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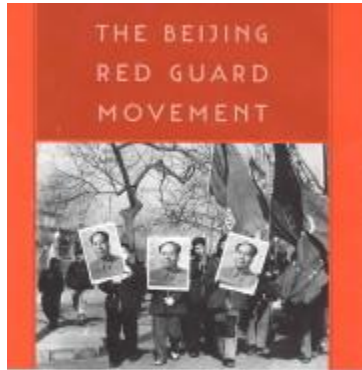
Gittings, John, "In Case You Missed It: Fractured Rebellion" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 803.
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In Case You Missed It: Fractured Rebellion

March 31, 2010 in [In Case You Missed It](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

By John Gittings



FRACTURED REBELLION Andrew G. Walder, *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2009).

A group of former Red Guards at Beijing's Qinghua University, interviewed in spring 1971 about their recent factional struggles, laughed loudly (always a sign of uneasiness) and made their "frank confession": yes, they had not always behaved in a spirit of proletarian comradeship, they admitted. "We used to sit on either side of the table and agree to make up our differences, but even while we shook hands we were kicking one other under the table!"

If only it had been confined to kicks. This account, given to a delegation from the Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding (I was a member of it on my first visit to China), was a highly sanitised version. William Hinton, author of *Fanshen* — the classic account of rural revolution during the communist-led civil war in the late 1940s — heard a much bloodier tale when he interviewed at Qinghua. Hinton was told how the struggle on the campus in April 1968 had escalated "from cold to hot weapons", from stone slingshots and wooden spears to revolvers and hand grenades. One group welded steel plates onto the body of a tractor to convert it into a tank. Ten students were killed and many more badly injured in the next three months till July 1968 when Mao Zedong finally sent in groups of local workers, backed by the army, to restore order.

Hinton's account caused quite a stir on the left outside China when it was published as a special issue of *Monthly Review* (July-August 1972) under the title "Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University", but even so his discussion of Red Guard violence was limited to the final months of the first phase (1966-68) of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). For many Chinese who remember these times, especially among the families of teachers, intellectuals, artists and "cultural workers", government officials dubbed "bureaucrats", and others labelled as "capitalist-roaders," the most severe Red Guard violence in Beijing — which set the tone for elsewhere — had occurred two years earlier. By mid-1968 the survivors of these first months were simply keeping their heads down while the factions fought it out.

The rebellious students had emerged seemingly from nowhere in June 1966, encouraged by Mao and radical leaders close to him to denounce their academic staff and their curriculum as "bourgeois scholars and authorities". Mao deliberately stayed away from Beijing in a countryside retreat, leaving his ultimate target — the Head of State Liu Shaoqi and other senior leaders — bemused and unsure how to handle the student movement. The mistakes which Liu and the others made (or which Mao claimed that they made) in sending in "work teams" to keep the movement under control would provide the pretext for broadening the attack against Liu's alleged "bourgeois headquarters".

By August Mao had returned to Beijing, praising the “revolutionary” spirit of the first Red Guard groups. An emergency Party plenum clipped Liu’s power, and set up a new Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) to run the Cultural Revolution, dominated by Jiang Qing (Madame Mao) and other ultra-leftists who would in retrospect be labelled loosely as adherents of her Gang of Four. Bypassing the Party authorities, the Red Guards received guidance from this new Group on which human targets to attack, and also sought its backing in their factional disputes. On August 18 Mao reviewed the first Red Guard rally in Tiananmen Square.

There had already been “a wave of unrestrained violence” at the end of July, Andrew Walder tells us in his study of the Beijing Red Guard movement, as soon as the work teams were withdrawn from school and college campuses. “High-school students seized party secretaries, principals, teachers and classmates and subjected them to violent beating. . . . At least eight high-school party secretaries, principals, or vice-principals were murdered or committed suicide” — the first such murder was that of Bian Zhongyun, deputy principal of the Beijing Normal Girls’ High School. (The story of Bian’s murder has now been told in a remarkable film, *Though I am Gone (wo sui siqu)* by the independent Chinese film-maker Hu Jie, largely based on interviews with her husband who at the time with exceptional courage took photographs of her corpse and the circumstances of her death. The film cannot be shown in China but may be found on YouTube.)

However the violence escalated after Mao’s first Red Guard rally even more terrifyingly. Walder records that in the following month more than 114,000 homes of those identified as “bad classes” were searched, typically in violent assaults by Red Guards, for evidence of “bourgeois ideology” such as foreign currency, books, paintings etc.:

In the Western district, the books, paintings, scrolls, and other items confiscated from 1,061 homes were set ablaze and burned for eight days and nights. During this period 77,000 people were expelled from their homes in the urban and inner suburban districts. The violence crested during the last week of August, when an average of more than 200 people were dying every day. The official Beijing death toll for the month after August 18 was 1,772.

All of this is well-known territory, described in foreign media and academic accounts of the period under the generic label of “Red Guard violence”: at the time even foreign sympathisers of the Cultural Revolution had to acknowledge that there had been “Red Guard excesses”. Most of us will have seen photos and film clips of Red Guards smashing temples, burning scrolls and pictures, and forcing “class enemies” to stand on chairs wearing tall dunce caps, or kneel and apologise to the masses.

Were the Red Guards really synonymous with violence to the extent that these images portray? The most authoritative account of the Cultural Revolution to be published in recent years — *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, 2006) — says that Mao unleashed a “reign of terror” in which the youth of China were “. . . freed from parental and societal constraints . . . to perpetrate assault, battery and murder upon their fellow citizens to the extent their barely formed consciences permitted. The result was the juvenile state of nature, nationwide, foreshadowed in microcosm by Nobel prize-winner William Golding in *Lord of the Flies*.”

While not minimising either the violence or Mao’s responsibility, Walder presents a less stereotyped and more diverse picture of Red Guard attitudes to violence — as far as I know for the first time at this length in Western scholarship. Substantial groups in the Red Guard movement in Beijing — perhaps the majority — were actually opposed to the violence and many said so. They organised Red Guard “picket corps” which sought to curtail violence and provide discipline to an anarchic and rapidly growing movement. The Western District Picket Corps, an alliance of 50 Red Guard groups from more than 40 schools, announced that

In the Cultural Revolution from this point forward it is absolutely forbidden to beat people, absolutely forbidden to physically abuse them either openly or in a disguised manner; absolutely forbidden to humiliate people, absolutely forbidden to extract forced confessions. . . . Kneeling, lying flat, bending at the waist, carrying a heavy weight, standing for long periods, keeping hands raised for long periods, keeping heads bowed for long period, etc., all are open or disguised forms of physical abuse and not methods of struggle that we should use.

Far from their consciences being “barely formed”, these young Red Guards showed a genuine sense of ethical judgement. Their members were expected to “serve the people” and “gain their trust” by non-violent means. The Red Guards at Qinghua University had issued a series of appeals for non-violence from the beginning of August. Their first appeal was initially welcomed by Mao himself who had it circulated to delegates of the Party plenum.

The role of violence in the Cultural Revolution was not the original subject of Walder’s research. Before setting out, he identified a mass of documentary material on the Beijing student movement which had not been looked at in much detail before, including near-complete runs of factional newspapers, collections of wall-posters, transcripts of speeches and chronicles of events kept by students at the time. Walder intended to test the generally accepted view that the factional divisions among the Red Guards reflected the social and political inequalities of Mao-era China” — in other words that some factions represented “conservatives” whose families belonged to the Party, the bureaucracy and other privileged strata, while the more “radical” factions were led by students from families with no social advantages who felt excluded from the dominant system. A variant of this analysis saw the main division as one between “conservative” networks of party members and political activists and “radical” groupings of those who had previously been excluded from these network ties.

Instead, Walder discovered that the social and political profiles of the rival factions were very similar. After the “rebels” had successfully carried out Mao’s aim of dislodging Liu Shaoqi and the Party bureaucrats from power, they split into new factions which carried on fighting against one-other for a year and half; this was not because of genuine ideological differences but because there was now a well-established history of violence between the two sides: for the activists who led the campaigns, the alternative to victory was a possibly life-threatening defeat. The issue of violence, Walder concludes, “even more serious than the issue of class origin, went to the very identity and aims of the red guard movement.”

We may infer from Walder’s account (though he does not pursue the argument) that the violent course taken by the Red Guards was not inevitable. Instead of being egged on by the ultra-left leadership, the students could have been steered to pursue a largely non-violent “cultural revolution” against privilege and bureaucracy — natural targets in China then and indeed now. Even after the violence erupted in August, the picket corps still represented the majority of student opinion, backed by Premier Zhou Enlai who held a series of meetings attempting to persuade the Red Guards to exercise restraint.

So why did reason not prevail? Walder explains that the calls to curtail violence ran directly counter to the views of the CCRG. Jiang Qing had given an early nod countenancing violence on July 28, telling high school Red Guards that “we do not advocate beating people, but beating people is no big deal”. Later, Mao told the Politburo Standing Committee that “I do not think Beijing is all that chaotic. . . . now is not the time to interfere. . . .” Taking his cue from Mao, Xie Fuzhi, minister of public security, set the official line: “I do not approve of the masses killing people, but the masses’ bitter hatred toward bad people cannot be discouraged, and it is unavoidable.” The local police and army were ordered not to intervene when Red Guards were on the rampage.

Walder describes this condoning of violence as the “Maoist shrug” in which the suffering of victims of violence was regarded as “acceptable collateral damage.” I would call it, using the same military analogy, the Maoist equivalent of “Stuff Happens”. Some at the time argued that Mao must have been unaware of the extent of violence but this cannot be true. Mao, Jiang and the other Cultural Revolution leaders were kept fully informed through internal bulletins compiled by official news agency reporters.

While in China any detailed study of the Cultural Revolution is still too sensitive to be explored publicly — the period 1966-76 is simply written off as “ten years of madness” — outside China there is a tendency to write off the whole affair as culminating proof that “Mao was a Monster”. This phrase was widely used in favourable reviews of the recent biography *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday. Though the phrase does not actually appear in their book, the authors claim that Mao from his youth had taken a delight in “bloodthirsty thuggery”, that he had wished to “terrorise” the nation by unleashing the Red Guards, and that he took pleasure in watching films of torture and murder committed by them. These assertions are part of a disappointingly one-

dimensional picture of Mao (it ignores, among other things, his extensive theoretical speeches and writings) but which seems to resonate with many readers. However this approach has been appraised much more critically by a number of serious scholars, both Chinese and Western: their views have been brought together in *Was Mao Really a Monster?* (Routledge, 2010) edited by Gregor Benton and Lin Chun.

Even Chang and Halliday concede that “most Red Guards [were able] to opt out of violence by saying that Mao was against it” — that is, by quoting a different pronouncement which he issued through Zhou Enlai two weeks after the first Red Guard rally, to the effect that they should “denounce by words and not by violence”.

Walder now shows that not only did many Red Guards dislike the violence but that — after the first protests by the “picket corps” had been stifled — a minority of independent-minded dissidents began to develop a new critique of the ultra-left CCRG leadership which identified the taste for violence as one of that leadership’s unprincipled weapons. Alone among students at this point in Chinese history, says Walder, they had “a realistic view of what was actually taking place, while the [officially approved] ‘rebels’ were conforming to CCRG authority and wrapping their actions in a fantasy language of conspiracy and rebellion.”

One critical wall-poster accused the Maoist clique of waging “Red Terror” to settle scores with its enemies: others asked whether the CCRG was beyond criticism. The leadership was urged to stop “riding around and issuing orders” and even to submit itself to criticism. Dissidents at Qinghua University condemned the CCRG for insinuating that Zhou Enlai (whom Jiang Qing detested) was a compromiser, and they denounced Jiang directly for her conspiratorial relationship with the violence-prone rebels. In short, Walder shows that in the very first months of the Cultural Revolution these student dissidents were capable of cool-headed analysis and understood very well the difference between real revolution and one manipulated from above. It is not surprising, he concludes, that they were severely repressed by the ultra-left leaders, and that their arguments were distorted to an extent that “for many decades warped our understanding of the nature of red guard factionalism”.

In China the phrase Red Guards for many people still evokes — either from their direct experience or family memory — the picture of unrestrained “disorder” (the dreaded concept of *luan*) and destruction. What little memory people have of the May-June 1989 events which led to the Beijing massacre (another banned subject) is often coloured, especially for an older generation, by a quite unjustified image of the students in Tiananmen Square as a latter-day Red Guard movement.

Yet those student Red Guards who objected in 1966 to the violence and its manipulation from above were the fore-runners of a long line of independent-minded thought and protest which extended right up to 1989. This included the Shengwulian declaration of January 1968 which posed the question “Whither China”, and the Li Yi Zhe document of 1973-74 “On Socialist Democracy and the Legal System”. It led in the dying months of the Cultural Revolution (and of Mao) to the unprecedented April 5, 1976 demonstration in Tiananmen Square, when protestors stood up to denounce the Gang of Four, in poems and manifestos chalked on the paving-stones or declaimed aloud. Many young Red Guards, educated by their disillusion with the Cultural Revolution, became activists in the Democracy Wall movement (1978-79) after Mao’s death. Some of them re-appeared in the Square ten years later.

It is a pity that Walder does not carry this story forward beyond the initial period of 1966-67 which he describes at great length. His book is very much in the monographic tradition of Harvard studies of modern China, tightly focused on a single thesis and laden with detail in which the general reader may get bogged down (there are 70 pages of notes). His argument that the factional struggles of those times did not reflect social conflict but were the product of authoritarian political structures — he calls the dominant Red Guards “radical bureaucrats” — seems true of Beijing: it does not necessarily explain factionalism elsewhere in China. He does however succeed in showing that by no means all Chinese students even in 1966 were the Chairman’s docile tools. In one of his famous Quotations, Mao had told China’s youth that “the world is yours as well as ours, but in the last analysis it is yours.” Though not in the way that he intended, he was surely right.

John Gittings is an author and research associate at the School of Oriental & African Studies. His most recent book is [The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market](#) (Oxford, 2005).

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