

## The Intensification of the “Social Turn” in the Recent Historiography of the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Martin Singer, *Educated Youth and the Cultural Revolution in China* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019). 144 pp. \$10.00 USD. Paperback.

Andrew G. Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019). 288 pp. \$47.00 USD. Hardcover.

Yang Jisheng, *The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021). 768 pp. \$40.00 USD. Hardcover.

Ever since the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), there has been a sustained interest in understanding how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the core of China's political structure, mobilized and concentrated power during the immense cultural rupture of the late-1960s. Traditional historiography on the Cultural Revolution, which began to appear as early as 1968, tended to adopt a top-down approach, with focus on the role of Mao Zedong, the party bureaucracy, and the Gang of Four. The traditional approach was largely a response to scantily available CCP documents, as many provincial archives and the central Party archives remained closed or largely inaccessible unless one was a registered member of the CCP. Most historians focused on critiquing the idea of a “cultural revolution” and its implications, while some dwelt on holding Mao particularly responsible for initiating the mayhem and frenzy which characterized the Revolution.

In particular, the rise of the Red Guards and the indiscriminate violence they unleashed on anyone who disagreed with or disapproved of Mao Zedong and his thought received much attention, as the sheer magnitude of societal destruction wrought by the Red Guards described the essence of the Cultural Revolution as a tragedy. Consequently, many works focused on the destruction, terror, and havoc that the Cultural Revolution unleashed upon ordinary Chinese civilians, and highlighted the controversially tragic and unjust record of human rights violations during the mayhem.<sup>1</sup>

While these works were notable for beginning an important scholarly discussion on a subject considered taboo and difficult to approach due to a lack of reliable sources, a breakthrough occurred with the publication of Hong-yung Lee's *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Lee's methodology is original because it

incorporated newspaper articles published during the Cultural Revolution, and, for the first time, attempted to give a comprehensive grassroots and public history of the Revolution by focusing on the Red Guards and the masses who supported them. Lee's book was notable not only for using primary sources directly in the possession of the Red Guards, especially their official newspaper, and large-character posters (*dazibao*) used during the Revolution, but also for opening up the novel possibility of writing a comprehensive societal history of the Revolution, one intent on close examination of the changes and ruptures in Chinese society.

Furthermore, Lee notably pointed out the close relationship between the elites and the popular masses in the making of the Cultural Revolution, which illuminated the importance of treating the Cultural Revolution as a part of modern China's social history. Although Lee does not meticulously differentiate between "radical members" based on their varying socio-economic status, his book importantly pointed out intra-elite divisions and interactions between the elites and mass groups.<sup>2</sup> Lee's approach, unlike traditional treatments of the Cultural Revolution as a political and bureaucratic affair with the Communist Party at the centre, highlighted the fact that the Cultural Revolution was a product of collaboration between the elites and the masses, directing scholars' attention to the need to adopt a more societal and comprehensive approach to understanding how the Cultural Revolution was initially conceived and organized into a populist event. In other words, Lee's book signaled a marked departure from scholars such as Tang Tsou, who analyzed the Cultural Revolution as an intra-Communist Party revolt against the establishment, a revolt inspired and directed by Mao Zedong's allies such as the People's Liberation Army, and Mao himself.<sup>3</sup> Lee posed the first significant challenge to the traditional assumption that the Cultural Revolution was a purely elitist event, a revolution with the Communist Party at the core but one which simultaneously tried to cleanse the Party of suspected reactionaries.

Lee's classic account signaled a "social turn" in the historiography of the Cultural Revolution, one that has become a trend in recent literature. Martin Singer, whose 1971 *Educated Youth and the Cultural Revolution in China* has been reissued, helped usher in this approach. With the opening of municipal and regional archives, scholars in China and abroad have begun to examine the impact of the Cultural Revolution at a genuinely societal scale, closely analyzing the causes, progression, and consequences of what was probably one of the most violent decades in modern Chinese history. Andrew Walder's *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (2019) and Yang Jisheng's *A World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (2021) are some of the most representative works featuring the essence of the "social turn" towards a comprehensive societal history of the Cultural Revolution, characterized by the use of a wide range of sources, from Party documents to memoirs and from newspaper articles to personal interviews.

Martin Singer's account of how the educated youth coped with the hardship, drawing on numerous newspaper articles, demonstrates that educators and

students were the most vulnerable and severely affected population. As Singer's meticulous examination of Chinese newspapers demonstrates, the Cultural Revolution not only devastated China's higher education, it also destroyed the career paths of many students and scholars who sought academic posts. Singer devotes particular attention to explaining the process of the "Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside Movement," noting that what was especially destructive about the Cultural Revolution was not the Red Guards' pillaging of China's cultural artifacts and traditions but the ideological warfare which forced many universities to either cut the number of faculty members or, worse, totally close down. The sudden and unexpected downturn in university enrollment meant that students had to rely on menial jobs to earn a meager living, and as many students were forced to abandon their studies, they had to forfeit their dreams, goals, and even passion for life itself, often resulting in students or intellectuals committing suicide.

Singer's use of the Red Guards' official newspaper and other major Chinese newspapers not only provided a foundational methodology to study the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but also, through his concentration on the Cultural Revolution's impact on students and intellectuals, put forth the seminal argument that the Cultural Revolution was first and foremost a classic topic of social history. Rather than succumbing to the important yet obvious desire to focus on the Communist Party's elite and the Red Guards as prime perpetrators, Singer suggested that understanding the destructive and failed nature of the Revolution was far more important to gauge the event's impact on Chinese society. In short, Singer showed that answering "What happened during the Cultural Revolution?" is not only synonymous with "Who was most deeply affected by the Cultural Revolution?" but also essentially identical to answering "Why did the Cultural Revolution happen?" Since students and intellectuals bore the brunt of the anti-intellectual Mao Zedong's ire, the real essence of "culture" which the Cultural Revolution destroyed was not merely Buddhist statues, ancient Chinese temples or history museums, but the lives of the very people who are responsible for purveying and producing knowledge about such historical relics and representations of historical memory. Furthermore, by focusing on the Cultural Revolution's impact, Singer paved the way to an independent structure of a logic for causality, or a paradigm for understanding the Cultural Revolution, since the identification of an impact or an effect naturally springs a scholar's curiosity into what constitutes a rational cause for it. In this sense, Singer's book provided a fundamental *raison d'être* for Hong-yung Lee's book, as the former implicitly suggested the need to study the perpetrators to assess why the magnitude of the Cultural Revolution was such that university students and intellectuals during the late-1960s had to be labeled as the "Lost Generation."

However, identifying the Red Guards and students and intellectuals as the only actors in the cycle of the Cultural Revolution's violence is insufficient because the infighting and mayhem which they unleashed were not independent outcomes but replications of intra-party struggles between party cadres. The Cultural Revo-

lution as witnessed by Chinese citizens in the streets was thus a mirror of a chaotic contest for power and influence within the party ranks. Andrew Walder, a sociologist specializing in Chinese politics and social change, examines the Cultural Revolution from a top-down perspective, focusing on how members of the Communist Party became the Cultural Revolution's principal agents of disorder. Unlike Lee and Singer, who focused on the activities of the Red Guards and their agendas, Walder considers the internal politics within the Chinese Communist Party as fundamentally more important because factionalism and infighting were already rampant within the party ranks. In other words, the chaos and destruction that characterized the Cultural Revolution did not happen when university students started putting up big-character posters or went down to the countryside and up on the mountains; the Cultural Revolution and the infamous chaos resulting from a seemingly endless chain of violence and factionalism had its roots in the central Party bureaucracy. Chinese society functioned as a mirror of the struggle to redefine a proper Marxist culture which had its epicentre already defined as the Communist Party even before the Red Guards unleashed their mayhem.

The greatest forte of Walder's book is not his subject matter but his methodology. The idea that the Cultural Revolution had to be approached from a social historical perspective is hardly new, since Singer and Lee had already pioneered the use of *Hongqi* (*Red Flag*) as a window into the activities of the Red Guards. Walder's originality comes from his use of memoirs, directives, diaries, and memoranda contained in provincial archives, which show how the Red Guards not only attacked China's traditional culture to uphold Mao Zedong Thought, but also did so because they sincerely identified with Mao's dislike of older traditions and saw Communism exposed to "bourgeois" influences. Walder's idea of studying the party cadres is notable for shifting away from Maurice Meisner's classic emphasis on Mao Zedong, thereby bringing a more sustained focus on actors within the leadership structure rather than assuming Mao's complete control over planning and executing the entirety of the Cultural Revolution. Meisner, although attuned to the political ramifications of the Cultural Revolution and situated adjacent to Lee and Singer's social history, centred Mao's ideas and motives. Meisner, then, did not extensively discuss the magnitude of chaos, destruction, and havoc that the Red Guards had unleashed, which made it difficult to know how much of an economic and societal burden the Cultural Revolution proved to be.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that Meisner incorporated much of the scholarly literature and primary sources available when he was researching his book, his methodology did not radically differ from Singer or Lee, for he too relied on newspapers such as *Hongqi* (*Red Flag*), the Red Guards' official newspaper, English-language books and journal articles, and some Communist Party documents, and did not use materials from provincial archives.

Walder's book complements Meisner's work by extensively utilizing materials from provincial archives, meticulously documenting the activities of the Red

Guards as they occurred in real time. Moreover, unlike the authors just mentioned, Walder does not rely singularly on *Hongqi* articles but displays a thorough grasp of documents produced by party cadres, thereby allowing him to move beyond Singer's discussion of how mass politics negatively affected intellectuals to address how intra-cadre conflict was decisive in producing the chaotic and horrible violence of the Cultural Revolution. Rather than focusing on how the Cultural Revolution produced disastrous effects on the Chinese public, Walder turns the classic question on its head by asking who was responsible for producing the chaos, and his answer points to the party cadres and their political aspirations. For Walder, greed for political power was the ultimate source of the debacle that the Cultural Revolution unleashed.

Yang Jisheng, a long-time journalist who directly experienced the Cultural Revolution, offers a first-hand account of the Revolution. Through an holistic examination, he addresses both the internal political feuds of the Chinese Communist Party and the immense degree of social disintegration experienced by the Chinese public. Yang shows the chaos and disorder that a ten-year experiment on finding a "correct Communist culture" indiscriminately unleashed on everyone who had either initiated the Revolution or become its innocent victims.

Although Yang's book is not thorough in terms of analysis, it is richly packed from beginning to end with novel information. For Yang, the overriding point is the continual aimlessness of the Cultural Revolution. The absence of a clear objective and direction, as Yang discusses, meant the fundamentals of traditional culture in China were destroyed for no other reason than being too "bourgeois," which few could define. It was not only the precise definition of "traditional culture" that became murky; the fundamental division on the basis of social class and the conflict such division bred also had no purpose beyond the senseless violence it created. The Cultural Revolution had not only destroyed a nation's culture, it had destroyed its government and every vestige of order the government had worked hard to establish after the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War. Yang suggests that, if the Cultural Revolution had any profound lessons to teach China, it was that anarchy is always less desirable than they rule of law and order, for the latter at least brings a sense of clarity and direction to the former and establishes a clear purpose for the existence of a national government. The former produces nothing but confusion, disorder, and mayhem. In short, the real tragedy of the Cultural Revolution was that the destruction of traditional culture did not immediately produce anything tangible beyond chaos and anarchy, which is why the end of the Cultural Revolution may be arguably more important than its beginning for teaching China about the importance of government and the rule of law.

A major consequence of the confusion over the Cultural Revolution's purpose and direction was a high suicide rate at the national level. Victims were largely people who were accused of being "counterrevolutionaries" or "bourgeois elements" and were mostly from middle to lower-class backgrounds. In particular,

Yang documents the high level of stress and psychological torment these victims had to face and which some failed to endure, often leading them to choose suicide out of depression. Yang also demonstrates how China's social order literally "turned upside-down" as conflicting messages about whether or not the Cultural Revolution should continue came out of the party ranks. Yang finds Mao Zedong to be principally responsible for the debacle, for Mao tried to bypass the party bureaucracy as much as possible to take matters personally under control. Most importantly, despite sending in the military and police to try and keep things in order, Mao himself did not clearly know the precise direction and objective of the Revolution.

After leaving 1.5 million people dead, the chief outcome of the Cultural Revolution was a struggle between anarchy and state power. Although Yang does not utilize new primary sources because Party archives still remain largely inaccessible to locals and foreign scholars, he skillfully blends his secondary sources into a cogent narrative, utilizing both Chinese and Western sources, which provides a notably balanced assessment of a highly controversial topic. In a country where freedom of expression and a search for truth remains largely suppressed, if not dead, under the weight of the Chinese Communist Party's singular grip on power, Yang's account joins that of Singer and Walder in reminding the Chinese public and the world at large that the Cultural Revolution, however ugly the facts may be, cannot and must not remain in the shadows forever. As such, Yang has made a courageous first step towards delivering a comprehensive, if not definitive, history of one of modern China's greatest national tragedies.

Singer's book is notable for being a methodological precursor to Lee's classic approach by re-examining the disastrous impact of the Cultural Revolution on intellectuals and students and describes how these classes ended up experiencing a "lost decade" after being sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside. Walder's book focuses on the chaos and social disorder that the Red Guards brought about, and examines how the Cultural Revolution devastated social ties and destroyed the societal fabric which had managed to bring a fledgling sense of social harmony and peace for less than two decades following the Chinese Civil War. Walder's book marks a sharp departure from Singer and Lee's classic method of relying on articles in *Hongqi* and other Chinese newspapers and also utilizes the top-down approach in analyzing the Cultural Revolution in a radically different fashion. While Singer and Lee concentrated on documenting the impact of the Party directives and the Red Guard's engagement in violence in direct response to the directives, Walder turns this approach on its head and instead argues that the factional infighting and chaos seen in the Chinese public stemmed not from the Red Guards and associated groups acting in accordance with their own will and agendas. Rather, factional infighting had its roots within the central leadership of the Communist Party. The ensuing chaos at the societal level must be understood as a disastrous reflection of the original infighting within the Party ranks.

Yang's book is a synoptic synthesis of Singer and Walder's books showing

that political and social interpretations of the Cultural Revolution must not be divorced from each other but must become indispensable elements of a project aimed at describing the complete nature of the Cultural Revolution. In short, Yang's book complements that of Singer and Walder by demonstrating not only why the Cultural Revolution aspired to be a revolution but also why it had to necessarily fail because it was not interested in creating anything new from old traditions but had a warped conception of "new" as a necessary antithesis of "old" in which the former can only be independent through a thorough destruction of the latter. Yang's work especially corrects Walder's emphasis on the cadres' autonomy by arguing that however much power was at stake, the ultimate source of power was still in the hands of Mao Zedong, and because Mao had no clear blueprint of the Cultural Revolution, the power struggle between cadres uncovered by Walder was more of a symptom than a cause of the brouhaha that the Cultural Revolution produced.

Overall, these three books show a progression in both method and direction of research. While no account can ever satisfy all historians of the Cultural Revolution, these three books nevertheless show how a history of this event ought to be presented. They emphasize that however imperfect efforts may be at portraying the entire panorama of the Cultural Revolution, it is better to tell some uncomfortable aspects of a truth rather to praise its beautiful aspects, especially if the latter are virtually non-existent. The truth about the Cultural Revolution is indeed horrible but believable. Yet, the truth is also valuable, for the sheer horror of the Cultural Revolution as experience and memory directly reflects a part of a nation's past which must be remembered if it is not to be repeated ever again.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Michael Schoenhals, "Unofficial and Official Histories of the Cultural Revolution—A Review Article," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (August, 1989), 566.

<sup>2</sup> Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Stanley Rosen, "Review: The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study by Hong Yung Lee," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (August, 1979) 764-766.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Robinson, "The Cultural Revolution in China," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 44, no. 2 (April, 1968): 214-227; Tang Tsou, "The Cultural Revolution and the Chinese Political System," *The China Quarterly* 38 (April-June 1969): 63-91.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).