

“The Highest Principle”: The  
Factionalization of Mao Zedong’s  
Red Guards

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“The Highest Principle”: The Factionalization of Mao Zedong’s Red Guards

Gao Yuan’s comrade had kidney injuries. The East-is-Red Corps was battling Gao’s Red Rebels; those fighting were almost entirely under the age of seventeen, but this was no child’s play. An attack by the enemy on the Red Rebels’ artillery had bloodied Gao’s friend, Sanxi, and wounded and killed others. But the hospital where Sanxi was sent supported the East-is-Red Corps, and workers were reluctant to give the boy proper care. Shocked, Gao wondered aloud, “How can they be so inhuman? Chairman Mao says that medical workers should heal the wounded, rescue the dying, and practice revolutionary humanitarianism.” His friend Mengzhe replied, “The highest principle now is factionalism.” Eventually, lacking appropriate medical care, Sanxi died<sup>1</sup>.

This is no scene from a typical war movie. The fighters are children under seventeen; the cause is pure, unadulterated, and unsubstantiated revolution. Sanxi and other ill-fated members of the Red Rebels were hardly the only victims of the Great Proletarian Communist Revolution (GPCR), headed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s exalted Chairman, Mao Zedong. Beginning in 1966 and lasting officially until Mao’s death in 1976, the GPCR was one of the most destructive movements in Chinese history, physically, socially, culturally, and politically. The *hongweibing*—Mao Zedong’s Red Guards—were the central elements of the GPCR’s first and most destructive phase, lasting from 1966 to 1968. The Guards were implements of destruction in the revolution that did, in effect, achieve its goal of overthrowing the government, or as Mao himself

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<sup>1</sup> Gao Yuan, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 264-278.

put it, ‘bombard[ing] the headquarters<sup>2</sup>.’ But the Red Guards were more than instruments of the GPCR; they were an independent organ, controlled by and culpable to no one but themselves. As Gao Yuan’s memoir, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*, describes, the Red Guards began as an unorganized body of mostly harmless students, and escalated into an out-of-control, factionalized army who took orders from no one but their student leaders. The Guards were not, in the end, mere tools of Mao’s greater agenda; they did not simply purge the party of undesirables. Instead, they nearly destroyed the CCP and irreversibly altered China’s political climate. The gradual factionalization Yuan details is what truly made the Red Guards so lethal and destructive.

Gao Yuan grew up in a small village in Hebei Province. His mother was the daughter of a “bankrupt landlord” and a ‘middle peasant;’ his father, a revolutionary official, head of a county, who fought against the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War. This classified him as a “Red<sup>3</sup>,” a desirable, revolutionary pupil and a candidate for the Red Guards. Yuan and his brother, Weihua, attended middle school together, away from their family’s home but within the province. The school was one of the ‘key’ schools that typically sent students to the two major universities in China; the boys were lucky to attend, and Yuan harbored ambitions to attend Beida, or Beijing University<sup>4</sup>. The two Gaos were in an advantageous position at the dawn of the GPCR.

For Yuan, the GPCR started in the spring of 1966. Students began making *dazibao*, big character posters hung around the school, denouncing the “Three Family Village,” three men who ran offices in Beijing and wrote essays for the Beijing Party

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<sup>2</sup> Gao, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Juliana Pennington Heaslet, “The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution,” (*Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 12, December 1972), 1033.

<sup>4</sup> Gao, 31-32.

Committee's monthly journal<sup>5</sup>. It was clear that officials within Yuan's school were imposing a particular political agenda; looking pleased, they surveyed the posters, written with zealous fervor by the students at the school<sup>6</sup>. School life had already begun to shift away from education and towards a greater political agenda. Students immediately began finding evidence of 'counterrevolutionary activity' in posters, paintings, magazines, and other propaganda; one student discovered the phrase "Long Live Kai-shek" in a picture of wheat on the back of *China Youth*<sup>7</sup>. School officials kept this early movement well under control.

These early developments on Yuan's school campus were nothing, however, compared with the violence and confusion set to erupt with the dawn of the Red Guard movement itself. The spread of the movement is accepted as commencing with Mao's first rally with the first Guards in August 1966<sup>8</sup>. Standing before a million students displaying their Red Guard armbands in Beijing, Mao received the Red Guards wearing a badge of his own. The *New China News Agency* reported on August 18, 1966:

"Tumultuous cheers broke out from the packed square as Chairman Mao, wearing the red armband, waved greetings to the paraders. Red Guards down below shouted joyfully, 'Look, Chairman Mao is wearing our armband. He approves of our Red Guards<sup>9</sup>...'" The spread of the movement hardly required that such fervor be invented by the paper; it was clear that the students' zest and passion for the movement was genuine.

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<sup>5</sup> Gao, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Gao, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Gao, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Heaslet, 1032.

<sup>9</sup> Untitled excerpt from *New China News Agency* in Heaslet, 1032.

Having received Mao's blessing, the movement spread across the mainland. In Yuan's home province of Hebei, he and his fellow students debated who ought to be allowed to wear the Red armband; Yuan, who belong to a "Red" category himself, had nothing to worry about, but his close friend, a girl named Yuling, fell in between the Red and Black categories. Those determined to be of "Red" background were the children of workers, poor and lower peasants, revolutionary cadres, and revolutionary martyrs.<sup>10</sup> Yuan argued for all of the students to be admitted: "All our classmates were born and brought up under the five-star red flag. We all have a socialist education<sup>11</sup>," he said. His classmates disagreed, and only 35 of the 50 students in his class were allowed to be Red Guards.

This early delineation became crucially important later in the factionalization of the movement. Andrew Walder, a sociology professor at Stanford University and author of "Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered," argues that those later labeled as "conservative" were often these 'Reddest' Red Guards who argued against accepting their less 'revolutionary' classmates early on.<sup>12</sup> Having decided who could and could not join their elite group, the emboldened new Red Guards set out on their campaign to destroy what Mao called the Four Olds, defined as "old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits<sup>13</sup>." On their first day as Red Guards, following reports of the Red Guard activity in Beijing, Yuan and his classmates sang the "Song of the Red Guards," which went as follows: "We are Chairman Mao's Red

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<sup>10</sup> Heaslet, 1033.

<sup>11</sup> Gao, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew G. Walder, "Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered," (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 2, May 2002), 438.

<sup>13</sup> Gao, 82.

Guards,/Tempering ourselves in great waves and winds;/Armed with Mao Zedong thought,/We'll wipe out all pests and vermin<sup>14</sup>.” They traveled throughout the city, knocking down a Qing-era gate and renaming a street called “Four Harmony Street” as “The Street of the Four News<sup>15</sup>.” The beginning of the movement was childish and straightforward, and Yuan and his classmates, along with millions just like them, had an extraordinary amount of fun strutting the streets, ordering peasants around, and skipping school.

Government-run work teams had been sent in early on in the GPCR to oversee and control the students' actions, and it is within these first encounters between the students and the teams that Walder argues factions originated. Yuan's account supports this: because the presence of the work team validated student criticism against teachers, it spurred public arguments against teachers between students, some denouncing, others defending. Yuan, however, rarely takes a side in these early debates; when a teacher's past is questioned, he readily admits, “I wasn't sure what to believe.<sup>16</sup>” Yuan's innocent confusion reflects the divide between his classmates. Later, when the work team itself came under fire, he stayed neutral, shying away from the violence. Yuan never directly supports or decries his classmates' struggles against the work teams, but looks on as the work team is taken down.<sup>17</sup> In most cases, as Walder explains, the work teams were nearly overthrown by a particularly militant group who they punished, and following their withdrawal left a different group of students at the helm of the movement.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Gao, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Gao, 86-88.

<sup>16</sup> Gao, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Gao, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Walder, 441.

work teams withdrew mainly because, according to Walder, “[they] clearly did not have the support of Chairman Mao.<sup>19</sup>” When the work teams retreated, they created an atmosphere of confusion and panic, and whichever group they had left in power took hold. This transfer of power to another group created early factions within the student groups.

Yuan’s first real experience with factionalism, however, came not at his own school, but at home. His father, head of the county, was under fire from the youth there. Many regarded Yuan’s father, Gao Shangui, to be an excellent county head, and he was popular in the region. Because he was so well-liked, the students denouncing him encountered plenty of opposition. Those opposing Shangui formed a faction, calling themselves the Mao Zedong Thought Red Guards, and those who supported him called themselves the Mao-Zedongism Red Guards<sup>20</sup>. Such a clear division over Shangui, delineated by the names of the parties, is a good example of the early Red Guard factions. Forming over a single idea or thought, they later evolved into complex organizations, often contradicting their positions and supposed ideals for political gain. It was only a matter of time before such factionalism hit Yuan’s school.

Most of the early factionalism erupted over early disagreements on the revolutionary status of one person or another, as in the case of Yuan’s father. In Yuan’s class, factionalism developed as students compiled “dossiers” on teachers in an attempt to classify them as “good,” “comparatively good,” or “monsters and demons.” Yuan, whose favorite teacher, Li, came under attack for being a former Guomindang official, argued with his classmates against denouncing him. In the debate, some of Yuan’s classmates

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<sup>19</sup> Walder, 453.

<sup>20</sup> Gao, 110-111.

announced their intention to “declare their independence from class 85.”<sup>21</sup> Soon the class had dissolved into four distinct groups. The treatment and accusations directed at certain persons were, according to Walder and supported by Yuan’s experience, “an evident source of conflict.”<sup>22</sup> Nothing so riled these students as the mistreatment and unfair persecution of a person they supported; the punishment of the innocent was one of the great tragedies of the GPCR.

At this juncture, the Red Guard movement nationwide began to escalate and grow more violent. Spreading outside the universities and high schools and into the surrounding towns and homes of those nearby, the Red Guards and the factions they belonged to became more important to the public as a whole.<sup>23</sup> In Yuan’s school, the violence escalated when a teacher being interrogated was killed in ‘self-defense.’<sup>24</sup> However, before the violence could continue, most of the students set out on *chuanlian*, small-group journeys across China with all expenses paid for by the government<sup>25</sup>. According to Heaslet, “Many youths regarded free travel as an extended holiday and took the opportunity to travel extensively throughout the various provinces and participate in local Cultural Revolution activities.”<sup>26</sup> By the end of Yuan’s journey across China at the beginning of 1967, his father’s persecution had intensified and most of his fellow students had also returned from their journeys. The government had discontinued the free transportation, lodging, and food given to students on *chuanlian*. The students immediately set up new factions: the East-is-Red Corps, whose goal was to wrest control

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<sup>21</sup> Gao, 134-136.

<sup>22</sup> Walder, 448.

<sup>23</sup> Walder, 457.

<sup>24</sup> Gao, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Heaslet, 1034; Gao, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Heaslet, 1034.

from the Preparatory Committee and thus destroy the last remaining vestige of adult supervision in the movement at Yuan's school. Their opponents, the Lu Xun Commune, argued against "overthrowing everything," according to Yuan's brother Weihua, a member<sup>27</sup>. The factionalism became ideological.

Though the Red Guard movement was originally quite clearly supported by Mao and his Cultural Revolution Committee headed by Lin Biao, the ideological factionalism derailed its original purpose and most of its function for the CCP. Because Mao's poems and quotations were so vague, and the directives of the GPCR outlined in the Sixteen Points directive so open to interpretation, it was natural that the factions would split along ideological lines. At Yuan's school, one faction originally supported total and constant rebellion; the other, a more balanced and careful route to revolution<sup>28</sup>. Walder suggests that many supported such a policy, advocating a more 'disciplined' approach to the movement: "Unfocused violence, theft, and attacks on state property were not part of [original 'Red' revolutionaries'] conception of the Cultural Revolution."<sup>29</sup> With continued factionalization and disagreement mounting between ideological parties, the Red Guards were growing beyond Mao and the CCP's control.

Former political analyst Heaslet, who wrote during 1972 before all relevant information on the GPCR was released, argues that the government continued to have powerful control over the Guards at this point in the movement.<sup>30</sup> Although it is impossible to definitively say what activities the government itself was organizing, by the time the government revoked *chuanlian* it became obvious that the GPCR had unintended

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<sup>27</sup> Gao, 190-191.

<sup>28</sup> Gao, 197.

<sup>29</sup> Walder, 458.

<sup>30</sup> Heaslet, 1035.

consequences. This was relatively early in the movement. At Yuan's school, the "army"—in fact a work team—moved in to unify the factions and attempt to control them, but after a few months, they simply became a new sticking point upon which to rebel.<sup>31</sup> The army that came to Gao's school, a division the students called the 901, divided the school into two distinct categories: those who firmly opposed the army's presence, and those who supported it. But whether or not the 901 really represented the People's Liberation Army soon came under debate. Yuan's classmate told him, "the 901 does not represent the glorious tradition of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Fangpu [our classmate] says they're nothing but a group of college students in uniform."<sup>32</sup>

Fangpu had a point. The unit was soon driven from the school and became embroiled in a conflict with a field division of the PLA, the 93<sup>rd</sup> Army. The militarized students became more factionalized as those who supported the 93<sup>rd</sup> Army—the East-is-Red Corps—came into direct conflict with those who had supported the 901, later taking on the name Red Rebels<sup>33</sup>. This brought the movement to its final stage: militarized factionalism.

"The situation was growing more and more confusing," mused Yuan, as his classmates began to argue over the armies. "I could not sort out the logic of the situation."<sup>34</sup> Neither could Mao and his committee. Violence began to escalate across the country as these militarized factions took over areas of cities, turning them into battlegrounds. At Yuan's school, torture and violence between the factions mounted; the students began to fight using bricks and stones, and moved into government buildings

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<sup>31</sup> Gao, 201-203.

<sup>32</sup> Gao, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Gao, 207.

<sup>34</sup> Gao, 208.

downtown.<sup>35</sup> These movements were taking place across the country. As Alessandro Russo, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Bologna, explains: “They had decomposed into small paramilitary groups lacking any political distinction, engaged in increasingly grotesque brawls to establish the absolute supremacy of their own faction.”<sup>36</sup> Yuan and his classmates made small weapons, and casualties increased. Yuan’s father lamented the political situation in the province: “‘This is an abnormal period,’ he said. ‘No party, no government, not even police or courts. Everything has collapsed...The Cultural Revolution is supposed to broaden democracy. But as the saying goes, a thing turns into its opposite if pushed too far.’”<sup>37</sup> People like Yuan’s father could not comprehend the purpose of the GPCR and lost confidence in the CCP as their utmost loyalty to Communist principles and the Party was rewarded with torture, abuse, and denunciation.

Chen Boda, head of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, eventually labeled Yuan’s faction as a “counterrevolutionary hodgepodge,” and such a denunciation was enough to defeat them.<sup>38</sup> With nowhere to go, the defeated Rebels returned to the campus, where they were brutally tortured, some killed, by the victors, the East-is-Red Corps.<sup>39</sup> This struggle continued through the beginning of 1968, when Mao and his Committee finally put an end to the last factional struggle in Beijing. “...We want cultural struggle, we do not want armed struggle,” said Mao in a meeting with the Beijing

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<sup>35</sup> Gao, 243.

<sup>36</sup> Alessandro Russo, “The Conclusive Scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968,” (*Positions*, Duke University Press, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005), 536.

<sup>37</sup> Gao, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Gao, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Gao, 290.

factional leaders in July 1968.<sup>40</sup> Mao and his Central Group forced the Guards to stop the violence: “the Central Group was united and resolute in its request for an immediate cessation of the fighting.<sup>41</sup>” Mao and his group had to convince the remaining factions to stop fighting; such was the degree to which the movement spun out of control. “There is quite a bit of anarchism,” said Mao. “In this world, anarchism is correlative with government.<sup>42</sup>” Despite this pronouncement, Mao and his Committee ensured the end of the Red Guards. Gao Yuan and those still living at his school ‘graduated’ and were instructed to work in the countryside.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the first and most violent stage of the GPCR had come to a close, and Mao’s lethal Red Guards were disbanded.

The GPCR left millions of Chinese disillusioned with their government and bereft of an education. The Red Guards had succeeded in nearly overthrowing the government. The gradual and total factionalization of Mao’s Red Guards nearly destroyed the CCP. The process, which began with personal conflict and escalated into ideological disagreements, ended in bloody, pointless battles that had very little to do with revolution. Each side simply wanted to win and prove their dominance, no surprise given that children were the soldiers in these factional battles. The many casualties that resulted from factional fighting and the GPCR constituted completely unnecessary deaths; they died in the name of revolution and Mao Zedong, but no other firm cause. Yuan’s horror at the violence and torture inflicted on his classmates and citizens will stick with him for a lifetime, and his generation will never fully recover from the pain of the GPCR. They are the legacy of Mao’s Red Guards.

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<sup>40</sup> Russo, 548.

<sup>41</sup> Russo, 552.

<sup>42</sup> Russo, 557.

<sup>43</sup> Gao, 344.

## Annotated Bibliography

Alessandro Russo, "The Conclusive Scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968," (*Positions*, Duke University Press, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005), 535-574.

Alessandro Russo is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Bologna in Bologna, Italy. Russo details a meeting between Mao and key Red Guard faction leaders in July 1968, using the detailed meeting notes as a means to comment on the control of Red Guards throughout their reign during the Cultural Revolution and their contact with authority and government figures. It is an especially telling document because it quotes Mao's comments in the meeting extensively and offers an insight into his and the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution. This document was useful in determining Gao's place in the Red Guards and in examining the Red Guard meeting as a whole, from beginning to its end with the meeting between Mao and the faction leaders.

Andrew G. Walder, "Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered," (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 2, May 2002), 437-471.

Andrew G. Walder, a professor of sociology at Stanford University, argues in this article that Red Guard factions were not formed based on preexisting social conditions and norms, but rather from politically influenced disagreements based on ambiguous instructions from higher-ups. Walder grounds his argument in the early days of the revolution. Despite unequal beginnings, which Walder details, and a social hierarchy rooted in the past, Red Guard factionalism erupted from political differences. This source informed my research on the broader consequences of factionalism and the earlier stages of Red Guard policy in the country.

Gao Yuan, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

Gao Yuan's memoir recounts his recruitment and experience as a Red Guard in Mao's Cultural Revolution. Gao, who grew up in a small town in Hebei province, was the son of a Communist official, classifying him as a desirable, "Red" student. The memoir details Gao's experiences as a Red Guard during this tumultuous time in China's history.

Juliana Pennington Heaslet, "The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution," (*Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 12, December 1972), 1032-1047.

Juliana Pennington Heaslet, a former CIA political analyst, examines the political phenomenon known as the Red Guard movement. It is a concise history and political examination of the Red Guards, attempting to discern the Guards' origin, goals, organization, and finally, accomplishments. Beginning with the formation

of the different Red Guard factions and concluding with the July 1968 outbreaks of violence, Heaslet argues that the Guards, originally recruited as political tools furthering Mao and Lin Biao's political agenda, ended up derailing that agenda. This article proved useful in examining Gao's role as a Red Guard in light of the broader movement across China.