

The Northwest School

Controversies About the Cultural Revolution and Impact of the Red Guards

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This research paper provides an analysis of the Red Guards, an influential socio-political group that emerged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The study focuses on examining the action, historical value, and impact of the Red Guards, discovering their significance and negative impact within the context of Chinese history.

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part is to give the historical background of the Red Guards. Establish a comprehensive understanding of the factors that formed and developed the Red Guards by examining key events, policies, and figures.

While presenting contrasting viewpoints from contemporary scholars, the second part of the paper delves on criticism sources, exploring the historical significant of the red guards, highlighting their impact on society, politics, and cultural institutions.

In the third part, the paper adopts a more personal understanding approach, combining different perspectives on the Red Guards, theme to explore the divergent interpretations and assessments of the Red Guards' actions.

Overall, this research paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the Red Guards. By examining their historical background, scholar's arguments, and contrasting perspectives, this study present a personal understanding of the Red Guards' significance and s their lasting impact on China's socio-political landscape.

In the 20th century, China underwent a significant transition from the old society to a new era, which is commonly referred to as modern Chinese history. One of the most pivotal events in this period was the Cultural Revolution, which remains controversial to this day. Scholars have debated the motivations behind the actions of the Red Guards during this time and the impact they had on society. For instance, Rana Mitter suggests that the Red Guards were motivated by personal grievances, while Lü believes that their impact on society continues to this day. Additionally, Han and Joseph argue that the Red Guards are an inalienable part of the Cultural Revolution. In the following paragraphs, the opinions of disagreeing with Mitter and agree with the others will be demonstrated.

In 1966, Mao Zedong published his famous Dazibao, which brought to the public's attention the clash between him and Liu Shaoqi and represented the start of the Cultural Revolution. In 1959, following Mao's retreat, Liu Shaoqi was elected as the new Chairman of China. From 1963 onwards, with Liu's leadership and Mao's central ideology, a movement called "The Four Clean Movement (Siqingyundong)" was initiated, with the aim of clearing out remnants of the old dynasty and establishing a new society. However, as the movement progressed, the divergence between Mao and Liu grew deeper, with Mao believing that Liu was being too aggressive (zuopai) in his approach, even though Liu believed in Maoism.

The discord between the two ideologies eventually became public, and Mao decided to use his public influence to strengthen the keynote of social thought. As mentioned in John Israel's "The Red Guards in Historical Perspective: Continuity and Change in the Chinese Youth Movement (16)," the Party's regional bureaus came under

fire in mid-October. A poster attack on Li Hsueh-feng was followed by criticism of President Liu Shao-ch'i for protecting Li. Liu's name was soon linked to that of Party Secretary Teng Hsiao-ping. On August 5th, 1966, Mao published his big character poster (Dazibao) through People's Daily (Renminribao), titled "Bombard the Headquarters: My Big Character Poster (Paodasilingbu: Wodeyizhangdazibao)." The poster insinuated that Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were behaving aggressively and acting like capitalists. The ideology brought out by the poster was quickly responded to by many citizens, which marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

The Red Guards were not initially a government organization; they began as a group of young people who were inspired by Mao's call for the Cultural Revolution. They organized speeches and activities in public, gradually gaining more members and influence. As they gained more power, they began to refer to themselves as the "Red Guards," symbolizing their status as a representative organization for the Cultural Revolution. Mao recognized the Red Guards' potential and granted them more power, such as the ability to make arrests. The Red Guard confrontations grew in the spring of 1967 after military leaders in fifteen problematic provinces were initially criticized. In these regions, the leaders vacated their positions and allowed Red Guards to engage in clashes without restraint, resulting in the emergence of chaos and anarchy (1044, Heasley). They were later supported by the government organization called the Cultural Revolution Committee (*Wenhuagemingweiyuanhui*), which helped to legitimize their authority. However, as the Red Guards' power and influence grew, they also became increasingly violent. In the spring of 1967, they clashed with military leaders in fifteen provinces, leading to disorder and anarchy. The Red Guards started as a grassroots

movement inspired by Mao's ideology and grew into a powerful organization with the support of the Cultural Revolution Committee.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, the influence of the red guards can be found everywhere. However, as the red guards began forming factions and engaging in violent clashes, the military was called upon to intervene, leading to Mao's official disbandment of the organization. Despite this, Mao showed great appreciation for the red guards by spending a week meeting all 1.1 million members in 1967-1969. "In fact, the part of the Cultural Revolution that has remained in popular memory – teenage Red Guards persecuting their teachers, massive crowds of youth in Tian'anmen Square hoping for a sight of Chairman Mao – date from the early period, 1966 to 1969 (Mitter)." Nonetheless, during this time of increasing power, the red guards also engaged in escalating violence, putting immense pressure on Chinese citizens. As the central government realized that the organization had become an uncontrollable group of young volunteers, they ultimately decided to disband it.

When discussing the history of the Cultural Revolution, people often ask whether the Red Guards' original motivation was good or evil. However, such a simplistic binary does not capture the complexity of history. People hold different opinions on the matter; some argue that the Red Guards played an important role in Mao's revolution and brought positive changes to society, while others contend that they were responsible for widespread violence and chaos. In "Modern China: A Very Short Introduction," Rana Mitter suggests that the Red Guards were often motivated by personal grievances or a desire for power and that their actions led to the persecution and death of many innocent people (Mitter, 64.) Undeniably, the Red Guards were

responsible for many deaths during the Cultural Revolution. However, it is important to note that their original philosophy was to support Mao and create an ideal society.

The Cultural Revolution was a complex chapter in Chinese history. While Mao's initial poster served as a catalyst, the decade-long process involved many factors. Among those factors, are the red guards a necessary part of bringing those changes? What roles had they played in the event? The role played by the Red Guards in the event remains a highly debated topic, and opinions vary widely. Some argue that the Red Guards were a driving force behind the revolution and contributed to a significant change in Chinese society, while others see them as a destructive force that ultimately led to Mao's downfall. According to Han Dongping, "The Red Guards were the most visible and radical part of the Cultural Revolution, and their campaigns transformed Chinese society (85)." On the other hand, William Joseph contends that "The Red Guards were the leading edge of the Cultural Revolution, and their actions made possible the transformation of Chinese society (129)." Despite these differing opinions, it is evident that the Red Guards brought about significant changes to Chinese society.

The Cultural Revolution brought significant changes to Chinese society that continue to impact the country today. While some argue that the Red Guards played a positive role in bringing social and political transformation to China, the majority of scholars and historians see their influence as largely negative. This view is supported by data that shows the immense trauma and suffering inflicted on the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. As noted in "Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution", "According to national officials, about one hundred million people (one-tenth of the country's population) suffered during the CR.

Regardless of the precise numbers, it is certain that the trauma and impact on the Chinese people as a whole were immense (Lü, 526).” By using the phrase “suffer”, Lü is indicating the violence and segregation that the Red Guards had implemented on people. While it's true that the Red Guards played a role in the changes that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, it's important to acknowledge the negative consequences of their actions and their overall impact on Chinese society.

Analyzing the references above, three main statements were made by different authors in their writing. Firstly, Mitter argued that the Red Guards were driven by personal grievances. Secondly, both Han and Joseph stated that the Red Guards played a crucial role in driving Chinese society forward. Thirdly, Lü directly used the word "suffer" to describe the experience of the Chinese population during the Cultural Revolution and under the rule of the Red Guards.

In contrast to Mitter's claims in "Modern China: A Very Short Introduction," even though the Red Guards have actions that were impulsive and seditious, it can be argued that the Red Guards were not solely motivated by personal desires and grievances. The Red Guards was not a small group, instead, it's an organization that contains around 1/60 of the population (cnr.cn.) It's unreasonable that they are all satisfying their personal will or desire of power through violence this way, and this reason is also not enough to gather them together for years long.

In terms of explaining the Red Guards' actions, China's cohesive culture played a significant role. Mao Zedong, as the spiritual leader of China at the time, placed great importance on the idea of "gathering all citizens into one." In his "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," he emphasized the need for everyone to work together to

build a prosperous, democratic, and culturally advanced socialist society. Mao also stressed the importance of the Party having a strong bond with the masses and leading them forward step by step. These ideas created a strong sense of unity among the people, and many young adults were eager to contribute to the establishment of a new society. When Mao published his poster, people immediately reacted, especially youth that were extreme leftwing. While it is true that the Red Guards eventually resorted to violations, it is unfair to simply attribute their actions to personal desires. Even though the strategy is completely deviated, the original wish is to build a new society with goods.

On the other hand, there were two reasons that not only united the Red Guards but also urged them towards substantive movements. Firstly, the encouragement from the government played a significant role. The Cultural Revolution Committee, being an official organization, initially supported the Red Guards. This gave the young adults a sense of legitimacy and the feeling that they were acting in the name of the Chinese government. Secondly, a large number of people joined the organization to demonstrate their loyalty to the country and to clarify their social class status. As the Cultural Revolution included violence against the capitalist class, some of the "capitalist children" chose to join the Red Guards to reject their previous identity.

Finally, agreeing with the arguments put forward by Lü, Han, and Joseph, the Red Guards did played a significant role in the Cultural Revolution, and were partially responsible for pushing the development of Chinese society. Among the ten years of process in total, the first three years of the Cultural Revolution were the most chaotic with the formation of the Red Guards. While their methods were aggressive and aimed

at overthrowing capitalism and imperialism, the result of their actions was recognized as positive. In "Wind in the Tower," a Chinese-born Eurasian author who lived through part of the Cultural Revolution stated, "The Red Guards were the most militant and progressive section of Chinese youth...the youth, led by the Party, are the most active and dynamic force in China, and have already made and are making great contributions to the socialist transformation of their country (Han)." This sentiment is echoed in other literature from the time. Today, China may be hesitant to discuss the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards, but the society is partially shaped by the cultural revolution, and there are benefits that people are using.

Speaking from a personal perspective, as a Chinese citizen living 50 years after the Cultural Revolution, I have heard many family stories about that time. For example, my grandmother, who was in her thirties during the Cultural Revolution, was called a "capitalist Miss" by the Red Guards and experienced violence, including having her hair cut and being segregated. My mother has told me that when she was a child, there was a photo of Mao hanging on the wall of their house, but one day it fell and broke into pieces. My grandmother became extremely intense and gathered the children around, telling them not to speak about the photo. My father, on the other hand, was born into a working-class family and has a different perspective on the Cultural Revolution. He believes that it was not a big deal, that citizens did not experience dramatic changes, and that people continued to live their usual lives. He also believes that the Cultural Revolution effectively united society and helped to create a classless society.

When discussing this topic with my father, I remember how he shrugged and said that this piece of history is too far away for people to care about impact. China today acknowledges that this massive movement was a mistake in history and caused significant loss of life. However, as discussed earlier, a conclusion can be made that the Cultural Revolution was not entirely negative. History can be controversial, and no "what if" hypotheses can be made, nor can anyone predict what the world would be like without any event. The Red Guards played a significant role in the Cultural Revolution, leading to sacrifices for citizens at the time, but also making an irreplaceable contribution to the society through the long arc of history.

Citation

Israel, John. "The Red Guards in Historical Perspective: Continuity and Change in the Chinese Youth Movement." *The China Quarterly*, vol. 30, 1967, pp. 1–32.

Heaslet, Juliana Pennington. "The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution." *Asian Survey*, vol. 12, no. 12, 1972, pp. 1032–1047.

Mitter, Rana. *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Han, Dongping. *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2008, p. 85.

Joseph, William A. *Politics in China Since 1949*. Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 129.

Xiuyuan, Lu. "A Step toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1994, p. 533.

中国人口数量发展轨迹：从"独生子女"到开放两孩, gongyi.cnr.cn/news/20151110/t20151110_520457749.shtml.

Heaslet, Juliana Pennington. "The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution." *The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution*. The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643022>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

- *Original:* The source is an article published at the University of California Press, which made the quality of the source credible. The source is a second handed source that focuses on the history of the Cultural revolution.
- *Purpose:* Like a lot of sources, this source also talked about the historical overview of the Cultural revolution, an introduction to what had happened. However, this source focused more on how the red guards had been used during the cultural revolution. Instead of just the Cultural revolution as a historical event, the author also dragged attention to the society that's behind the event, and its motivation and development of it.
- *Value:* I was first attracted by the source because of its name, I think the wording is very interesting. While looking through the source, I found that it spent some length talking about the "old four" (the translation is kind of funny), which I think are a very important part of the revolution, that people don't talk about that much. I might be using this part of the source to talk about the role that the "old four" had been playing. Also, how were the red guards used as "instruments" is a very important question, and somehow matches my theme.
- *Limitation:* The source is a second handed source. Though I think the author was known for her accomplishment in the study of the red guards (when I search for her on google, a lot of images of her quotes are related to Chinese history or the red guards). The author's not Chinese, there might be a cultural gap in learning Chinese history.

Israel, John. "The Red Guards in Historical Perspective: Continuity and Change in the Chinese Youth Movement." *Cambridge University Pres. The Red Guards in Historical Perspective: Continuity and Change in the Chinese Youth Movement*, www.jstor.org/stable/651860. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

- *Original:* I wasn't able to search out the background of the author, however, since he's able to publish his article on Cambridge University Pres, this makes me believe his professional. The author mentioned using sources from *The China Quarterly*, Apr. - Jun., 1967, No. 30 (Apr. - Jun., 1967), pp. 1-32, and he thanked the Committee on Contemporary China of the Social Science Research Council, and Research center of Harvard University. The author is using professional, and first-hand sources.
- *Purpose:* The paper is about the development of the red guards. Throughout the paper, the author also talked about the relationship between the central government and the red guards and discussed the comment about the red guards during that historic time. The article also contains a list of what the red guards did in action.
- *Value:* The first sentence of the article watched my attention, I think the author is not just discussing the relationship between the government and the red guards easily, but saying that there are both "love and hate" between them. I didn't detail read the article yet, but I think I will use this source to provide support to the historical side of the red guards about how they developed.

- *Limitation: Even though there are first-hand sources included in the article, this author's writing is still a second-hand source. The author is not Chinese, there might be a cultural understanding limitation. Also, at the very beginning of the article, the author mentioned that there are one billion red guards, etc. Though, according to the research I found, there are more accurate numbers. I'm afraid that since the author included too much information in his writing, some of the details might be not as accurate.*

Phillips, Tom. "The Cultural Revolution: All You Need to Know About China's Political Convulsion." The Guardian, 10 May 2016, www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/the-cultural-revolution-50-years-on-all-you-need-to-know-about-chinas-political-convulsion. Accessed 29 Mar. 2023.

- *Original: This is a second handed source that collects information together and presents them in this form.*
- *Purpose: This article means to give a historical context about the general cultural revolution. The article contains every part of the cultural revolution and gives a brief overview of what has happened in the past. There are no personal comments contained in the writing. The author mentioned a few controversial questions and provided answers to them. However, there are no direct quotes about where all the sources came from.*
- *Value: This source gives me a very good go-through of the historical event, and I will be able to capture more accurate keywords to use during research. It helped me to build a clear concept in my mind about what had happened, and what the event was about. Also, the questions the author mentioned were very interesting, they gave me some inspiration.*
- *Limitation: The source is probably unable to be used in my proper writing. Some of the sources that the author used are unclear about where the original was, so the authenticity is impeached.*

Teiwe, Frederick C. "The First Tiananmen Incident Revisited: Elite Politics and Crisis Management at the End of the Maoist Era." Pacific Affairs. The First Tiananmen Incident Revisited: Elite Politics and Crisis Management at the End of the Maoist Era, www.jstor.org/stable/40022499. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

- *Original: The article is focusing on the Tiananmen incident that happened the near end of the cultural revolution. However, the author also focused on a lot of Chinese politics, making the point that the Mao era was finished after this incident.*
- *Purpose: This article is mainly focusing on how the last conflict burst out at Tiananmen, which led to the end of the cultural revolution. It contained some historical context from the previous history, and talked about the event in detail, from April 1-6. The author not only focused on the history of the event itself but also spent time talking about the development, in his understanding, and building a connection with Maoism.*
- *Value: I think this event is quite important because this is pretty much how the chaos had emerged to the surface, and when the government finally realized that things are going a little wild. This article is a good source for me to learn about the Tiananmen event itself, it's detailed enough that I don't really need to do a lot of additional search*

about what specifically happened during that event. However, the event is not the most important part of the Cultural Revolution or my research paper, so I will probably use it as partial support.

- *Limitation: From the conclusion, I think there is some subjective view that was included in the article. I feel like the author is holding a pretty western viewpoint about Chinese politics, and I don't think he really understood the cultural situation in China. This source is good to have a very detailed view of what happened, the description had been fairly detailed and organized, but it's not a good one to look into the comments or to discuss the author's perspective.*

Xiuyuan, Lu. "A Step toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution." Pacific Affairs, vol. 67, no. 4, 1994, p. 533. A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2759573>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

- *Original: The author is a Chinese scholar who published the article at the University of British Columbia. Though it's kind of confusing because, at the end of the article, the author marked "Princeton University, April 1994". I'm not quite sure if she means that this is the place where she finished the writing or something. Since she finished this writing in 1994, the author was probably born around the 60th or 70th, which means that she had gone through some part of that history.*
- *Purpose: The author is probably more focused on the part when she made her own argument. I think she really wants to talk about her opinion, and I think she is going pretty fast about the historical part. The article is focused more on the topic of "violent", this is obviously shown in her journal's title and her introduction. Other than the history introduction, she also wrote an interesting section, the "cultural revolution study in China", which is related to her scholar status.*
- *Value: As I mentioned, the author wrote about the cultural revolution study in China, I think that part can be finely used in my essay to talk about the comments that are possible in China about the cultural revolution. Also, when the author herself is someone who had been through that period of time, this article she wrote can be a good source for me to look at and annotate, analyze her viewpoint, and draw conclusions from her attitude.*
- *Limitation: Starting from the beginning of the article, I can tell that, as an individual who had been through the period of the cultural revolution, the author is somehow biased. She is speaking from a more subjective perspective, and in the second part of the article, which she had mentioned in the introduction, she dragged to an "argument", which indicates that there are personal viewpoints imported.*

"当年的红卫兵现在去哪了." Zhihu, 27 May 2022, 当年的红卫兵现在去哪了? - 晓杨削恩的回答 - 知乎 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/54991216/answer/2505278298>.

Accessed 26 Mar. 2023.

- *original: The article is a reply to a forum called "Where did all the red guards end up to be?" The author replied to this question and received a lot of likes. It's unable to know the real name or identification of the author, but according to his file, his answer had received qualifications from professionals.*

- *purpose: The article was to answer the question of where all the red guards end up to be, however, the author brought up the point that there is an enormous amount of red guards. While explaining the development of the population of the red guards, he cited a lot of sources and gave some specific numbers.*
- *value: Firstly, the numbers the author provided were very impressive, they created good data, and the author cited the years and the area for the data. Secondly, it is also interesting, in this forum, how people are talking about the red guards. When talking about the contemporary attitude toward the red guards, these arguments in the forum will be supportive.*
- *limitation: The author is not qualified as a professional scholar. People who are discussing this topic are not talking with first handed sources, there are biases contained in the argument.*

老照片, 1966年毛主席八次接见全国各地红卫兵1300多万人, 17 Mar. 2021, www.meipian.cn/3h89un7c. Accessed 26 Mar. 2023.

- *Original: The article here is a collection of a lot of sources, containing pictures of posters and newspapers from that time, pictures of the red guards, and paintings. There are some brief word introductions to some of the events that happened at that time.*
- *Purpose: The article is mainly about some picture sources of the red guards and the review Mao had with the red guards. There are a few pictures from newspapers, and in the newspaper, there is some information about the red guards. For example, there are 1.1 million red guards, there are seven times of reviews, etc. The few paragraphs at the end of the article briefly talked about the agenda of how Mao had met all the red guards.*
- *Value: According to the other source I found, this source can give stronger support about the exact number of the red guards, because it has a newspaper from that time that has numbering on it. Also, from the picture, we can see the attitude of the red guards toward Mao and Mao's attitude toward the red guards at the previous time. This can be used to make a contract later on in my article.*
- *Limitation: As I mentioned that there are a lot of pictures, which can be a great limitation. A lot of information requires my inference, and I'm unable to directly quote or use them. Also, I think this source is good for me to get a sense of the cultural revolution and the red guards while I'm still doing research and learning about this concept, but will not be as much use when I'm eventually writing the paper.*