out, to debate and to write big-character posters. Mao got what he wanted but the young people did not hand back the weapons that were given to them.

When we came to a dead end and could find no answer in Mao's writings, our spirit of mass democracy made us discard Mao's way in search for a reasonable answer. From then on we assumed democracy and freedom to interpret the events which took after the Cultural Revolution—going to the countryside, Lin Piao's incident, and analysed the existing society. We grew to understand what the Chinese people wanted and felt pained at the fate of China under the rule of Mao Tse-Tung.

JIN CHUNG YAN: Change could not be brought about in a day, but the Cultural Revolution was a start. The few years of rustic life, the instability of the Chinese Communist government all constituted factors of change in a young persons mind.

Mao Tse-Tung's hunger for power had been satiated at the Cultural Revolution. He received cheers at Tien An Men Square from thousands and thousands of people, 'far more than any emperor had received In the same revolution, he finally lost the love and devotion of the new generation.

The young people who participated in the Cultural Revolution gave their youth, sweat and even blood. But when they threw away the bondage of Mao's thoughts, they then understood the real destiny of China.

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