

Beijing's Bloody August

Geremie R. Barmé

Recently, I was commissioned to review *Mao's Last Revolution*, a co-authored work by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (Belknap Press, 2006). It is a weighty tome on the history of the Cultural Revolution, and the opening paragraphs of my review read:

‘On 18 August 1966, Mao Zedong reviewed a mass gathering of zealous young people in Tiananmen Square. At the last moment he donned a PLA uniform and, although it didn't quite fit his bulky frame, it marked both to his audience of over a million Red Guards, and to his colleagues standing on the rostrum with him, that the old guerilla leader was launching a new campaign. It would become a war of all against all, a civil conflict unlike any other that China had experienced.

‘In Chinese, August 1966 is known as ‘Red August’, *hong bayue*. For the supporters of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, red symbolized revolution and the revitalization of the ardour for uncompromising and radical change. Their battle cry was “to rebel is justified”. For those who were the victims of the opening salvos of this political movement, however, those harrowing summer weeks of verbal abuse, ransacking and murder were “bloody August”, a prelude to the long years of confusion and devastation that were to follow.’

The review ends with a quotation from a former Red Guard on the subject of the slogan ‘to rebel is justified’ (*zaofan you li*). I took the quote from an oral history interview conducted by the writer Sang Ye and published in his book *1949, 1989, 1999* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1999). Much of that book, translated and edited, recently appeared in English under the title *China Candid: the people on the People's Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Unfortunately, due to the length of the manuscript I was obliged to edit the original down, and roughly a third of Sang Ye's interview material was not included in the published English book.

The following two contrastive interviews with former Red Guards were not included in the English-language version of Sang Ye's book. Given the fact that it is forty years since the ‘Red August’ of 1966, it would seem timely to make them available to interested readers. The translations and notes are mine, although I would acknowledge the editorial contribution of Miriam Lang.

I

He had been a founding Red Guard at Tsinghua University Middle School. Later he would become an executive working in the Shenzhen office of a multinational company. She (her interjections are marked by parentheses) was a university lecturer in Chinese. —Sang Ye

We were both in our mid teens when the Cultural Revolution was launched. We were extremely idealistic about the future of China and the fate of humanity. Don't forget, we were born the same year that the People's Republic was founded and grew up with the party's education. It was an education that left an indelible mark on the

way we think. We were as young as New China. Just like China after entering the phase of socialist construction, we experienced a period of great idealism too; we too followed a tortuous path, and each twist and turn has left its mark on us.

Take the years after 1957, for example. The party's policies started deviating from the correct course, especially when an emphasis was placed on class contradictions and struggle. Because the party had evolved in an environment of extreme class antagonism there was a great sensitivity to the issue of class. Add to that the fact that there were severe differences of opinion between the established socialist countries like the Soviet Union and the newly-socialist nations like China on how revolution was to continue under the conditions of socialism, and what was to become of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Our party placed a particular emphasis on class contradictions and struggle. So the concept of never forgetting class struggle had a profound impact on us.

It was in this kind of environment that after 1964 both the leadership and the students in our school—that is Tsinghua University Middle School—were tirelessly discussing class struggle. When the Cultural Revolution began there was a widespread awareness that we couldn't take anything for granted, despite the fact that the proletariat was ostensibly in political control. There was a general sense of political crisis and now it had reached explosion point.

We wanted our party to be more pure so that it could avoid the pitfalls of the Soviet revisionists. That was the innocent and naïve motivation behind our involvement in the Cultural Revolution. From the very outset we showed ourselves more willing and able than others to respond to Chairman Mao and the party's various appeals. The leadership at all levels saw things differently from us and the older cadres disagreed with the way the masses were being incited to carry out the Cultural Revolution; they felt this mass movement was a betrayal of the party's traditions. They couldn't understand why the masses were being incited to oppose the leadership rather than relying on the democratic mechanisms within the party, that is allowing the party leaders to decide everything and be done with it. We, on the other hand, felt as though a new age was dawning; it was very exciting and the revolutionary situation was excellent. At the start of the Cultural Revolution all the students at my school influenced each other, or rather infected each other, forged connections; and in our enthusiasm we set up the Red Guards.

Honestly, there was nobody else behind it. The idea didn't come from an older cadre or a high-level official; it was entirely our own doing.

(The notion that some high-level cadre told us to set up the movement is just a myth. Like so many things said about those days, it has no basis in fact. Even some so-called Cultural Revolution specialists still claim that the Red Guards were established at the behest of Chairman Mao or Jiang Qing. There's even one school of thought that identifies Wang Renzhong as the central party leader behind it. That just isn't true. Having said this, it is a fact that after the Red Guards were established various people got involved and exploited the movement for their own ends. But that's another story.)

I'd like to say a few words about our school and the kind of environment in which we were living and studying. From this it will be evident why the Red Guard movement

appeared there. Our school emphasized the overall development of the individual—moral, intellectual and physical. Added to that was that fact that from 1960 enrollment was opened to students from any school in the city. In other words, only the *crème de la crème* were chosen. The school was a long way from the city center so everyone boarded there, including first-year students. That meant that people in the same class did everything together, studying, eating and sleeping. They were in constant contact with each other. Tsinghua and Peking Universities were nearby, and so was No. 101 Middle School. So there was a lot of contact between students at all of these schools.

(No. 101 was a school that had started out as a Communist Party kindergarten established in Yan'an. From the 1940s it was a 'horse-back cradle' for the revolutionary successors of the party. The children of Chairman Mao and many important central party leaders were sent there; some of them were still there right up to the time of the Cultural Revolution.¹ The entrance exam standards were also very high.)

That's one aspect of the situation. Another was that the school leadership at that time included people who believed in educational reform, and they wanted their students to excel in every aspect of their activities. They favored a heuristic method of education,² and they encouraged students to discuss and debate issues amongst themselves and also to take part in various extramural activities. So the atmosphere was extremely lively; it wasn't just a bunch of people with their heads stuck in books. Frankly, if you got into Tsinghua Middle School that pretty much meant that you were on your way to university.

(Later on, as part of an experiment in educational reform, they set up preparatory classes for college. They wanted to give people a specialized training so they'd be ready for university. Those preparatory classes became a breeding ground for future Red Guard leaders.)

And that brings us to the third characteristic of our school: the class background of the students. Because they got in on the basis of exam results and they had to be good all-rounders; that meant that a lot of people had been student cadres in their old schools. As a result they had already developed their own ideas about things and were confident about expressing them. This made the school environment even livelier. Equally important was the fact that there was also a relatively large percentage of children from intellectual and cadre families. That's because they grew up in a positive social environment and had a strong educational atmosphere at home.

(However, our school was not a school for high-level cadre kids. It was definitely not a Chinese version of the elitist schools they had in Japan that allowed commoners to compete in the entrance exams but would accept all the children of the nobility. At that time in China people were very unhappy about the fact that cadres' children tended to be concentrated in particular schools—but those had a different system for recruiting students from the one ours did. But since ours wasn't an ordinary high

¹ No. 101 was next to the Yuanming Yuan, or Garden of Perfect Brightness, an extensive Manchu-era imperial garden palace that had lain in ruins since the 1860 sacking by Anglo-French forces. See below.

² *qifashi jiaoyu*, as opposed to *tianyashi jiaoxue*, a 'duck-stuffing' or forced-feeding method of teaching.

school—we ate and lived there, and we had lots of extramural activities—that meant families had to spend more on their children's education. That was inevitable.)

Given such an environment it was only natural that our students would be particularly idealistic. Generally speaking, we felt obliged to show an interest in the affairs of the nation and politics, and we believed we should be concerned for its future, or rather that we should feel a sense of responsibility for it.

We all got involved in heated discussions from the time of the publication of ‘A Critique of the Newly-written Historical Play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*’ in November 1965,³ right up to the denunciation of the ‘Three-Family Village’ in March-April the following year.⁴ The general consensus was that the issues involved were more than just academic, and that this was more than a series of denunciations of bourgeois ideology within the cultural sphere. We were convinced that they were questions of major importance for the political fate of the nation; they touched on issues of crucial significance for the political life of people throughout China.

(At the time this view was diametrically opposite to that of our school leadership and the Beijing Municipal Committee—and even of Party Central itself, that is Liu Shaoqi's headquarters. All of them emphatically claimed that these were academic debates that should not be crudely simplified or turned into a metaphysical discussion. They warned against deviating from the matter at hand and extending the terms of reference of the discussions. To this day I'm still not sure whether or not they realized that this ‘academic debate’ was setting the stage for the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. But to be honest, at the time I never thought the movement would become so frenetic, or have such a massive impact on China and the rest of the world—and transform the lives of a whole generation.)

Anyway, given these sentiments some of us felt that the party leadership at school was incapable of keeping up with the unfolding situation. They were too rightwing, too soft. So the students voiced their criticisms and the authorities responded by drawing on the experiences they'd had during the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957 [when criticisms of the party leadership had led to a wide-ranging purge]. They decided that students would not be permitted to criticize the party leadership at will, and they took the kind of action that had worked in the past. Initially, they cautioned us. ‘What you're doing is very dangerous’, they said. ‘You should be mindful of the lessons of history. During the struggle against the rightists in 1957 many students had expressed their dissatisfaction with the party and its work. As things turned out, however, people who had voiced their criticisms ended up being classified as rightists themselves.’

Their cajoling only served to make the situation more explosive. We were confident that truth was on our side, and nothing could scare us off. We searched through party

³ Yao Wenyuan's denunciation of the historian and Beijing party bureaucrat Wu Han's play about the Jiajing emperor's dismissal of the upright late-Ming dynasty minister Hai Rui marked the public escalation of the secretive political maneuverings that would eventually turn into the Cultural Revolution. The play was construed as being a defence of Peng Dehuai, a prominent party leader who was dismissed from his post by Mao Zedong for his criticisms of the Great Leap Forward.

⁴ The ‘Three-Family Village’ refers to the three writers Wu Han, Deng Tuo and Liao Moshan and their supposedly anti-Maoist essays. Eventually, these essays, which appeared from late 1961 to mid 1964, were attacked for ‘using history, general knowledge and popular topics as a screen, drawing on historical incidents to mock the present and making oblique attacks to launch a vicious and thorough-going attack on the great Communist Party.’

journals and newspapers, as well as other propaganda materials, for ideas that could support our stance. The general tenor of propaganda at the time just happened to be in line with our position. *People's Daily* and *Red Flag* were putting out articles almost every day with big bold headlines that read 'Never Forget Class Struggle'. You can easily imagine what was in them. Of course, we drew support from them and we believed that our struggle with the school leadership was following the general pattern of contradictions [as outlined by Chairman Mao], and would inevitably end in victory for us. So from the very outset we spontaneously developed links between students in different grades who felt the same, so we could act together.

A significant day in the history of these events was 29 May 1966. On that day a number of key activists in both the senior and junior sections of our high school got together to discuss the situation and our strategy to deal with it. Our school was next to the Yuanming Yuan [the Garden of Perfect Brightness],⁵ and we often used to go there after class had finished. We'd wander around there and talk about anything we needed to discuss, or just chat together. We had our meeting there on 29 May, so it came to be known as the Yuanming Yuan Meeting. The date became known as the day on which the Red Guards were founded.

Up until 29 May no big-character posters had appeared in our school.⁶ Some students in the junior years had suggested posting attacks on the school authorities, and we had debated the issue but decided against it. At the time I had argued that a poster campaign was not the best strategy at this juncture. On the night of 1 June, in response to an instruction from Chairman Mao, Central People's Radio had broadcast the big-character poster written by people at Peking University who had rebelled against their Party Committee. The broadcast gave full support to the poster, which Chairman Mao praised as 'the first Marxist-Leninist big-character poster to appear in China.'⁷ This development had an extraordinary impact on me. Now I was convinced that our rebellion was an inevitable expression of the contradictions between the students and the party committee. Things were clearly developing faster and in a more positive direction than any of us could have expected. Our immediate response was to put up our own big-character poster and to adopt formally the name [Chairman Mao's] Red Guards.

Here I must emphasize the fact that, although we decided on the name Red Guards that day, the expression had been around for some time. During the denunciations of the 'Three-Family Village' in March and April, we had all put up a series of mini-posters which we signed in a lot of different ways. One of our group, a student by the name of Zhang Chengzhi, put up a mini-poster and signed it 'A Red Guard'.⁸ At the

⁵ The Garden of Perfect Brightness was a Manchu-Qing palace garden used by the imperial family from the early-eighteenth century until its destruction in 1860 following the Arrow War at the hands of an Anglo-French military force. In the twentieth century the destruction of the gardens was regarded as being emblematic of the decline and national humiliation of China at the hands of the imperial powers.

⁶ The authors of big-character posters or *dazibao* used Chinese writing brushes and ink to write essays and denunciations on sheets of paper that were then pasted on walls. First popularized during the years 1957-58, big-character posters were an instant form of unofficial mass communication and protest used throughout the Cultural Revolution. They were banned by government order in the early 1980s.

⁷ The Peking University big-character poster was written by a group of teachers in the university Philosophy Department and it launched an attack on the party leaders led by Liu Shaoqi.

⁸ Zhang, a Hui-Muslim, would eventually become a noted novelist and essayist who kept faith with his Cultural Revolution-era ideas which became intertwined with various elements of Sino-Islamic thought from the 1980s.

time he explained to us what he meant by this name and I thought it was perfectly suited to our situation. Although there were a lot of other names current among the students—things like ‘Red Descendants’ and ‘Soldiers for the Annihilation of the Bourgeoisie’, and so on and so forth—‘Red Guard’ was the best. So from that time we generally agreed that all like-minded students, that is people who were critical of the school leadership, should use ‘Red Guard’ to sign their mini-posters, followed by their real name. Thus, ‘Red Guard Zhang Chengzhi’, or ‘Red Guard Pu Dahua’. Although we'd all agreed on it we didn't actually use the term all that much, in particular because we were already losing interest in writing mini-posters, and we didn't really have any other opportunities to use the name.

When we put up our own big-character poster on 2 June, it was a perfect opportunity to use it. We signed the poster ‘Red Guards’ and then added our real names. After it went up people who agreed with our views also signed their names on it. Soon the poster had the signatures of over one hundred Red Guards.

As for the contents of the poster, there really wasn't very much to it. Basically, we stated our position and announced that our basic principle was that we would do whatever Chairman Mao and Party Central called upon us to do, and that we would enthusiastically participate in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Our views were well known within the school and had been at the center of controversy for some time. The leadership had even held a special meeting to discuss us. So by this stage it was completely obvious what we really thought and what our intentions were. Naturally, that meant that anyone who signed our poster was critical of the school leadership and of some actions by some party organizations. Those who weren't didn't sign. Some of them were strongly opposed to our point of view—real hardcore opposition—and they put up their own big-character posters attacking us. They were pretty cutting, things like, ‘We are more than aware of what type of people you are and what you are really up to. You have been secretly engaged in underground activities for ages, hatching furtive plots and plans. You Red Guards are wildly ambitious and your real aim is to overthrow the party committee’, and so on and so forth.

(One of the things these people said left a deep impression on me. It was: ‘You have repeatedly claimed that there is an ever-present danger that the bourgeoisie will stage a comeback in China. You're absolutely correct, and you people are the cause of the danger’.)

Of course we tried to explain ourselves and present our own point of view.

(We tried to explain that our sole desire was to protect Chairman Mao with our lives, oppose and prevent revisionism, and persevere with the revolution. We said that we would fight anyone at all who diverged from the proletarian revolutionary line. We were prepared to take on anyone and everyone who was opposed to Chairman Mao. We were determined ‘to overcome all obstacles and stop only when world revolution was victorious.’ We were extremely confident; we felt as though we could somehow

See, for example, Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red, on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.304-309.

determine the fate of the nation. The things we wrote at the time were pretty histrionic.)

As things developed the debates became more heated and we even started doing things like putting crosses through the names of our opponents on the posters. That's when outsiders who supported us, for example, students from Peking University High School and No. 101, decided to come to our campus as a gesture of solidarity. At first the school authorities locked the school gates to prevent them from coming in, but that only served to stir things up even more. Our supporters who had been locked out didn't leave; they stationed themselves outside the school and chanted: 'We're Red Guards too! We're Red Guards too!' Who would ever have thought that that was how the term 'Red Guards' started to circulate outside our school?

The story of the birth, evolution and eventual demise of the Red Guard movement is long and involved. After the term 'Red Guard' began its journey outside the school in June 1966, the leaders in charge of the day-to-day supervision of work in Party Central—in other words, Liu Shaoqi—sent out work teams to occupy the school and suppress the movement. However, Chairman Mao personally wrote to us to express his warm support and to reiterate the principle that 'revolution is not a crime; rebellion is justified.'⁹ In particular he emphasized that 'rebellious against reactionaries is justified.' Before long all kinds of Red Guard groups had been set up throughout China, and Red Guards moved out into the society at large to take part in the movement 'to obliterate thoroughly and rebuild staunchly'¹⁰... .. and so on and so forth. That's about all I can really say about the early days of the Red Guard movement.

Everything is a process. As I said earlier, differences of opinion among ourselves eventually led to factional in-fighting. As the Cultural Revolution progressed all kinds of mass organizations called themselves Red Guards, while we, the original Red Guards, fragmented and regrouped. The situation in our school was the same as everywhere else: there was violence and conflict between the two main factions.

(Nowadays some people take the term 'Red Guard' to connote something very negative, as though Red Guards were all murderers, some kind of oriental fascists. That's obviously quite unfair. It's tragic both for us personally and for the Red Guard movement as a whole. I will admit that in the organizations that sprung up all over China calling themselves Red Guards there were hooligans, lunatics, ambitious schemers and plotters, and that they did a lot of bad things. I also concede that there were people in the old Red Guards—that is students at our school—who committed errors during the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps one could even call them crimes. I have to live with that fact. However, at the inception of the Cultural Revolution we, and our classmates, were true path-breakers. We were absolutely sincere in our devotion to the Communist Party, the nation and the people. We established the first group of Red Guards in China—in the world, for that matter—in good faith. Over a quarter of a century has passed, and from our present perspective it is irrelevant

⁹ *geming wu zui, zaofan you li*, a quotation from Mao Zedong's letter to the Red Guards. The second part of the quote comes from Mao's 'Speech at the Meeting Sponsored by All Circles in Yan'an to Celebrate the 60th Birthday of Stalin,' in which he said, 'In the final analysis, the innumerable truths of Marxism may be expressed in one sentence: "to rebel is justified".' Although broadcast on national radio and printed in the press, Mao's 'letter' was never received by the Red Guards at Tsinghua Attached Middle School.

¹⁰ *da po da li*, that is to obliterate the old totally and to establish the new firmly.

whether or not the founders of the Red Guards killed people, or smashed and looted and destroyed things. The heavy cross that we bear has been imposed upon us as a matter of political expediency, and we are carrying the weight of other criminals. It will be our burden forever. So, in retrospect what I have to affirm solemnly is that what I did in the spring of 1966 I did in good conscience and faith for the sake of the ideals I once held so dear.)

People like us—especially a person like me who made a bit of name for themselves in the early days of the Cultural Revolution and was later jailed—have weathered many of the vicissitudes of life. That period had a profound and long-lasting impact on us. If you ask me to consider the past and think about the future, then I can claim to speak on behalf of the majority of the old Red Guards when I say that we still care about the fate of our party and our nation, and still care about the grand enterprise of our people.

II

Another Red Guard from more humble origins eventually became the proprietor of a Beijing fashion boutique. —Sang Ye

I was in my third year of junior high school when the Cultural Revolution got going. It was No.27 High School, a real dump. I don't care what other people say about why they got involved; I know I became a Red Guard just for the hell of it, to have a chance to lash out and rebel. Up till then alley-kids like me were always treated like dirt.¹¹ But, fuck, when the Cultural Revolution came along, I was suddenly one of the five red categories, a child of the workers and peasants who had been oppressed by the revisionist line in education. Under revisionism I'd been forced to learn my lessons off by heart; ten long years and they still wouldn't let me pass. Now that I had the chance I was going to get out there and fuck with them, wasn't I?

I didn't even wait for old man Mao to review the first batch of Red Guards. I joined a Mao Zedong Thought Brigade set up in the Western City. Later on the Red Guards in the high schools fell into two factions. We were in the 4.3 faction.¹² They were all much the same thing; the manifestoes had lots of articles in them and no one could remember what they were. But one line that Chairman Mao had taught us summed it up for everybody: 'In the final analysis, the innumerable truths of Marxism may be expressed in one sentence: "to rebel is justified".'

I took part in pretty much all the big events: being reviewed by Grandad Mao in Tiananmen, destroying the four olds, the great link-ups, armed struggle:¹³ anything that involved beating people up and smashing things and taking stuff. Man, it was fantastic! Me and my buddies got baseball bats and worked our way up the street from south to north. We must have busted every damn shop sign along Xidan. Just try doing that today! The cops'd be all over you after the first hit. But back then, they didn't dare. We were fuckin' Red Guards; we were destroying the four olds! Rebellion is justified! Breaking into the Nationalities Palace, putting the British Rep Office under siege, man I was there for all of it. How could you miss it? It was full on. Then the British place was torched. They never found the guy who lit the fire. If they could get their hands on him today he'd be finished. Burning up foreigners? Talk about big time! They'd execute the guy three times over. But back then foreigners weren't worth a hair on your dick; they were the object of revolution.

I wasn't all that involved with beating people up; too late to be in on that really. The first time was in August, a good two months later than most. By then beating people to death wasn't really what people were doing any more. I remember it really clearly because it was the first day Chairman Mao reviewed the Red Guards at Tiananmen. 18 August. I was unlucky, though; I didn't get to catch a glimpse of him because I was too well behaved. We were supposed to meet at our school first, so that's where I went. But our school was way over to the west of Tiananmen, and the Red Guard

¹¹ In this context, alley-kids *hutong chuanzi* indicates young people who grew up in the older and poorer parts of Beijing and were regarded as being ill bred, uneducated and unemployable.

¹² The '4.3 Faction' appeared in April 1967, named after a meeting on 3 April (literally the 4th month 3rd day, and thus 4.3), encouraged by the radical central party leaders as a force to counteract the 'old Red Guards.'

¹³ *po sjiu, da chuanlian, wudou*, the hallmarks of the Red Guard movement (1966-68).

groups were all moving from east to west. They went past Tiananmen, and saw Mao, and then moved on towards Xidan in the west, and then they dispersed. There were marshals all over the place to stop people going back towards Tiananmen. So there's old Grandad Mao over in the square and there's me stuck in Xidan. I could see fuck all. All I could see was everyone really happy because they'd seen him. I was so pissed off. I'm a loser, too obedient, so I've always missed out.

Later I got to see him a few times but he was always so far away he didn't quite seem real. Seeing him in the Mausoleum is better. But at the time I was still incredibly excited. I'd seen the Red Commander-in-Chief and that was the only thing that mattered. No bullshit; how many people got to see Chairman Mao when he was alive? Heaps of people are still lining up to see his body now. I reckon they should set up a company and sell tickets, charge out-of-town people ten yuan a pop to see him. They say his kids don't have it so good nowadays. So maybe the Chairman should help them make a few bucks.

But that was a real bad day. That fucking shit of a class monitor came and put on this big act of reading the big-character posters. I couldn't stand her, so I went over and gave the cunt a few slaps around the face. After all, there she was, presenting herself to me on a platter. You could get away with beating up anyone, like it was for free, as long as they were class enemies. You could beat them to death and no one would care. She didn't have a fucking clue why I'd hit her, and she caved in immediately. 'I'll confess, I'll confess. I'm guilty, I'm guilty. But it wasn't me who made you repeat a year; it was so and so. He didn't let you pass. It wasn't up to me.' She was scared shitless, and started selling out other people just like that. Typical fucking intellectual. As soon as I hit her all these other people gathered round. Some of them hated her too, for other reasons, so they got stuck into her as well. We struggled her for a while before we let her go home.

Even now I don't feel bad about it. Big deal. That slut had treated me badly in the past, always punishing me, and making me stand for hours in detention. I still wouldn't apologize. She was over forty then, so I guess she'd be long gone by now. I was only doing my job. If she wants to pay me back she can complain to the manager, Chairman Mao. Anyway, I did my ten-year stint in the countryside after that. About the only thing I didn't experience was death. And, damn it, but those old poor peasants were mean bastards. They really fucked me over. I reckon ten years in the countryside evens the score.

Then came the revolutionary link-ups. What that meant was free travel. If you showed your Red Guard ID you could go on the train for free—anywhere you wanted, within China that is. But you couldn't really call it a free ride. It was standing room only—not even that—people got crushed to death. And nowhere you went was as good as Beijing. All those shit-holes everywhere else. Poor as dirt. It was a real eye-opener, though. I was a bit of an innocent then, and I didn't have much of a clue about anything. The first time I saw a real airplane was at a mass rally at the Capital Airport when they expelled the Soviet diplomats. It was mainly university students who were behind that; I just went along to get a look at the planes.

Society's never fair. Even in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards were divided into different classes. Look at the kids in 'United Action'. They were

from 1 August High School, all privileged kids; they wore real army uniforms; they had black leather shoes, all shining, that's if they weren't wearing snow white sandshoes. They all sped around on brand new 'Forever' brand pushbikes, too. When a pack of them went riding past it was like the Praetorian Guard. They really were in your face. They were all from high-level cadre families, or army brats. How could alley-scum like me compete with that? In the Cultural Revolution they were still the ruling class. Our rebellion was a joke; sure it felt good, but we were only the shit-kickers for those people. You've got to face the facts.

Who are 'the people' anyway? Morons like me: we're the people. The majority. The Cultural Revolution created chaos among the people; they let us fight it out amongst ourselves. Take that teacher I hit, for example, or a rightist, or some capitalist. In reality, they were all just common people. The peasants screwed me over for ten years, but in the end they're just like me, cannon fodder. Think back to when the Communists and Nationalists were fighting it out with each other. The ones who did all the fighting were the common people. Anyone with money and power never had to get their hands dirty. Sure the Communists eliminated eight million Nationalist bandits. Big fucking deal! Chiang Kai-shek got off scot-free; so did [his son] Chiang Ching-kuo. Who ended up dead? The people, that's who.

So if you ask me I reckon the Cultural Revolution was just a fucking sham. Old Mao was feeling a bit insecure up there in Party Central. He wanted to screw Liu Shaoqi, but Liu was no loser. So Mao got everyone fighting among themselves: students beating up teachers, workers beating up factory heads, party members beating up party secretaries. After that the students, workers and party members turned on each other. In the end, even old grannies and aunties were at each other's throats. The place turned into something out of the Three Kingdoms, with Liu Shaoqi stuck in the middle of it all.¹⁴ Old man Mao was never afraid of chaos; he was a hero born of disorder. The only time he felt at peace was when all under heaven was in a state of chaos, and he was the only one who could stay on top of it all. Forget about Liu Shaoqi; even a dozen US presidents rolled into one couldn't have kept a lid on it. Just take a look at what the Chinese can get up to when they're aroused: no one would want to touch the place with a barge pole.

Of course, I didn't understand all of that at the time. But I reckon I still would have got into it even if I had. Look at me now. I started out with nothing and, fuck, here I am—a small capitalist, you might say. I've got myself a car and everything. And I reckon I'm shit-hot, too. But what about those people from 'United Action'? Man, they've been driving around in Mercedes Benzes for years, and it has to be the right model and the right year, and they have to have a chauffeur! My hat's off to them, man. The country belongs to them. Their families founded New China—the generals, the government ministers, and now they're claiming their inheritance. I'm telling you, you just have to accept it. But I'm still pissed off as hell because it's so fucking unfair. If things go on like this it'll end up like the Manchu-Qing dynasty, won't it?¹⁵

¹⁴ A reference to the conflict between the kingdoms of Wei, Shu and Wu in the third century CE, and the machinations and betrayals that the contestation involved.

¹⁵ The corrupt and bureaucratically top-heavy Manchu-Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911 ushering in an era of revolution.

If you ask me to look back on it from my present perspective, I don't think it was all that different from today. If a time comes when rebellion is justified again, I might be too old to get involved but believe you me I'm going to encourage my son to get out there and fuck them over a bit.

You don't get anything if you don't rebel. You don't get anything if you do rebel either, but you've still got to do it whenever you get the chance. For us ordinary people that is the only truth we believe in.

© Geremie R. Barmé