

Chairman Mao's Morning Sunlight:  
Children in the Cultural Revolution\*

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## Introduction

In May of 1966, Mao Zedong called the Chinese people to arms to engage in a war on anything representing traditional China, including the divide between classes, those who would return China to a non-communist society, and the old art and culture. This was the beginning of a decade-long struggle. The Revolution brought the Red Guards, Big Character Posters, and in some ways, a complete breakdown of normalcy. The Big Character Poster became a medium for people to express criticisms regarding the state, their neighbors, and their leaders. Red Guards were a group of young people who believed so firmly in Mao's Cultural Revolution that they took it upon themselves to carry it out. This group was composed mainly of Chinese youth. Thomas Gold in his journal article "Youth and the State" defines youth as a "transitional phase in the life course between the freedom of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood."<sup>1</sup> Youth to many is an age range between thirteen to twenty-five years old. This has become one of the most studied groups during the Revolution, as they were the most active primarily during the most violent period of the Revolution.

This most violent period is the first two years of the Revolution, from 1966 to 1968. This is the period when neighbors turned against neighbors, wives turned against their husbands, and eventually, even Red Guards turned against themselves. Homes were raided, possessions were destroyed or confiscated, and people were publicly denounced and executed. Everyone was a potential target or a threat, especially during the first two years of the Revolution. The Red

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\* Heng Liang and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 1983), 62. This refers to Liang's reflection on how Chairman Mao Zedong would refer to children as "the morning sunlight." This is intriguing because it suggests that Mao thought of children as metaphorical bringers of light, or his foremost agents in the conflict that he orchestrated: the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas B. Gold, "Youth and the State," *The China Quarterly*, no. 127 (1991): 594–612, 595.

guards soon split into factions. Later, Red Guards and their peers, mostly other teenagers and young adults, were “sent-down” to the countryside in order to be re-educated after they had served Mao’s purpose.

As Anne F. Thurston notes in “Victims of China’s Cultural Revolution: The Invisible Wounds,” there is a need to study those who have suffered during this tumultuous time in China’s history.<sup>2</sup> Many studies have been done on the Red Guards and the violence they inflicted as well as endured, Mao Zedong and the political landscape of the time, and many of the significant events of the time. There is a group that has yet to be thoroughly analyzed by scholars: children. Children offer a unique perspective on the Cultural Revolution. For the purposes of the study that follows, the age range of childhood will be defined as three to twelve years old. Children in this age range are not old enough to participate fully in a Revolution. Despite their young age and inability to fully participate, the events of this decade affected children the most. The events that occur during a person’s childhood manifest themselves in numerous ways. They have the power to shape a person’s decisions, beliefs, and overall outlook on life.<sup>3</sup> The children of this period experienced trauma that many cannot relate to. Children watched as their homes were ransacked. Some were asked to denounce their family members, while others were left without family members at all during the denunciations and the send-down movement. Children experienced these events not always by directly participating, but by experiencing it within their families and communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne F. Thurston, “Victims of China’s Cultural Revolution: The Invisible Wounds: Part I,” *Pacific Affairs* 57, no. 4 (1984): 599–620, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758711>, 599.

<sup>3</sup> Xiaowei Zang, *Children of the Cultural Revolution: Family Life and Political Behavior in Mao’s China* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 3.

That is not to say that children did not participate at all. As shown in Li Zhensheng's photograph *On National Day, Schoolchildren Carrying Red-Tasseled Spears and Wearing Red Guard Armbands Parade Through the Streets Past a Russian-Style Department Store*, children participated in revolutionary demonstrations. It is also true that revolutionary propaganda often targeted children. Examples of this include films such as *Sparkling Red Star* and the political posters that followed. All of these examples will be discussed later, but they provide a necessary introduction to the ways in which childhood and children were impacted during the Cultural Revolution. These children were not Red Guards, they could not be labeled as reactionaries or rightist in any serious way, and they were not targets of Big Character posters. However, their parents and siblings could be involved or could be targeted. They could be taught to think regarding the Cultural Revolution. They could grow up to worship revolutionary heroes like Mao Zedong.

By looking at certain memoirs written about the time, posters, photographs, and even film, it becomes clear that children were operative during the Cultural Revolution. It is necessary to study children during this time, though this has been a topic largely ignored by scholars, because children became indoctrinated in the ideals of the Cultural Revolution. Children were targets of political propaganda more than any other group, because children's minds are easy to shape. Teaching children to love Chairman Mao above all else, and to aspire to be revolutionaries, ensures that the ideals of the Cultural Revolution will live on. In memoirs and anecdotes such as "Childhood without Toys," many people who were children during this time look back on the Cultural Revolution with nostalgia. As many of these children grew up in the Cultural Revolution, they began to join revolutionary groups and participate directly. Children experienced the Revolution through their families and communities and were targeted by

propaganda until they eventually joined the Revolution themselves. Though it is not always obvious, this is one of the groups affected most by the Cultural Revolution.

### **Historiography**

The Cultural Revolution is a subject that is still relatively new, as far as historical scholarship is concerned. This is due to the fact that the Cultural Revolution began only about fifty years ago. It is not a topic like the American Revolution, where scholars have had hundreds of years to collect documents and to hypothesize about each and every aspect or minute detail. The Chinese are still experiencing the effects of the Revolution, and many still adhere to revolutionary values and ideals. The relative newness means that many aspects of the Revolution have not yet been fully explored, or explored at all. This presents the opportunity for new scholarship and original ideas, such as the topic of children in the Revolution. Stumbling on scholarship relating to children during any period is unlikely. Children are not generally active in historical events, especially when it comes to revolutions and wars. Most scholars do not care to study children during the Seven Years War or the Irish Rebellion of 1798, let alone children during the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution presents a unique opportunity to study children. This is because the Revolution was started by people who had just left childhood or had just entered adulthood. The Revolution was very close to children. It was in their homes, their schools, and the streets of their villages. Those who were children at the beginning of the Revolution in 1966, around ages three to twelve, in a few short years would be old enough to actively participate in the Red Guards or act in a reproduction of a Model Opera. Children remained targets of revolutionary propaganda, and felt the effects of the Revolution the most, until the Revolution's end in 1976.

One of the primary problems in the historiography of this field is that scholars cannot seem to agree, at least when it comes to the confines of this subject, on what constitutes a child. Unfortunately, many scholars refer to Chinese middle school students as children. These would be people aged thirteen to eighteen. This might be an attempt to have readers understand that while many people in this age bracket participated in the Revolution, whether as Red Guards or otherwise, they are still quite young. This age group would be better defined as youth, adolescents, or even teenagers. This also results in many scholars focusing on the Red Guards while still discussing “childhood.” This is a mistake that leads to difficulty when researching the topic. One of these problematic scholarly works is “Children of the Cultural Revolution: The State and the Life Course in the People’s Republic of China” by Liren Hou and Xueguang Zhou. This article focuses on the “Send Down” movements during the Cultural Revolution, and the disparity between youth who come from different family backgrounds. One example provided is that of a fifteen-year-old who was sent down because their family’s background was “bad.”<sup>4</sup> A fifteen-year-old should not be considered a child. I suspect that the authors meant children as in the act of being someone's child. They do not focus on actual children, as in a person aged three to twelve, but as what a person is to their parents.

Some scholars, like Anita Chan in her book *Children of Mao: personality development and political activism in the Red Guard generation*, focus on the Red Guards. However, Chan uses childhood in China to understand what led to the development of the Red Guards, their break into factions, and the violence of the first few years of the Revolution. She discusses childhood organizations such as the Young Pioneers, as well as education during the time

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<sup>4</sup> Xueguang Zhou and Liren Hou, “Children of the Cultural Revolution: The State and the Life Course in the People’s Republic of China,” *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (1999): 12–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657275>, 16.

preceding the Cultural Revolution, but after the Chinese Communist Revolution.<sup>5</sup> This is more in line with the topic of childhood but still places too much focus on the Red Guards. The issue with focusing on Red Guards and youth as “children,” is that it ignores the plight of young children during this period. The Red Guards, their raids, denunciations, and later feuding factions are already significant topics within the scholarship of the Cultural Revolution. In a way, it is eclipsing other essential topics, such as children in the Revolution.

Like Liren Hou and Xueguang Zhou’s journal article, Xiaowei Zang’s book *Children of the Cultural Revolution: Family Life and Political Behavior in Mao’s China* also focuses on class differences in China during the Cultural Revolution. Zang also makes a distinction between class and caste as it relates to revolutionary China. “Class” is more of an economic term, and “caste” would refer to political and social stratification.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Hou and Zhou though, Zang relates this to family life during the Cultural Revolution and children. Many of Zang’s sources do not even focus on the Cultural Revolution. In his bibliography, one of the only primary sources used is Heng Liang’s memoir *Son of the Revolution*. While this is a fantastic source, a scholar should be using more than one primary source or memoir to back up his arguments about the class divide within the Cultural Revolution and how it was affecting families.

Another salient scholarly work on the topic is Thomas Gold’s “Youth and the State.” This article is interesting because it focuses mostly on teenagers in China before the Communist Revolution until the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Gold also briefly touches upon the topic of children during this time frame. This provides crucial context to the topic of children growing up in the Revolution as it allows for a deeper understanding of the concepts of childhood and

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<sup>5</sup> Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Xiaowei Zang, *Children of the Cultural Revolution*, 7.

youth as a whole over the course of Chinese history, not just in the period of the Revolution. Gold explains that most Communist parties like the Chinese Communist Party focus on young people and children because they are less immersed in old societies, and are much easier to train in the new ideas.<sup>7</sup> The CCP was no different from these other communist parties; “The CCP-state moved forcefully to control the life course of all Chinese, but it naturally had the widest scope with children and youths as it could dominate virtually their entire life trajectory: education, employment and career, residence, marriage, fertility, interpersonal relations, and observable life style.”<sup>8</sup> This claim is very in line with the claim being made in this paper. Young people did experience the full attention of the revolutionaries and the CCP during the Cultural Revolution especially. However, though Gold is on the right track, he has significant problems with some of his arguments. Later in this article, he claims that while children did experience some of the instability of the first few years of the Revolution through their parents and siblings, they were too young to experience it directly or have been affected by it.<sup>9</sup> This claim is short-sighted. Due to the popularity of the topic of youth and the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, and the relative ignorance of many Cultural Revolution scholars, it is possible that Gold and some other scholars merely do not know of the evidence to support the contrary.

Though Zang does give some attention to childhood and children during the Revolution, Anne Thurston is one of the only scholars who truly grasps the severity of the topic in her two-part journal article “Victims of China's Cultural Revolution: The Invisible Wounds.” Thurston takes on the issues of children being asked to denounce family members and children of those

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<sup>7</sup> Gold, “Youth and the State,” 596.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 604.



who had been incarcerated in the first part of her article.<sup>10</sup> One line from part two of her article is particularly profound: "...there was almost an entire generation of children that grew up in China with living parents but who were raised nearly as orphans."<sup>11</sup> One of the great things about this source is that many of the information comes from oral interviews conducted by the author herself, though she also uses memoirs and literature. Knowing that Thurston worked first hand with survivors of the Revolution and that she heard their stories first hand, makes this a very reliable and substantial work. Though Thurston is not Chinese herself, she is an expert in Chinese History and worked in China for a year on this project. She also wrote this article for *Pacific Affairs*, an interdisciplinary academic journal focusing on Asia and the Pacific.

Of course, even these secondary sources that mention children during the Revolution do not focus solely on them. These scholars are missing out on the opportunity to work with some fantastic and powerful primary sources. Because there are so few monumental scholarly works on this topic, it is important to focus on many different sources outside of scholarly books and articles that show the experiences of children during the Cultural Revolution. There are many sources a scholar could look at. To understand the personal experiences of children during The Cultural Revolution, memoirs and literature are the best. Photographs also represent the events and emotions of the Revolution, though, not as well as personal narratives. However, personal experience is not the only way to understand Childhood during this period. It is also valuable to look at the media created and released by the Chinese Communist Party, and by Mao's followers, to understand not just how children felt about the Revolution, but also how the Revolution felt about children.

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<sup>10</sup> Anne F. Thurston, "Victims of China's Cultural Revolution, 618.

<sup>11</sup> Anne F. Thurston, "Victims of China's Cultural Revolution: The Invisible Wounds: Part II," *Pacific Affairs* 58, no. 1 (1985): 5–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758007>, 13.

## Raising Red Guards and Childhood Aspirations

One of Xiaowei Zang's main points in *Children of the Cultural Revolution: Family Life and Political Behavior in Mao's China*, is that different socioeconomic backgrounds caused people to experience the Cultural Revolution in different ways.<sup>12</sup> This is true in many instances, such as who was allowed to join the Red Guards, and who was criticized for coming from a family with capitalist ideals. This can be seen in the memoirs of people who come from different backgrounds like that of Cunxin Li, who was born into a peasant family, and Heng Liang, who was born to an intellectual and a rightist. Despite these differences, there are similarities in children across socioeconomic boundaries throughout China during this revolutionary period. Children grew up yearning to be a revolutionary, and respecting revolutionaries above all else. This is true even of children who were shut out due to family background.

In Heng Liang's memoir *Son of the Revolution*, Liang recalls his life in the People's Republic of China, with a particular focus on his childhood during the Cultural Revolution's beginning. Liang was twelve years old at the beginning of the Revolution, but his story truly begins with the Hundred Flowers Campaign. The Hundred Flowers Campaign began in the wake of the Chinese Communist Party coming to power at the end of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, led by Mao Zedong. Party officials, including Mao in 1956 encouraged "non-party intellectuals" to make suggestions on the Party's rule, even allowing criticism. However, many Chinese took advantage of this opportunity, lashing out at the government and threatening the Party's control. What followed was a crack-down on those who had criticized the

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<sup>12</sup> Zang, *Children of the Cultural Revolution*, 3.

party. These people were now considered anti-rightists, and many lost their jobs and were sent to work camps.<sup>13</sup>

Liang's father was a founder and editor of the *Hunan Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist party. His mother was a cadre in Changsha Public Security Bureau, working as something comparable to a police officer.<sup>14</sup> While both his mother and father were firm supporters of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, his mother made the mistake of participating in the Hundred Flowers Campaign. According to Liang, his mother had not wanted to participate in the criticisms of the party, but she was pressured by the leaders at her job.<sup>15</sup> His mother was labeled a rightist due to the criticisms she made and was sent Yuan Jia Ling for "labor reform," her title was stripped away, and her salary was slashed.<sup>16</sup>

His mother being labeled as a rightist was something that followed him throughout the Cultural Revolution. His father's intellectual status was also something that haunted him. At the beginning of the Revolution, as Big Character Posters became popular, many were created denouncing his father as a capitalist and a rightist. A quote from one of these posters directed at his father is "Liang Shan is worse than Capitalism, fiercer than the KMT, more dangerous than Revisionism. Down with Liang Shan!!!!!"<sup>17</sup> Due to the common understanding that he was the child of a rightist and an intellectual, he was often considered as such due to his affiliation. He was looked down upon by his peers and was not allowed to join any children's revolutionary groups such as the Young Pioneers.<sup>18</sup> The Young Pioneers was a group similar to the Boy Scouts

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Curt Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Heng Liang and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 1983), 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

of America, except they were trained in the ways of Communism instead of training for the outdoors. The Young Pioneers evolved into a training ground for children in primary school to become Red Guards.<sup>19</sup>

What is interesting is that even when he sees these Big Character Posters and even watched his father be denounced in front of his entire community, he was still interested in becoming a revolutionary himself. He even wrote Big Character Posters with his classmates, and eventually lied to get into the Young Pioneers. One must ask, how could a child who had witnessed traumatic events such as denunciations and house raids want with the Revolution?

Liang provides some insight into this issue through other stories of his childhood. Liang explains that the first character he had ever learned to write was Mao's name and that he was taught phrases such as "Chairman Mao our great saving star" and "we are all Chairman Mao's good little children."<sup>20</sup> Liang's father even encouraged him to read the Little Red Book and to write self-examinations.<sup>21</sup> Schools and families during this period, and even preceding it, taught children to love Chairman Mao above all else. It is no wonder that they would want to support Mao's Revolution and to cherish him above all else. It was only natural for children to follow in Mao's footsteps.

This is something that can be seen throughout many memoirs of children at the time that has been published. Joining the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards was a common wish for all children. While Heng Liang was the son of an intellectual and a rightist, children from other backgrounds experienced a similar education and had similar desires. As stated earlier, people like Cunxin Li came from peasant families. This meant that while Li's parents were not

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<sup>19</sup> Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Liang, *Son of the Revolution*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

necessarily targeted by revolutionaries, life was not easy for them. Cunxin Li grew up in the rural town of Laoshan and was only five years old at the beginning of the Revolution. Li became used to starvation and hard work as a young child, as his parents had six other children, and were quite poor. None of this hardship stopped Li from wanting to become a revolutionary.

While Li's parents did not have political careers like Liang's parents, Li states that "memories of my niang and my dia are always related to how hard they worked."<sup>22</sup> Despite being peasants living in a rural area, Li's family was forced into politics. Like Liang, Li became disciplined in Mao's political culture as soon as he began school at the age of nine. Every day in school learning was centered around Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In his memoir, Li explains that the only required text was the Little Red Book, a collection of speeches and writings by Chairman Mao that became a staple for every Chinese person who wished to survive the Cultural Revolution.<sup>23</sup> The class would begin by bowing to portraits of Mao, Lin Biao, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. Mao was the main subject of all textbooks, and the first phrase Li learned to write was "long live Chairman Mao."<sup>24</sup> It is clear that even peasant children living far removed from urban centers were trained as revolutionaries.

At home, the Revolution seeped in. Some of Li's older brothers joined the Red Guards, and Li would hear "horror stories" of the Red Guard's raids and burning things.<sup>25</sup> Young Red Guards would even come to his house, trying to teach his mother to read so she could understand the Little Red Book, though his mother was often preoccupied with taking care of the house and work.<sup>26</sup> Li became attached to Mao and the Revolution, becoming one of the first Little Red

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<sup>22</sup> Cunxin Li, *Mao's Last Dancer* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Guards in his class, and dreaming of becoming a dancer. The Little Red Guards was an organization similar to the Young Pioneers, but with a stronger focus on Mao's ideals. Li eventually went on to become a dancer at Jing Qing's Beijing Dance Academy to perform her model operas.

Another example is an anecdote by Yang Yan, who was only two years old at the beginning of the Revolution. Yang Yan takes a fascinating look into her young life in during the Cultural Revolution. As the title "Childhood without Toys" suggests, Yan recalls how their only childhood toy was a Red Guard doll. Yang Yan recalls of the doll, "In its pocket it had a tiny copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* and on its military cap was a five-pointed star. The mere sight of the 'doll' made me all excited."<sup>27</sup> This 'toy' was soon taken away from Yang Yan and placed in a corner with a portrait of Mao that the children were not allowed to go near.<sup>28</sup> Knowing the social climate of the time, having toys was a sign of wealth, which many families did not have, or did not want others to know about. It also shows that Red Guards were revered as much as Chairman Mao himself. This was another form of children being taught from a young age to aspire to grow up and be like Chairman Mao or a Red Guard. Many toys for young children are meant to be educational. In America today, companies like Hasbro market toys meant to teach young children colors, shapes, and animals. In China during the Cultural Revolution, Yang Yan shows that companies were focused on toys like dolls of Red Guards. This shows that revolutionary education had become more important than basic education at home, as well as in school. In school, children were learning to write Mao's name before their

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<sup>27</sup> Yang Yan, "Childhood without Toys [1989]," in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966-1969: Not a Dinner Party*, ed. Michael Schoenhals (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 326-27, [https://bbnewpaltz.sln.suny.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-2512989-dt-content-rid-7188193\\_2/courses/fall18\\_HIS492\\_02/Schoenhals1996-YangYan-Childhood-p326.pdf](https://bbnewpaltz.sln.suny.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-2512989-dt-content-rid-7188193_2/courses/fall18_HIS492_02/Schoenhals1996-YangYan-Childhood-p326.pdf), 326.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 327.

own. At home, children were being taught to recognize revolutionary heroes like Mao Zedong and the Red Guards before they learned to recognize animals or shapes.

Another source to consider is a short story written by Ch'en Jo-hsi called "Jingjing's Birthday." This source will be discussed more in-depth in a later section, but it provides compelling commentary on children's family life during the Revolution, and how it pertained to the Revolution. It must be noted that Ch'en Jo-hsi is Taiwanese, and moved to China in 1966 after a long process of becoming enamored with Chinese Communism and Mao Zedong. She and her husband's arrival in China coincided with the beginning of the Revolution, and the couple soon left China for Hong Kong. It is after their move to Hong Kong that Chen Jo-hsi began to write short stories centered around the Revolution. Though this is fiction, it could be considered a primary source. Unlike *Son of the Revolution* or "Childhood without Toys," this is not written by a person who experienced the Cultural Revolution as a child in China. It is written from the perspective of a foreigner who became a school teacher in China, who witnessed the Revolution from an outsiders point of view. So, this is a source on how outsiders viewed the Revolution and the role of children in it.

At one point during the short story, the main character, Jingjing's mother, is advised that she should raise her son to love Chairman Mao. She then goes through all the ways she *has* raised her son to love Chairman Mao; "When he was but a few months old we were lifting him up to look at Chairman Mao's portrait so he'd recognize it as he grew up. He would laugh at the sight of his picture, and kick his legs and wave his arms. Before he could even say 'Mama' he was crying out 'Mao! Mao!'"<sup>29</sup> His father even told Jingjing that Chairman Mao was their only

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<sup>29</sup> Ch'en Jo-hsi, "Jingjing's Birthday," in *Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Revised Edition* (Bloomington, UNITED STATES:

family.<sup>30</sup> Again, this is just one more example of children learning at home early on in their lives to be revolutionaries. Of course, because this is fiction, it cannot be assumed that parents raised their children to look at Mao's portrait every day and say Mao's name as their first word. However, *Mao's Last Dancer* showed that children did learn about Mao and the Revolution before anything else in school. "Childhood without Toys" showed that even children's toys, which are very often meant to be educational, were centered on Mao and the Revolution. It is not impossible to believe that some parents tried to raise their children to be good little revolutionaries. Those who were old enough to have children at the latter half of the Revolution, when this short story takes place, would have witnessed the many years of violence during the first half of the Revolution. Even after the Hundred Flowers Campaign, they would understand that they would have to be careful of what they said, and what they did. It would have been imperative for parents to raise their children in the Revolutionary spirit. These parents would not have wanted to watch their children be denounced, sent down to the country, or even killed for not acting like revolutionaries as they grew up. Even if this short story is meant as a satire or a caricature of family life during the Cultural Revolution, it still points out the most extreme measures some parents would need to take in order to raise their children the "revolutionary way."

### **Children as Political Targets**

Children during the Cultural Revolution, especially in the 1970's, were the subjects and targets of propaganda released by the Chinese Communist Party. As noted by Stefan R.

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Indiana University Press, 2004), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/newpaltz-ebooks/detail.action?docID=242727>, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 43.



Landsberger, the Cultural Revolution was a “cultural desert.”<sup>31</sup> Almost all of the media during this decade was controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and was political in nature. This is partially due to Jing Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife, and her particular interest in culture and the arts. Not much besides her Eight Model Works were produced during the Cultural Revolution, and even these were meant solely to push the agenda of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. Outside of the Eight Model Works, films, posters, toys, and everyday objects were manufactured with the intent of creating culture solely around Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Many of this politicized media used children as its subjects, as well as its primary targets.

One of the earliest examples of this is a pencil case housed in the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art on the New Paltz Campus of the State University of New York. *Pencil Box* (Figure 1), which can be seen at the end of this paper along with some of the other forms of media discussed in this section, is a product that would have been used by schoolchildren every day. The Museum’s online collection describes the pencil case as “... A boy wearing a Young Pioneer red kerchief... His open book has a five-pointed red star. To the left is the inscription in Chinese characters under four heroes of the approved operas.”<sup>32</sup> This is interesting especially because of the reference to the Model Operas. The most notable of these “heroes” is the woman on the far right. She is the protagonist of the ballet *The White-Haired Girl*. This opera is about a peasant woman who is driven into exile by her terrible landlord and is only able to return to her village after the landlord is killed in the Revolution. This opera predates the Cultural Revolution,

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<sup>31</sup> Stephan Landsberger, “Pan Dongzi,” *Chinese Posters: Propaganda, Politics, History, Art*, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://chineseposters.net/themes/pandongzi.php>.

<sup>32</sup> *Pencil Box*, tin, October 1966, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, <http://hvvacc.org/cdm/ref/collection/sdma/id/5100>.

but Chairman Mao and Jing Qing appropriated it because it was simple to market as a revolutionary piece.<sup>33</sup> The opera was edited to become revolutionary and to praise Chairman Mao as the savior of the protagonist, the white-haired girl. This can be seen in a clip of the model opera, as the protagonist is singing the praises of Chairman Mao; “Long live Chairman Mao! Long live the Communist Party! Long live Chairman Mao! Long, long life! Ah, dear Chairman Mao, you are the savior of the people!”<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that this pencil box was meant to target children, as it is a product mainly used by young school children. Children were meant to see this box and become inspired to aspire to be like the white-haired girl or the Young Pioneer. All over the world children tote around toys and personal effects that bare the resemblance of their favorite characters, such as *Doc McStuffins* in the United States, or *Hello Kitty* in Japan. It is clear that these figures were meant to be admired and loved by children, the way that many cartoon characters are loved by children today.

Another character similar to the white-haired girl who was meant to be admired was Pan Dongzi, from the film *Sparkling Red Star*. This film was released in 1974; much later than *Pencil Box* or *The White-Haired Girl*. This film, like *The White-Haired Girl*, takes place before the Cultural Revolution. This film takes place in in the 1930s, during the Communist Revolution. The main character, Pan Dongzi, is a peasant boy who lives under the control of his landlord. Throughout the entire film, Pan Dongzi struggles against his landlord and the Nationalists. Pan Dongzi becomes a spy for the Red Army at a young age and fights to free the peasants.<sup>35</sup> This

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<sup>33</sup> Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Hu Sang, *White-Haired Girl* (Shanghai Film Studio, 1972), [http://www.morningsun.org/stages/cultural\\_productions.html#](http://www.morningsun.org/stages/cultural_productions.html#).

<sup>35</sup> Ang Li and Jun Li, *Sparkling Red Star* (S.L. James, 1974), <https://archive.org/details/china-communist-history/sparkling-red-star-1974.mp4>.

narrative is very similar to that of *The White Haired Girl*, showing the plight of Chinese peasants and their eventual freedom at the hands of their savior, Chairman Mao. This film was another form of media that was directed towards children as a way to encourage them to admire Mao and to follow him blindly.

Subsequently, posters were released with the film *Sparkling Red Star* that encouraged these characteristics in children. In these posters, children were also encouraged to act like Pan Dongzi, meaning that children were encouraged to fight against oppression, join the People's Liberation Army, and to even resort to violence when necessary, as Pan Dongzi had done in the film. Two posters, *Study Pan Dongzi to become good children of the party* (Figure 2) and *Study Pan Dongzi, strive to become good children of the Party* (Figure 3), made it known to children explicitly that they must act like Pan Dongzi to be accepted in the society that Chairman Mao had created.<sup>36</sup> Knowing the truth of what happened to those who were not deemed "good" by the Chinese Communist Party, such as denunciations, jail time, and even execution, this can be understood as an encouragement, but also a threat to these children if there was non-compliance.

Other political posters were released that targeted children besides those involving Pan Dongzi. Posters such as one titled *Red loudspeakers are sounding through every home* (Figure 4) show how the Cultural Revolution was at the center of family life. In this poster, we can see a family sitting and doing housework outside of their home, listening to the loudspeaker attached to their home. A shrine set up dedicated to Chairman Mao can be seen inside of their home. According to the International Institute of Social History, it is likely that in some towns these P.A. speakers were set up so that families could enjoy political speeches, songs, and

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<sup>36</sup> Landsberger, "Pan Dongzi."

announcements from the comfort of their own homes.<sup>37</sup> This is similar to some of the stories in the previous section. A family is seated around this loudspeaker, listening to political slogans or songs. This family includes many young children, who sit with their parents and listen to this as well. It was expected of adults and parents to expose children to the events and ideas of the Cultural Revolution.

There is a group of five political posters released in 1960 titled *Chairman Mao loves children*, in which children surround Mao. In one (Figure 5), Mao can be seen caressing a child. These posters depict a narrative in which Mao is visiting a small village, and one of the mothers cannot come out to see Mao because her young child is sick. One of the other children convinces the mother to see Mao, and she explains how sick her son is. This portion is seen in Figure 5. In the next panel, Mao lends the pair his car and sends them to a hospital, where the child is saved.<sup>38</sup> These posters show that Mao and the Chinese Communist Party were incorporating the idea of families and children into their political narratives before the Cultural Revolution, though not as often as during the Cultural Revolution. The story told in these posters is also paradoxical in comparison with Mao's relationship with his children.

Throughout his life, Chairman Mao married four times. His first three children came of his union with Yang Kaihui, his second wife. However, Mao abandoned this family soon after his third son was born due to the start of the first conflict of the Chinese Civil War, around 1927.<sup>39</sup> Yang was executed soon after Mao left for good, and their sons were essentially

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<sup>37</sup> Entao Huang, *Red Loudspeakers Are Sounding through Every Home*, September 1972, International Institute of Social History Collection, <https://chinese posters.net/gallery/e16-271.php>.

<sup>38</sup> A Zhi, *Chairman Mao loves children (3)*, September, 1960, International Institute of Social History Collection, <https://chinese posters.net/gallery/d29-713.php>.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Fenby, "Mao's Forgotten Son Dies," *The Observer*, March 25, 2007, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/25/china.jonathanfenby>.

orphaned. His youngest son at the time, aged of three or four years old, died of dysentery.<sup>40</sup> The child in the poster, a seemingly random child in a random Chinese village, was sent to a hospital by Mao when he was dying. This was just a piece of propaganda showcasing Chairman Mao as a savior figure, but holds no truth in light of the information on Mao's third son and the family he left behind. Anqing, Mao's second son, struggled his entire life with mental illness, which is unsurprising after his childhood of abandonment and living on the streets.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that Mao does not care much for children, especially his own. Targeting children during his political campaigns was not due to a genuine love for children, but is only meant for continued political gain.

Even political songs meant to be sung by children were produced during the Cultural Revolution. One of the most well-known of these songs is "I Love Beijing Tiananmen." This song can be heard within the first fifty seconds of Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *hung Kuo China*.<sup>42</sup> The lyrics of this song praise Chairman Mao, as well as the Chinese Communist Party. Many of the aforementioned memoirs mention songs such as "I Love Beijing Tiananmen" because many schoolchildren began their days by signing songs like this one.

These different mediums of operas, films, posters, and even utility items were used to push Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party's agenda. This was not necessarily unusual for the time, but it is noteworthy that children were brought into the realm of politics and propaganda. The examples above make it clear that children became popular to depict in propaganda, but also to target children and families with children. Many of the political posters

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Michelangelo Antonioni, *Chung Kuo China: Part One*, 1972, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Z9tAd\\_-2AoM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Z9tAd_-2AoM), 0:00-0:45.

and films featuring children were produced in the latter half of the Revolution after 1970. This is most likely because the Chinese Communist Party understood that integrating party ideology into family life before and during the first half of the Revolution, led to many children growing up to participate directly in the Revolution. The Party wanted children to continue to grow up having similar thoughts, beliefs, and aspirations, so more propaganda was produced with the intent of being consumed by children.

### **Political Agents**

Through propaganda, schooling, and even family life, it became inevitable that children would participate in the Cultural Revolution. Growing up, some children would become Red Guards, and others would join acting troupes that performed Jing Qing's Model Operas. Even before this transition into young adulthood, children would participate in the Cultural Revolution. Children, of course, could not contribute as much to the Revolution as the Red Guards, or as adults with jobs in the political sphere. Due to this, the participation of children, whether voluntary or involuntary, intentional or unintentional, is often overlooked.

One of the first examples of active participation in the Cultural Revolution comes in the form of a photograph from Li Zhensheng's compilation *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*. This photograph, *On National Day, schoolchildren carrying red-tassled spears and wearing red guard armbands parade through the streets past a Russian-style department store* (Figure 6) was taken in October of 1966, only a few months after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>43</sup> This is a monumental photo, and it is

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<sup>43</sup> Zhensheng Li, *On National Day, Schoolchildren Carrying Red-Tassled Spears and Wearing Red Guard Armbands Parade through the Streets Past a Russian-Style Department Store*,

truthfully what led me to the study of children during the Revolution. Some important context to this photo is the significance of National Day in the People's Republic of China. Many nations celebrate their own National Days, to commemorate the beginning of the nation's statehood. In China, National Day celebrates China's break from its dynastic past, and the forming of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. This holiday is often celebrated with festivities such as parades and fireworks.

This photograph depicts children no older than ten years old, carrying spears and wearing Red Guard uniforms. These children, of course, were not old enough to participate in the Red Guards, but it does give a sense that the Red Guards were meant to be celebrated as much as the founding of the People's Republic of China itself. This photo is powerful in contrast with Solange Brand's photograph *Célébrations du 1er mai* (Figure 7).<sup>44</sup> Brand's photo shows teenage girls carrying guns and demonstrating for a crowd, perhaps performing a dance. Comparing these photos is significant because they show the changes brought on by the Cultural Revolution to the lives of young people. Brand captured this image on the eve of the Revolution, during a socialist holiday celebrated worldwide. These girls are significantly older than the children in Li's photo. They are wearing relatively plain street clothes for this period, in comparison to the Red Guard uniforms of the children in Li's photo. Even the look on the children's faces in Li's photo are much more solemn than the girls in Brand's photo. These two photos show the drastic change that took place quickly after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The children during the

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October 1, 1966, Photograph, October 1, 1966, *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*.

<sup>44</sup> Solange Brand, *Célébrations Du 1er Mai*, May 1966, Photograph, May 1966, <http://solange-brand.com/en/galleries/la-rue/>.

Cultural Revolution became political machines, propagandized and armed with the ideology of the Party and Chairman Mao.

The short story discussed earlier “Jingjing’s Birthday,” shows how even the words and actions of children as young as three or four years old could become political and could stay with them for the rest of their lives. In “Jingjing’s Birthday” one of the main issues is how some of the children in the community have been shouting “Chairman Mao is a rotten egg.” Children would be questioned about it, and it was deemed a “reactionary slogan.”<sup>45</sup> A child of three years old is much too young to understand these words truly. However, the actions of young children in this short story are seen as something of high scrutiny, even just what they shout on the playground. The narrator explains that the tapes of a child admitting to saying this phrase could be used against them for life, and the child would be deemed ‘reactionary since childhood.’<sup>46</sup> This is despite the fact that the children meant nothing by these phrases. Again, this is a work of fiction. We cannot assume that children this young were scrutinized in this way. However, it is indicative of how politicized children were during this time, even if it was not to the extent laid out in “Jingjing’s Birthday.” There is no doubt that parents had to be careful of what their children said or what they did.

The memoirs discussed earlier, *Mao's Last Dancer* and *Son of the Revolution*, also show a pattern of weaponizing children and forced participation. Liang’s participation in the Revolution began in 1966 when he and a group of friends answered Mao’s call to point out those who threatened the Chinese communism by creating a Big Character Poster about their teacher. Liang admits that they did not understand what a “black element” or a capitalist was; instead,

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<sup>45</sup> Jo-hsi, “Jingjing’s Birthday,” 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.



they were mimicking the revolutionary words they were taught to recognize but not truly understand because they did not like their teacher.<sup>47</sup> As Liang would soon come to comprehend, deeming someone as a capitalist or an enemy of the Revolution was no light matter. Those who were considered to be against the Revolution could be arrested, denounced, or even killed. Even something a child said could be taken very seriously, as demonstrated in “Jingjing’s Birthday.” Liang was lucky that he did not get his teacher severely humiliated, injured, or killed. Soon after he and his friends created their Big Character poster, posters were created denouncing his father as a capitalist and a nationalist.<sup>48</sup> Liang is forced to compose a criticism of his father, watch as his father’s possessions are burned and taken away, and must watch his father be publicly humiliated and denounced.<sup>49</sup>

Li’s experience was different, as his participation was not as violent and disruptive. This is most likely because he was only about the age of five years old at the beginning of the Revolution, during its most violent period. Li, instead, joined the Beijing Dance Academy at the age of eleven years old to perform Jing Qing’s model operas.<sup>50</sup> Ballet is a grueling artform, often requiring strict diets and extreme pain especially when learning pointe technique, which requires dancers to put all of their weight onto the tips of their toes. This was no different for Li, who complains of a losing his childhood to this school.<sup>51</sup> The children who were taught at the Beijing Dance Academy were trained to perform in works created and adapted solely for political purposes. Children gave up everything and were put through physical and emotional trauma, in hopes of being in productions of the Model Works.

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<sup>47</sup> Liang, *Son of the Revolution*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Li, *Mao’s Last Dancer*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

The Chinese Communist Party and Mao Zedong's complete disregard for the wellbeing of children is apparent throughout all of the examples above. Instead of being allowed to do the things that children usually do, such as play with other children and begin their education, children were expected to forgo their childhoods in exchange for a revolutionary career. Children were expected to follow complex rules, be mindful of their every word or action, and even be forerunners and leaders of the Cultural Revolution and its ideology.

## Conclusion

Xi Jinping is the current president of the People's Republic of China. Xi Jinping was thirteen years old at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Though this is slightly older than the parameters set up by this paper for what constitutes a child, thirteen is still on the cusp of childhood, so his story should be considered. Xi Jinping has a similar story to some of the children discussed earlier; he watched his father be beaten and denounced, he lost his Red Guard sister after she most likely committed suicide during the mayhem of the first few years of the Revolution, and eventually became a Red Guard himself.<sup>52</sup> It is essential to contextualize all of the different aspects of the involvement of children in the Cultural Revolution on the People's Republic of China today. As the leader of China, Xi Jinping shapes the present and the future of China through policy and ideology. It is not implausible that his experiences from childhood to young adulthood during the Cultural Revolution, have shaped who he is today. These experiences could also affect the way he leads the People's Republic of China. Some argue that Xi Jinping's experiences during the Cultural Revolution have made him into an authoritarian

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<sup>52</sup> Chris Buckley and Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Cultural Revolution Shaped Xi Jinping, From Schoolboy to Survivor," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2015, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/25/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-cultural-revolution.html>.

leader. Patricia M. Thornton, a scholar of the Cultural Revolution, claims that while Xi Jinping was raised to revere Mao Zedong like many of his peers, he also suffered greatly at the hands of Mao and the Revolution.<sup>53</sup>

If it is possible that his traumatic experiences influence China's top official during the Cultural Revolution, then it is more than probable that many other top officials and influencers in Chinese politics and culture have also been influenced by their shared history that is the Cultural Revolution. Children throughout China, despite class differences or social standings, all experienced the Cultural Revolution. This generation experienced it in their classrooms, at home, in their communities, and through propaganda until their eventual direct participation in the Revolution. This is the generation that is now leading the People's Republic of China in all realms. Each child did not experience the Revolution in precisely the same way, but the events of the Cultural Revolution were significant events in their lives, and this generation was undoubtedly influenced by them.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1: *Pencil Box*. October 1966. Tin. Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art.

<http://hvacc.org/cdm/ref/collection/sdma/id/5100>.



Figure 2: Qi, Daoyan, and Lianxiao Shan. *Study Pan Dongzi to Become Good Children of the Party*.

May 1975. Landsberger collection. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-615.php>.



Figure 3: Nie, Wensheng. *Study Pan Dongzi, Strive to Become Good Children of the Party*. August 1975. Landsberger collection. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-754.php>.



Figure 4: Huang, Entao. *Red Loudspeakers Are Sounding through Every Home*. September 1972. International Institute of Social History Collection. <https://chinese-posters.net/gallery/e16-271.php>.



Figure 5: Zhi, A. *Chairman Mao loves children (3)*. September 1960. International Institute of Social History Collection. <https://chinese posters.net/gallery/d29-713.php>.



Figure 6: Li, Zhensheng. *On National Day, Schoolchildren Carrying Red-Tassled Spears and Wearing Red Guard Armbands Parade through the Streets Past a Russian-Style Department Store*. October 1, 1966. Photograph. *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*.



Figure 7: Brand, Solange. *Célébrations Du 1er Mai*. May 1, 1966. Photograph. <http://solange-brand.com/en/galleries/la-rue/>.

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