**I Was A Teenage Red Guard**

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![[image, unknown]]()
Photo: Rory Dell / [Camera Press](http://www.camerapress.com/)
**I was a teenage Red Guard
Fanatics ready to commit violence and denounce anyone in the name of communism - or heroes who sacrificed personal comfort to work for the greater good? Conflicting images of the Red Guards summed up Western confusion about Mao's China. Mo Bo remembers what it was really like to be a Red Guard.**

When the Cultural Revolution reached my school in 1966 I was 14. In the beginning, classes were interrupted from time to time; the teachers began to get worried and did not know what to do. Then, overnight, wall posters appeared everywhere. We all took it for granted that the senior students wrote the posters and that the only thing we could do was admire them.

Most of the posters were just empty slogans but one depicted our geology teacher as a 'dirty bourgeois intellectual' because he would make sure that the water temperature was exactly the same as that of his body whenever he washed. He was also criticized for his 'yellow' diaries which were searched out by the active 'rebels' (he was so eccentric that we all thought there must be something bourgeois about him). In one of his diary entries he recalled his experience of sitting beside a plump lady in a bus. The poor bachelor wrote that it was 'very comfortable' to feel that lady's flesh.

Then, following the example of the students in Beijing, we formed an 'Organization of Red Guards'. Everybody wanted to join the Red Guards because nobody wanted to be 'unqualified', 'backward' and 'non-revolutionary'. I was one of the first to join because, being from a poor peasant's family, my background was supposed to be 'clear'. We all enjoyed having no classes and degrading the teachers. 'The teacher takes the student as the enemy and uses examinations as weapons to attack the student' - the fact that it was Chairman Mao who had said this meant a great deal.

In the past our teachers had been intimidating. Now the situation was reversed: whenever teachers came across a student they would lower their heads. This kind of experience was so intoxicating that some of us went off our heads. But like most of the Red Guards I never appreciated the beating-people-up business. The farthest we went was when the most unpopular teacher was made to kneel down and confess his 'crimes' to the students. One student hit the teacher's heels with a brick - I couldn't bear to look. This student was one of the rough boys who would call their fathers 'bastard' and perform badly in exams. Chairman Mao gave them the chance to get their own back - at least that was how I understood it then and it is how I understand it now.

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| Waiters in Canton station perform a dance tribute to the thoughts of Mao.Rory Dell / [Camera Press](http://www.camerapress.com/)  |

Then I was selected as one of the representatives to go to Beijing to see Chairman Mao. I was very proud and excited. We saw him in Tienanmen Square when his car passed us like the wind. Some Red Guards cried with joy - 'the happiest moment in my life', said one. But I just felt nonplussed: I could see Chairman Mao better by looking at his portraits.

Then we went to Beijing and Qinhua universities to copy posters. We were supposed to 'learn revolutionary experience and then to spread the revolution all over the country'. After a fortnight several of my notebooks were full of slogans and posters. But I had no better understanding of what was going on.

Later on all the Red Guards started going to Beijing or somewhere else to 'establish the revolutionary links'. But what most of us really wanted was to travel. It was wonderful because we didn't have to pay for anything: hotels (very primitive), food and transportation were all free. Special centres were set up where Red Guards could borrow clothes and even cash in an emergency. I remember I once borrowed coupons worth 80 kilos of rice and I was never able to return them. Nobody asked me to return them and I did not know how.

Nobody understood Marxism. After all who would bother? The only things we believed were that Chairman Mao was the great banner-carrier of Marxism-Leninism; that Russia had turned to Revisionism and that the Third World needed guidance for their struggle against Western Imperialism and Hegemony. We also believed that Western society was rotten and decadent and that the only way to create a new society was to destroy the old one in China first. The 'academic authorities' in the fields of philosophy, history, literature and art (not science!) had to be re-educated because they stood for the Old Ideology. Temples were destroyed because they were thought to be part of feudal superstition.

I think I believed all this. But that did not lead me to beat people up or to destroy buildings. I wrote hundreds of posters but I never attacked anyone in them whom I knew personally. Some people destroyed things simply because they liked being vandals. Later on, when things were getting chaotic, the whole of society got involved, whether they were Red Guards or not. By then nobody could tell who did what - let alone for what reasons.

I felt at a loss when I came back from Beijing to find my school closed. It meant I had to go back to the countryside - when I really wanted to continue my formal education. I found Chairman Mao's idea of 'young people going to the countryside to learn from the peasants' uninspiring to say the least. But then I was from a peasant family.

For the city-dwellers things were different. Few did not want to go to the countryside. Some youngsters ignored their parents' anger and volunteered to go before the required age. Of course several years later most of them regretted it and wanted to return to the city. The sheer physical labour and material deprivation was enough to strip them of the romantic sentiment of the Great Helmsman's call. A lot of the 'educated youth' were sent to State farms where there were no poor and lower-middle peasants anyway. Those who were sent to poor villages began to despise the peasants as soon as they got there. For them, the people in the country were illiterate, ignorant and unhygienic. When an educated youth went to visit a poor peasant's home she might have enough revolutionary sense not to use her handkerchief to wipe off the dirt from the bench that was offered - but that meant she had to remain standing for half an hour, pretending to talk with and learn from the peasant.

The peasants, on the other hand, treated these 'foreign students' as temporary guests. Their instinct told them that things might come and go but their life would always be the same. However, they did look at the young urban people with great interest. The 'educated Shanghai youth' became well known all over the country for their good-looking hairstyle and clothes - and young Shanghai women with their white skin were constantly hunted by the 'local bosses'.

But this is only part of the story. Quite a few students settled down in the rural areas and contributed to the improvement of the country. When I went to university in 1973, we former Red Guards met to exchange our experiences. We agreed that our stay with the people in the country had taught us the value of things - and of life itself.

Looking back dispassionately, whatever motivated Mao to launch the Cultural Revolution, some of the ideas which emerged from it are still valuable. The 'barefoot doctor' and 'barefoot teacher' system is certainly good for a country like China. The country people, especially the children, suffer from simple and common diseases. Great improvements were brought about by training local people in basic methods: a school leaver with just three months' medical training is capable of dealing with many of these diseases. Similarly with education. Basic things like how to read, write and calculate can be taught very cheaply if they are organized by the local people themselves.

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| Spreading the word - wall posters bearint slogans during the Cultural Revolution.Photo: Richard Harrington / [Camera Press](http://www.camerapress.com/)  |

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution I feel the ordinary people were exhilarated by their new right to criticize and even to attack their bosses. The suppressed humiliation that one suffers at the hands of a faceless bureaucracy builds up a resentment that is like the surging tide blocked by a dam. When the dam crumbles the destruction is horrendous. That was what happened during the Cultural Revolution.

Now resentment is building up again. The bureaucracy problem was never solved. And when the old bureaucrats and local lords were invited back to power as heroes after the Cultural Revolution had been denounced, their prejudice was confirmed and their stupidity encouraged. And their misuse of power was intensified by the urge for revenge and a wish to make up for lost time.

But again this is only part of the story. There is something deeper and more permanent going on as well. When the leadership launched a campaign against 'cultural pollution' in 1983, the response of the people was very revealing - there was simply no response. Meetings were called. But I recall vividly that all we said at the meetings were things like 'well, well. and then 'the price of fish is 2.50 *yuan* per *jin*'. The end of the campaign was also untypical in Chinese politics: no documents, no theoretical summary and justification in the *People's Daily* - just a natural death.

But for the Cultural Revolution this would not have happened. After that unforgettable ten years we don't believe official propaganda any more. I myself have developed a peculiar habit. Whenever I read from the paper or hear over the radio something like 'another great achievement.', 'such and such project has been accomplished with great success.', 'the statistics show that.' I say to myself 'rubbish!'. But whenever I hear bad news reported I say 'this may be true, more of it!'

We are more cynical, more skeptical and more practical. The age of ideological romanticism is gone, perhaps forever. Because of this, no leader or ideology will ever again give us such inspiration; and hopefully there will never again be such horrific suffering either.

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