

## **The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Historiographical Study**

In 1965, Mao Zedong believed that his socialist campaign was being threatened by Liu Shaoqi and his comrades who, in Mao's eyes, were traitors to the revolution because they shied away from a genuine mass movement. These veteran revolutionaries who had helped Mao create the People's Republic were now seemingly less committed to Mao's vision. In Mao's eyes the Chinese Revolution was losing ground because of party conservatism and large bureaucracy. Mao insisted that many party bureaucrats "were taking the capitalist road." Mao called for a wave of criticism against "reactionary bourgeois ideology" in 1966. Thus began the decade-long Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that would have devastating and far-reaching impact on modern China.

The Cultural Revolution was one of the most complex events in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. All the Chinese people and institutions were involved and changed forever. Although Mao initiated the movement, once the masses were mobilized the movement gained its own momentum. Mao and his party would continue to manipulate the masses but the masses would find ways to express themselves spontaneously. The Cultural Revolution would last from 1966 to 1976 and pass through a number of stages with the majority of the violence occurring in the first two years. As the Chinese masses split into factions, factional struggles affected the course of the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Mao would call on students to purge those that had betrayed the revolution.

Widespread violence was the Cultural Revolution's most unusual aspect and has become the main definition of this time. The People's Republic had suffered brutality but none so widespread as the Cultural Revolution. The student revolts that began in Beijing educational institutions quickly led to violence. Libraries were burned to the ground by Red Guards. Anything that was not in line with Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought was destroyed. Murder was so widespread that trucks patrolled streets in Beijing looking for dead bodies. The suicide rate increased dramatically as people, who attempted to

---

<sup>1</sup> Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1-3.

escape persecution jumped from buildings, drank insecticide and would lie across tracks in front of oncoming trains or throw themselves in front of cars. Not only did people during the Cultural Revolution die from murder and suicide, but also, unnecessarily, from illness due to the refusal to grant medical aid to those considered counter-revolutionaries. Everyone in China was affected; everyone knew someone who had died.<sup>2</sup> Historians have had to ask: Why did so many Chinese attack each other with such violence? Why would groups of young Chinese, often students as Red Guards, attack their fellow Chinese with such violence and destruction?

### **Early Scholarship**

In 1978, only a couple years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Hong Yung Lee attempted to write a balanced and comprehensive history of the Cultural Revolution in his doctoral study, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study*. He chose to be thorough in his study rather than provide any new interpretation. He wanted not to overemphasize any particular thesis but rather give a clear view of each stage of the Revolution by using primary source Red Guard newspapers. Lee explained the causes of the revolution through four distinct stages. Although the movement began as an elite conflict, Lee explained how it quickly became a conflict between elites and masses. This case study of the Red Guard Movement illustrated the process through which the mass organizations were formed. Lee found that radical organizations came from socially underprivileged sectors and sought to challenge the status quo. When Mao denied the Party of its legitimacy, these groups fought for power.<sup>3</sup>

Lee concentrated on these mass groups and particularly the Red Guards. In conclusion, he attempted to explain the reasons why it was so difficult to suppress the violence of the Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao attempted to reduce the gap between the elite and the masses by exploiting the existing social contradictions and shifting his support from one group to another. The mass organizations behaved according to their own interests because they had such a stake in the outcome of the Revolution. The mass

---

<sup>2</sup> Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1987), 133-138.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 9-25.

organizations used coercion and bribery to collect incriminating materials of the opposing group. Alliances based on mutual interests made it difficult to resolve conflicts and control violence.<sup>4</sup> Lee's development of the concept of a social revolution at all levels of society would influence scholars of China.

In 1980 Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathon Unger published an article titled "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou" in *The China Quarterly* to address the question: What caused the divisions and violence between student groups during the Cultural Revolution? Comparing statistics taken on the status and class standing of parents of the student activists, Chan, Rosen, and Unger found correlations between parents' backgrounds & class backgrounds, and students' commitment to activism. They cited the events that happened prior to Cultural Revolution as agents in the conflicts. In pre-Cultural Revolution China the prospects for upward mobility were narrowing. There was growing competition to get into higher education. In order to make it into a good school, the students had to win political credentials as well as having high grades. Those that could enter the Communist Youth League were required to have good family backgrounds, which meant their parents had to be party cadres. Educational recruitment policies were based on a parent's background in the party. This led to class antagonisms that would transform into Red Guard factionalism.<sup>5</sup>

Although each author independently conducted doctoral research on this issue, they all came to the conclusion that pre-Cultural Revolution social tension led to the Red Guard violence. Due to harsh prospects and a lessened chance of getting into a University, the students had to fight for dwindling opportunities. The Red Guard factionalism occurred between the original Red Guards, or Good-Class Red Guards and the new, or Rebel Red Guards, who were initially denied entrance to political involvement. This division not only existed before the revolution but also became increasingly violent as the two camps grew intent on suppressing one another. Abuse and violence grew as the students vied to

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 330-348.

<sup>5</sup> Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathon Unger, "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou," *The China Quarterly*, no. 83 (September, 1980): 397-410.

show their devotion to the cause. Students who were originally turned away from revolutionary activism were no longer at the bottom of the hierarchy, and they resented the subordinate status that had been originally placed upon them.<sup>6</sup>

Anita Chan would write more extensively on the students involved in political activism during the Cultural Revolution in 1985, by conducting individual case studies. For her book *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation*, Chan interviewed fourteen students who were teenagers during the Cultural Revolution. Published in 1985, this book follows the stories of four student activists during the Cultural Revolution. Although each student grew up during the turmoil of this decade, the students had differing experiences and interpretations of their experiences as Red Guards. The students all came from the bourgeoisie class and shared a commitment to the Cultural Revolution and the idea that “China could be re-made into a prosperous and politically pure society.”<sup>7</sup>

Chan chose four students out of the fourteen as representatives of each of the four categories of activists: the conforming activist, purist activist, rebellious activist, and pragmatic activist. She then chronologically described their experiences, beginning with the activists as children in Primary School and concluding with their participation in the movement. She describes how in primary school character formation and political education was most important. As the children became adolescents, their political socialization became more demanding. Education shaped the behavior of teenage students through peer pressures and a strictly controlled social environment. This was during the years 1962-1966, when Mao’s image became deified and demands on young people to prove themselves increased. Each of the four students accepted the political teachings and chose to express their dedication differently.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 430-446.

<sup>7</sup> Anita Chan. *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 53-67.

In *Children of Mao*, Chan disputed the ‘national character’ school of thinking by authors like Lucian Pye, who will be discussed next, and Richard Solomon. Pye and Solomon, both well-known writers on China, explain both Chinese politics and the personality traits of modern day China almost entirely in terms of the legacy of the Chinese Culture and a traditionally authoritarian family structure. Chan explains that this school of writing is inadequate because it ignores the complex development in China during the last three decades. Chan presents evidence through her case studies, that the authoritarian personality characteristics that the activists learned were powerfully linked to a new system of political socialization that was based in the schools. The decline of the family as a socialization agent was replaced by the authority of the state, and school-learned socialization. The traits the children acquired at home led them to differing experiences of the socialization they received at school.<sup>9</sup>

Lucian W. Pye, in an article in *The China Quarterly* in December of 1986 attempted to assess the causes of the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to Chan, he believed what was most missing from current scholarship regarding the Cultural Revolution were deeper examination of cultural and societal forces that made possible such a decade. His belief was that not many scholars had gone much beyond the superficial interpretations of this period. Most scholars claim that Mao Zedong initiated and led and was therefore the primary cause. Although the Chinese public is willing to blame their Chairman they still consider him a great proletarian revolutionary and strategist, although China today follows very few of Mao’s early policies. Others blame the conflict on a struggle between two lines, that of Liu Shaoqi and that of Mao. Other factors considered are Mao’s personality, factional conflicts over policies, appeals of revolutionary utopianism, power struggles, elite conflicts and organizational problems inherent in governing a country of China’s size. Most puzzling to Pye, is that more profound social and cultural considerations have not been explored.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 212-215.

<sup>10</sup> Lucien W. Pye, “Reassessing the Cultural Revolution,” *The China Quarterly* 108 (December 1986): 600-603.

Lucian Pye cited studies of Nazi Germany which have made character studies of German culture and the state of German society a focus more than the motivations of Hitler and his associates. Why shouldn't scholars examine Chinese culture and society as primary cause for such an important event, Pye asked. "What was it in the nature of Chinese culture and society that not only permitted but encouraged the extremism of that period?...What was the connection between their faith in the miraculous powers of rebellion and the heterodox traditions of populist Taoism-Buddhism mysticism?" Or was the Cultural Revolution a playing out of tensions behind the peasant uprisings that China had from Han times onward? Pye encouraged scholars to question; what was the relationship between Chinese society and the causes of the Cultural Revolution? It is not enough to blame only Lin Biao and the gang of four, they could not have done this alone.<sup>11</sup>

Most importantly to Pye, the Cultural Revolution has had profound effects on Chinese culture. It has opened Chinese eyes to the reality of their failures and this shock, according to Pye, has jarred their traditional sense of racial and cultural superiority. Yet most people in China are probably still caught up in the problem of Chinese patriotism. Pye presents these questions to the Chinese: "does love of country require blind adherence to the political currents of the day, or can the imperative of patriotism be met by achieving standards of personal excellence as judged by international standards?" Pye agreed with Anne F. Thurston, mentioned shortly, in the opinion that patriotism made it impossible for the Chinese to analyze or criticize their own political history.<sup>12</sup>

This same year, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective* by Tang Tsou, author and scholar of Chinese studies at University of Chicago, was published. A collection of eight essays written by Tsou, and originally published separately over eighteen years, made up this argument against the school of thought that the Cultural Revolution played a negative role in China's history. The Cultural Revolution limited political power, and played a large part in the Post-Mao

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 603-604.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 609-611.

Reforms in China. This was not an abrupt break from the past either but rather a continuation of a self-limitation of political authority that existed also in China's traditional political system. The Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards, explained Tsou, were expressions of a profound crisis in integration. In the struggle for power, two political forces divided the Chinese people and refused to be integrated. Tsou also asserted that the use of violence was controlled, and that it achieved the desired social change with the least disruptive effects.<sup>13</sup>

By 1987, Tsou's defense of the Cultural Revolution was challenged in a book by Anne Thurston. In *Enemies of the People*, Thurston examined how the political upheaval of the Cultural Revolution affected the lives of its victims. She presented a view of the Cultural Revolution not as politics but as tragedy, by basing the book largely on interviews of victims of the Cultural Revolution. These interviews were conducted in China in 1981 and 1982. In her preface she tells the story of You Xiaoli who was left to die after being accused of being a bourgeois academic authority and follower of Liu Shaoqi. After being beaten a disk in her back had ruptured, but as a counterrevolutionary she was denied medical care. Thurston uses this example as another episode in the history of man's inhumanity to man and to illustrate that the Chinese Cultural Revolution was surpassed only by the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>14</sup>

Thurston explained how China's Red Guards could have been so cruel: First, morality is not a product of the nature of man but rather of education. Therefore, the young of China behaved badly because they were educated badly. Secondly, China had taken their leader and elevated him to a god. The Chinese exhibited unquestioning faith and obedience. According to Thurston, China had never been a society where individual judgment was encouraged. The role of the leader had always been more important than the individual. Mao's power only served to enhance traditional subservience before authority. In conclusion, Thurston states, "the lesson the Cultural Revolution teaches is nothing if not humility. For how can any of us be certain, without having been there ourselves, how we

---

<sup>13</sup> Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xxxi-xlii.

<sup>14</sup> Thurston, *Enemies of the People*, xiii-xix.

would behave in similar circumstances?...The germs of the Cultural Revolution are in us all.”<sup>15</sup>

Also important to Thurston was the peculiar challenge many Chinese faced in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution of having to go about their everyday lives. The persecutors and the persecuted have had to live and work side by side after the fact. Huang Chaoqun, who was interviewed by Anne Thurston, still sees the man several times a week who directed the house searches of his apartment. Often that man is wearing Chaoqun’s favorite sweater, which was seized during one of the raids. Of course there is tremendous guilt for those that did the persecuting and then there is survivor’s guilt, which is related to what people did in order to stay alive. This is ignoring the fact that many were confronted with no-win choices. Choices that often involved sacrificing one member of the family in order to save other members. Also pervasive is the fear that the Cultural Revolution will happen again, if not in their lifetime then in the children’s. Scholars must keep this fear and guilt in mind when searching for their answers.<sup>16</sup>

Like Anita Chan, Jonathan Spence, author and professor of Chinese History at Yale, also blamed the frustrations of the Chinese students as a cause of the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Disillusioned students who were frustrated over policies that kept them from obtaining political advancement because of their family backgrounds fueled the Revolution according to Spence, author of *The Search for Modern China*. There were also the millions of disgruntled urban students who had been relocated to the countryside during earlier party campaigns. In 1966 Mao used this to his advantage and called for a purge of the cultural bureaucracy. The Red Guards became the vanguard of the new revolution. Red Guards considered Mao the father of the revolution and raised him to the status of deity. As struggles continued the destruction and loss of life became more terrible. Those considered anti-revolutionary were subjected to mass criticism, humiliation and violence. Thousands of intellectuals were beaten to death and many committed suicide. Many were imprisoned for years or relocated to purify themselves

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 276-292

<sup>16</sup> Thurston, *Enemies of the People*, 245.



through labor in the countryside. Spence explains, “The extent of this outpouring of violence, and the rage of the young Red Guards against their elders, suggest the real depths of frustration that now lay at the heart of Chinese society. The youth needed little urging from Mao to rise up against their parents, teachers, party cadres, and the elderly, to perform countless acts of sadism. For years the young had been called on to lead lives of revolutionary sacrifice...and absolute obedience to the state, all under conditions of perpetual supervision. They were repressed, angry, and aware of their powerlessness. They eagerly seized on the order to throw off all restraint, and the natural targets were those who seemed responsible for their cramped lives.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Spence, the nature of Chinese politics was a system that bred both fear and compliance and made it possible for the mass campaigns of terror and intimidation. The Red Guards viewed the Cultural Revolution as the struggle of one class to overthrow another, and everything that did not fit into the socialist system was attacked. Factions of student and worker Red Guards began battling and disrupting life in Beijing. The result was chaos with battling factions branding one another “conservative.” The People’s Liberation Army was used to restore order to the city but only with great struggle. The situation was only resolved by forcing a return to obedience of the very students who had sought to bring new freedoms to China.<sup>18</sup>

### **Recent Scholarship**

In 1991, *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* was published by The Council of East Asian Studies and Harvard University. The essays in this book were originally presented at a conference held in May 1987 at Harvard University in an attempt to reassess the Great Proletarian Revolution of 1966-1976. The relative openness of post-Mao China had presented new material that allowed scholars to refine their ideas about this period. The flood of statistics that resulted from the modernization efforts of China

---

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 602-606.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 608-609.

and descriptive chronologies provided a rich source of facts about the Cultural Revolutionary years.<sup>19</sup>

Also important were the increased opportunities for interviews with people who lived through the Revolution. The essays in this book drew on this new information and new conceptual approaches to present fresh perspectives. The editors argued in the introduction that the goals of the Cultural Revolution did not correspond to the outcomes. Whereas Mao and other leaders of the of the Cultural Revolution had launched it as an attempt to purify Chinese politics and reinvigorate its economy, the realities of the movement fell short of such ideals. The Cultural Revolution had left its mark on nearly every aspect of China's politics, economics, and culture, but it failed to create egalitarianism and Maoist ideals proved hollow.<sup>20</sup>

Why did a movement based on seemingly noble ideals turn so brutal? The editors pointed out that although Mao believed that the Cultural Revolution would not be a “dinner party,” he appeared surprised and anguished that the violence became so aimless and endemic. Like Chan and Spence the editors believed that the social violence of the Revolution could be explained by the pre-Cultural Revolution political system, which encouraged factionalism and conflict. The contradictions of Maoist self-reliance and central planning caused incoherence. As Richard Kraus, author and political science professor at the University of Oregon, explained, “Maoism itself was embodied in the paradox that Mao wanted people to act voluntarily exactly as he wanted them to, without quite trusting that they would do so.”<sup>21</sup>

Shifting somewhat from this political argument, Lynn T. White III treated the Cultural Revolution as an unintended result of administrative policies. He claimed that the main roots of the Revolution's violence lay in previous measures undertaken by the state. The labeling, monitoring and campaigning of administrative policies influenced Chinese

---

<sup>19</sup> William A. Joseph, Christine P.W. Wong, and David Zweig, eds., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

students' attitudes toward each other and their local leaders. Tactics that increased fear and raised the rate of compliance had great affect in the short term but by manipulating people for short term goals tumult was the outcome. The Cultural Revolution was merely the long-term cost of these policies.<sup>22</sup>

In a search for more personal answers Zhai Zhenhua wrote a memoir of her life experiences during the Cultural Revolution. *Red Flower of China* is an example of a victim-genre memoir, published in 1992. Zhai grew up in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. She was taught *Mao Zedong thought* and revolutionary ideals in school. When the Revolution started, Zhai took part in student revolutionary activities and eventually became a Red Guard. She took part in the violence of the accusations and home raids. Although she would later look back on her activities with remorse, at the time she felt she was merely following orders and being a good revolutionary. What had been idealism, blind faith and patriotism soon turn to disillusionment when she was sent to the countryside, for re-education by peasants. Beginning to see the flaws of Mao's policies, Zhai comes to the conclusion that China would be better off without Mao. "From childhood we had been imbued with the idea that our lives did not belong to ourselves, they belonged to the country and the people. Once I had liked this idea, but only now did I know what it really meant. No schooling, no university, no future, like the end of the world." Although Zhai would make it through those turbulent years and she eventually attended a University, she knew there were many who were not so lucky. These people either got absorbed into the industry or agricultural production of the Provinces were they had been sent.<sup>23</sup>

Lu Xiuyuan is another historian who attempted to understand the popular violence that plagued China's Cultural Revolution in his article "A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution" published in *Pacific Affairs* in the winter of 1995. Xuiyuan insists that the Chinese people were active agents in the revolution, not merely victims of Mao. He also notes the large amount of "wounded

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 83-93.

<sup>23</sup> Zhai Zhenhua, *Red Flower of China: An Autobiography* (New York: Soho, 1992), 99-239.

literature” published after the end of the Cultural Revolution. These memoirs contained graphic descriptions and brought detailed information to a public audience. These memoirs, however important, cannot take on the tasks of theoretical research and he quickly notes the scarcity of theoretical analyses in China. Lu warns scholars that every publication written about the Cultural Revolution has to be examined by the government and kept within the confines of the official line. Even the published memoirs of important events during the revolution are therefore not value-free descriptions but only initial steps in the rewriting of history. Everything needs to be looked at with a critical eye.<sup>24</sup>

Lu does not question that Mao was a charismatic leader and an important cause of the Cultural Revolution, yet if there was not response by the people to Mao’s call, the Cultural Revolution could not have occurred at all. Lu asks of the reader, why did the people respond so enthusiastically to Mao’s call? In order to answer this question scholars have to shift their attention from elite politics of the Cultural Revolution to the Cultural Revolution as a process of mass movement. This perspective supports the theory that the Chinese people were not passive objects manipulated by Mao and his comrades but active participants who transformed their environment in the process. Their motivations and behaviors were derived from pre-Cultural Revolution contexts and hidden within the Chinese social reality and have to be thoroughly investigated to understand the fundamental causes of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>25</sup>

Also important to Lu was the careful study of the social groups at the mass level, including the Red Guards. The Red Guards greatly affected the course of the Cultural Revolution and demand the attention of scholars. By tracing the roots of the behaviors of Red Guards to the social contexts of pre-Cultural Revolution China, can scholars get a true picture of the causes of violence during this period? Lu cites Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathon Unger as making important contributions to this approach through scrutinizing student Red Guards. The complicated mentality of the Red Guard generation is explored in Anita Chan’s book *Children of Mao* that was mentioned previously.

---

<sup>24</sup> Lu Xiuyuan, “A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution,” *Pacific Affairs* 67, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 533-542.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 541-545.

Ultimately, the mass violence of the Cultural Revolution was a consequence of the tensions and conflicts among social groups, which used punishment and discipline against one another.<sup>26</sup>

Also in response to the wounded literature genre, came the book *Some of Us*. As sad as Zhai Zhenhua's story was, other women who grew up during the Cultural Revolution did not feel the same sense of sadness but rather empowerment in having lived during such a unique era. In 2001, Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng and Bai Di, editors of *Some of Us*, wished to present the day-to-day lives of women who grew up during the Cultural Revolution from a new perspective. They wanted to publish a book that was different from the existing literature: narratives often telling stories of persecution, violence and victimization. The editors thought a collective effort could present a more rounded view of the time. There were many perspectives and layers to the experience and they weren't getting told. Although the essays in the collection might disappoint the existing expectations in the West, the editors of this book wished to give a more inclusive view of this turbulent decade.<sup>27</sup>

Believing that the lessons of the Cultural Revolution had yet to be learned, Zhong, Zheng and Di, wanted a discussion free from the "dichotomized framework of victims vs. victimizers." In order to clearly examine the complexity of the situation, they wanted to leave this narrow focus and examine fully the intricacies of the decade that changed their lives. In attempting to do this, they had to question "why some people's memories seem to be treated as more legitimate than others." The questions they wanted answered were what it meant to have grown up in the Mao era, especially as women and how were they to have understood the mundane events of their lives in view of the existing literature and interpretations of the Mao era? They specifically cited as what they were not attempting to create the examples of "wounded literature", such as *Wild Swans* and *Red Azalea*.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 543-548.

<sup>27</sup> Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, *Some of Us* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), xiv-xvii.

They wanted their memoir to be different than those that existed and to present a less simplistic view of recent Chinese history.<sup>28</sup>

Attempting to reexamine the under-explored dimensions of that time in Chinese history, the editors chose women who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution in China but were now living and studying in the United States. By choosing the format of memoir writing, the women could discuss their thoughts in a public manner, and raise the question of the relationship between experience and history. Most of the women agreed that their positions expressed in the essays could not be easily made to fit within the narrative that already existed. Most important was how the women had understood their experiences both within China and the West.<sup>29</sup>

The book consists of essays by nine women and is arranged in the order of their birth. The editors chose not to summarize the pieces in order not to limit the “scope of (the) interpretations.” Most of the contributors wanted to challenge the notion of having been ideologically brainwashed during the Mao era. There is a difference between official discourse and personal experience, as Wang Zheng explains. The desire to tell their stories was a challenge to the existing paradigm of understanding the Cultural Revolution, but they wanted to enrich the understanding of this era, one in which they had grown up.<sup>30</sup>

In her essay, Wang Zheng, a professor of women’s studies at the University of Michigan, explains how being a young woman during the Cultural Revolution had advantages because there were few gender constraints. Young female leaders emerged and were encouraged to forgo the roles of wife and mother to devote herself heart and soul to the revolution. Regarding devotion to the Revolution, gender was irrelevant. Her interest in feminism was fostered by her experiences in the Revolution and ideals for gender equality. Wang continues to carry on a revolution on her own terms. Still wanting to be a

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xvii

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xxi-xxiii

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., xxx-xxxii.

revolutionary, she stated that she was stuck with the identity as an agent of change from the Maoist era.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this complex event in Chinese history is still being explored by scholars. This era affected all aspects of Chinese society including the social, political and economic, and much can be learned from studying it. It was a time of wasted years, which included loss of hope, distortion of facts, betrayal of ideals, guilt, and humiliation. There is a profound sense of loss for the Chinese in regard to the Cultural Revolution. Beyond the violence and the losses, the most apparent sadness comes from the meaninglessness of the movement. It is a cause that is impossible to understand. Many Chinese lost the capacity to distinguish truth from fiction and lost their own sense of identity in the process. The memoirs as well as the theoretical studies are all steps to helping the Chinese understand their turbulent past. Skepticism is a good trait for a scholar of China to have and to keep in mind that literature being published in China is censored. As time passes, more information that will help enlighten this era will reveal itself and hopefully a more rounded and complete study will be available.

Early scholarship of the Cultural Revolution was focused on the victims. This is often said to be due to political reasons, that the new government wanted Maoist policies to be seen as failures. Victim memoirs were popular and real scholarship was censored. Steven W. Mosher in his book *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality* in explaining the different ages of perception in China, which were originally controlled by culture brokers, who were a relatively small group of scholars who spent time in China and returned to an audience in the United States, showed how during the period in which the Cultural Revolution had taken place scholars were far more restricted. With the only access being these few brokers, American perception depended completely on them until after the Cultural Revolution. The 1960's and 1970's were an age of admiration according to Mosher. American intellectuals glorified Mao as this philosopher king. Before 1976 many scholars had to exercise self-censorship in order to be asked back to

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 27-52.

China. After the arrest of the Gang of Four, visas became easier to obtain and more cities were opened to foreigners. For the first time conversations with ordinary Chinese became possible. Government officials even seemed to delight in unmasking the past unpleasantness, if it could be blamed on the Gang of Four. With the relaxation of visa requirements came a new political climate towards American correspondents who now found it possible to make regular visits. More visits meant that they were less vulnerable to obvious forms of manipulation. Also in 1977, Beijing opened China up to tourists, which brought about changes as well. The Chinese people, once denied any contact with foreigners were now enlisted in large numbers to serve them. Unflattering information about China began to trickle out of the country. The press, which only a short time earlier had only admiration for Mao's China now began to attack and the incentive was provided by Beijing itself. It was the regime's attack on its recent past that gave Western correspondents much of the substance for their reports.<sup>32</sup>

The regime's disowning of its own past was difficult for the West to ignore. After years of projecting an image of infallibility, Beijing was admitting that all had not been well in the world of Mao. Post-Mao leadership's attacks on Mao began to dismantle the Maoist personality cult. This happened very quickly as posters were torn down and statues razed. Mao's failures and misinformation campaigns were hard to ignore. Scholars in the West who had earlier come to the defense of the Beijing regime and its policies actually apologized and wrote and published self-criticisms. What must be kept in mind is that even though these scholars may have taken back earlier views, their scholarship still forms an important part of the historical record of American perceptions and misperceptions of China at the time.<sup>33</sup>

But scholars especially abroad began to look to pre-Cultural Revolution conditions to show how the violence of this decade could have occurred. Chinese cultural and social traits were blamed, as were the Communist Party tactics of the early years. School environments were investigated to see how factions between the two groups formed.

---

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Mosher, *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality* (United States: A New Republic Book, 1990), 172-175.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-189.



More recently, more statistics and information has been made available to scholars which leads to a more well rounded scholarship. Some scholars began to challenge previous scholarship and began looking at the positive affects of the Cultural Revolution and Mao. While others just wishing to share their experiences, although they did not feel they were typical victims, published memoirs. Although all were searching for answers as to how and why such an event occurred and the impact on the Chinese people, scholars now attempted to understand this complex event in its entirety. New perspectives will only help in this challenge.

While early scholarship often attempted to discover the cause of the violence of the Cultural Revolution, later scholarship with the help of new data, tried not only to find causes but have also attempted to help China move forward. How do individuals and the country at large, continue to move forward in the face of such circumstances? How will the Chinese cope with the nightmares and guilt that resulted from the Cultural Revolution? This is what the new scholars are attempting to tackle. New scholars also wish to challenge the existing paradigm, and present a more rounded view of this decade with all its complexities. New perspectives will help heighten awareness and help to understand Chinese history better. Even if that means admitting that there is something to be learned from such a hated and despised decade; one that many Chinese would rather forget.

### Bibliography

- Chan, Anita. *Children of Mao: personality development and political activism in the Red Guard generation*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985.
- Chan, Anita, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathon Unger. "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou." *The China Quarterly* 83 (September 1980): 397-446.
- Joseph, William A., Christine P.W. Wong, and David Zweig, eds. *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution..* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Lee, Hong Yung. *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

- Mosher, Stephen. *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality*. United States: A New Republic Book, 1990.
- Pye, Lucian W. "Reassessing the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly* 108 (December 1986): 597-612.
- Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- Thurston, Anne F. *Enemies of the People*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- Tsou, Tang. *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Xinyan, Lu. "A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution." *Pacific Affairs* 67, No. 4 (Winter 1994): 533-563.
- Zhenhua, Zhai. *Red Flower of China: An Autobiography*. New York: Soho, 1992.
- Zhong, Xueping, Wang Zhen, and Bai Di, eds. *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.