

Introduction

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History's epoch-making events occur not once but many times, calling upon successive generations for repeated reinterpretation based on changing intellectual interests and cultural moods. China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (hereinafter, the CR) was clearly one such event, defying the best efforts of subsequent authorities to disarm its mnemonic power. Despite its chaotic outcome, the CR was in its heyday a crusade made of extravagant dreams and swashbuckling adventure. How did a debut launched with such élan come to such a rancorous denouement? One of the great challenges to an objective understanding of this movement is to reconcile its destructive outcome with its noble intentions. And what is the intrinsic linkage between intentions and outcomes but symbolism, or "discourse"? Of course, history consists of more than discourse—it also consists of sociopolitical action—but although the exact etiological relationship between word and deed remains a matter of active scholarly debate, surely the latter may be said to be informed by the discursive structures in which it is framed. And, as the recent "linguistic turn" in social history and sociology has underscored, narrativity—the "storied" nature of social life—plays a salient role in those discursive structures around which collective identities are formed. The chapters in this book all contribute to an understanding of the CR conceived as a concerted, indeed frenzied assault upon the conventional discourse of Chinese public life in an effort to supplant this with a new "master narrative" of the crafting, through rebellion, of the Good Society

and the New Human Being, only to see this master narrative of utopian rebellion successfully challenged in turn by a critical "counternarrative."¹

Barend ter Haar's study, drawing extensively upon historical and anthropological literature on Chinese popular culture (particularly the great sectarian revitalization movements of the late nineteenth century), provides a fascinating analysis of the pre-ideological mythic beliefs on which much of CR polemics were based. For the believers who participated in these movements, the world was inhabited not only by the living but by spirits of the dead: by the famous ox ghosts and snake spirits (*niu-gui sheshen*) and by all kinds of other demons (*gui, yao, mo*), who are genuinely feared to pose a persistent and fundamentally violent threat to life. Taking issue with those who view violence as exceptional and not normative in Chinese culture, ter Haar considers this demonological paradigm a "hegemonic master narrative," which imposed its "grammatical structure" on the different "content" of the CR. These demons, restless and dissatisfied "hungry ghosts" (*egui*) as they have not been properly accorded filial funerary rituals, may always be walking among us (or perhaps they were lurking underground, in "Hell"—the narrative is not entirely clear), but at periods of internal disintegration or external threat they swarm out with unusual audacity in search of vengeance. At such times, Confucian prescriptions for coping with contradiction (e.g., compromise) no longer avail; only resolute counterviolence will suffice. The times, in short, call for a savior: a youthful and vigorous messianic king capable of expelling demons and ordering the world—a Hong Xiuquan, or a Mao Zedong (who could swim the Yangtze in Olympic record time). These new charismatic leaders could break radically with the traditional model of harmony and hierarchy and precipitate a sweeping leveling of class and gender distinctions, exorcizing perceived demons even while emancipating repressed minorities.

Amid the shambles of the Party, the government, and most other hallowed institutions of authority, Mao became the new unifying symbol and messianic leader of a movement otherwise in chronic danger of disintegrating into factional anarchy, as Stefan Landsberger makes plain. Through culmination of a deliberate strategy of coopting traditional symbolism to build a mandate for the CCP initiated by Mao (with official support) at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, the apotheosis of Mao as a sort of "super-model" of communist virtues reached full fluorescence in fulfillment of Mao's personal ambitions shortly be-

fore and during the CR. His visage was depicted everywhere, painted "red, bright, and shining" (*hong, guang, liang*), and became the center of daily rituals such as grace, marriage, death, and thanksgiving. It is striking to note to what extent this deliberate heroization seems to have struck root in Chinese culture: even though the cult of personality, the CR, and indeed the whole notion of "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" was roundly excoriated at the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee (CC) in June 1981, and "Mao Zedong Thought" has been divested of much of its ideological content, admiration for Mao as a person has continued to flourish—particularly around the centenary of his birth in 1993, when he became the object of a cult both more religious and more commercialized than during its heyday. As a testament to popular belief in his god-like protective powers, his visage appeared on cigarette lighters, pocket watches, and New Year prints in plastic sheeting hung from taxicab mirrors; a 1995 *China Youth Daily* survey found that no less than 94.2 percent of all respondents deemed Mao the most admired twentieth-century Chinese personality.

Yet it is important to recognize, as Nick Knight makes clear, that the Mao who loomed larger than life in the celebratory symbolism of the CR was a quite different figure from the "real" Mao who emerges from a close study of his writings and recorded conversations during this period. Hardly the "unmoved mover" of events in the crowning crusade of his revolutionary career, Mao emerges as an oddly passive political actor, responding (albeit positively) to events that surprised him. Moreover, the "thoughts" of Mao as they emerged in the CR marked a sharp departure (and, Knight posits, a qualitative decline) from the thinking that characterized his pre-Liberation writings. These writings and obiter dicta had a far bleaker tone, anticipating not struggle followed eschatologically by peace and unity but struggle followed only by still more struggle. Taking issue with the typical depiction of Mao's later thinking as "utopian," Knight considers his dalliance with revolutionary optimism during the Great Leap Forward "short-lived and quickly abandoned," henceforth giving way to an almost apocalyptic vision of future wars, inner party splits, and natural disasters. The CR was in this sense no more than a "holding action" to defend stakes already claimed, not a quest for utopia. The "failure" of the CR appears from Knight's perspective unsurprising, indeed predictable, in that it really began without the haziest notion of what a solution would look like.

Mao was the central icon in a pantheon of formulaically depicted heroes, as revealed by surveys of CR artwork, literature, and stage productions. In his comprehensive analysis of the surprisingly prolific output of CR novels, Lan Yang shows how heroism was depicted more rigorously consistent with Mao's theories of the ideological function of literature than at any time since Yan'an. The hero of these narratives was likely to be a vigorous, unmarried (and sexually abstinent) youth, with large, piercing eyes (and outsize hands and feet), surrounded by a supportive retinue of lesser heroes, often with a military background (if not engaged in martial exploits). This supporting hierarchy is typically interrelated in fictive kinship terms (complete with kinship terminology), in which the hero is kind, courteous, deferential to seniors, solicitous of juniors, fiercely loyal to the cause, and uncompromisingly opposed to the class enemy (who may, however, be tricked by apparent compromise or surreptitiously penetrated for purposes of espionage). The opposition consists of a similar fictive kinship band, but motivated by greed and hence riven by envious treachery.

The role of the outsider in CR discourse, otherwise pervaded by the metaphor of the nuclear family, is discussed in Anne-Marie Brady's revealing chapter on "China's Foreign Friends," particularly in the context of the communist dialectic between internationalism and nationalism. As a self-consciously revolutionary state, Chinese foreign policy has long emphasized not only "foreign policy" as bureaucratically implemented through the Foreign Ministry and its ambassadorial network, but also "people-to-people diplomacy" (*minjian waijiao*), deemed to be a harbinger of the international order envisaged after the world revolution leads to the dissolution of the state. Foreign friends, as representatives of the "people," albeit admittedly in a rather selective sense, were highly valued as articulate participants in this diplomatic forum. These so-called Three Hundred Percenters, long accorded a comfortable place in socialist China as symbols of CCP aspirations for international revolutionary relevance, acquired even greater significance following China's divorce from much of the International Communist Movement beginning in the early 1960s (and most emphatically during the CR). Several members of this small, hitherto sheltered group responded avidly to Mao's invitation to participate in the CR. Viewing the sudden explosion of Red Guard voluntarism in the summer of 1966 as a welcome opening to democracy in Chinese socialism, they helped to cultivate radical pro-China factions throughout the International Communist Movement. The

radical orientation of the more activist members of this group (such as Sid Rittenberg), however, led them to align themselves with the radical CR Small Group, which split in the summer of 1968 over the issue of whether the CR should be extended to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Some members of the Foreign Experts Bureau even formed their own faction, the Bethune-Yan'an Rebel Group (*Baiqiu'en-Yan'an zao-fandui*), which then split between the original rebel leadership and a band of "ultras" who seized power in 1967. Yet as the Maoist leadership began to attempt to reinstitute authority and stabilize the situation in late 1968, the movement underwent a shift from radical internationalism to nationalism (accompanied by rampant accusations of "enemy spies"), and the community of foreign experts fell under suspicion—a few of the more visible (and imprudent) were even arrested and served long prison terms. Like people-to-people diplomacy, the role of the Foreign Friend in China did not survive the CR in its original form.

As the Cultural Revolution drew to an end, not with a formal obituary announcement but after a period of intellectual debate and political struggle spanning the Third to the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee (i.e., from December 1978 to June 1981), its master narrative, whose initially shocking phrases had now been endlessly repeated, showed increasing signs of exhaustion. With the rise of Deng Xiaoping and his leadership team in late 1978, the emerging critique of that narrative could draw upon elite sympathy as well as popular ennui. The resulting critique, which waxed and waned in intensity according to the economic conjuncture and the factional power balance between radical reformers and "leftists," contained three themes—each of which opposed the CR, but for different reasons (and with different normative implications). To simplify somewhat, the first was that the CR epitomized factional "chaos" and anarchy, and must hence be firmly suppressed by the forces of order. The second was that the CR represented the victimization of the Chinese people by the forces of a centrally enforced radical ideological tyranny, which must therefore give way to an "emancipation of the mind." The third was that the CR indeed represented victimization, but "we have seen the enemy and it is us"—i.e., the culture in which we are all enmeshed is the enemy. For shorthand purposes we may refer to these three clusters of thematic emphasis as the "chaos" focus, the "scar" focus (after the "scar" or "wound" literature launched in the late 1970s and early 1980s), and the focus on cultural self-criticism.

It should, however, be noted that although these three thematic emphases are analytically distinguishable, the distinction does not always hold in specific empirical cases. Thus many of the artists or thinkers discussed herein might agree to some extent with all three themes, although they would disagree in their interpretation of what constitutes "order," the burdens of "Chinese culture," or intellectual emancipation. Take, as another example, the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi, who was celebrated in the media as a "scar" case (in view of the former chief of state's *via dolorosa*), though during Liu's own brief active leadership role in the CR (i.e., before the 11th Plenum of the 8th CC) he provided an archetypal definition of the "chaos" interpretation.²

Among the first to strip the bandages from their wounds and decry the CR's victimization were the original proud subjects of the revolution, the Red Guards. China's urban educated youth, or *zhiqing*, were permitted to return to the cities between 1977 and 1980, but they did not quickly find peace or happiness. With their personal experiences of the failure of Mao's policies and the resulting immiseration of the peasantry, they became increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo and in favor of reforming the existing political-economic system. At the same time, they found themselves less than welcome in their urban haunts, being stigmatized not only for their erstwhile Cultural Revolution activism but for contributing to unemployment or even the wave of urban crime and unrest at the beginning of the 1980s.³ But if the *zhiqing* suffered unjustly, Nora Sausmikat makes clear, female returned youth suffered even more, enduring widespread sexual abuse by rural cadres and then being obliged to divorce rural spouses just to return. Though this might tend to align them with the scar school, these young women rejected, according to Sausmikat, not only their official role as "socialist heroes," but also their post-CR role as victims or outcasts. Sausmikat thus distinguishes among (1) the official view of returned youth as "socialist heroes"; (2) the general urban view of returned youth as uneducated, marginal people and potential criminals; and (3) various self-empowering narratives of returned female youth. Even more important in Sausmikat's analysis is her attempt, via comparative biographies of specific cases, to unravel the differences within the third category vis-à-vis the other two: while some women go against or ignore the first two categories, others seek to reconstruct their life stories in the light of official post-CR discourse (i.e., entrepreneurship and professionalism as continuations of the "real aims" of the rustication movement rather than contradicting them), there-

by disclosing the limits of some of these self-empowerment narratives. By interweaving victimization with the empowerment discourse, still others were able to forge a collective identity (from an array of minutely differentiated alternatives, with subtle distinctions between "Red Guards," *zhiqing*, *laosanjie*, and other subcategories) that embraced the jumbled sequence of roles they had been forced to play and infused it with a sense of pride.

Natascha Vittinghoff's review of three stage dramas about sent-down youth, in which these counternarratives were endowed with "model" status, however, also suggests limits to empowerment: only Sha Yexin's 1970 play *New Sprouts from the Borderlands*, a "master narrative" script (criticized and revised in 1973 and 1974), gives us a cast of characters that fall readily into CR stereotypes, featuring a band (a quasi family) of young heroes undergoing integration into the local commune. The other two plays she examines depict the sent-down youth as clear victims of brutal and senseless violence on the part of both cadres and the peasantry with whom they are expected to merge—victims who, however, remain stoically determined to regain justice (and urban residence). The more politically and commercially successful *Yesterday's Longan Trees* (by former sent-down youth Xu Pingli), however, portrays the victimizers as being likewise trapped by circumstances. In the course of post-CR reform, her long-suffering protagonists find fulfillment in a reintegrated urban social community. This is clearly "wound" literature.

Feng Jicai's fiction subtly departs from this genre, seeking to fuse a classic characterization of CR victimization with an implicit satire of the victim. Thus Wu Zhongyi, the protagonist in his award-winning 1979 novel *Ah!*, recalls Lu Xun's *Ah Q* (or Orwell's *Winston Smith*) in his "resounding spinelessness" in the face of repeated indignities. Though unsparing in his critiques of scheming victimizers, Feng tends to shift focus from the victimizer to the victim's collusion in victimage, or to the victimization inherent in the rectification dynamic. To Feng, the CR resulted in a pervasive deterioration in the "quality" (*sushi*) of human relations, mooted the issue of personal guilt or responsibility. As Monika Gaenssbauer indicates, although in terms of psychological penetration and appreciation of the complexity of the CR, Feng's works represented a step forward from the "scar" perspective; he refuses to give his stories any political or ideological closure. It is in this respect that Feng's works form an instructive contrast to the CR novels analyzed by Lan Yang, forming a bimodal pairing. Whereas Yang shows how the

content of radical ideology is concretely realized in the CR novel, Gaenssbauer reveals how Feng Jikai deconstructs it.

Whereas the works considered attempt above all to sublimate a coherent counternarrative through art, Chinese philosophers have sought to come to grips with the experience in more explicit (if more abstract) terms. Thus Woei Lien Chong analyzes three outstanding contemporary Chinese philosophical responses to that trauma. Li Zehou, a former professor at the philosophy department of Beijing University and a fellow of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), is very much a child of the Enlightenment. Thus he laments the holistic failure of Chinese philosophy to embrace the cleavage between nature and humanity embedded in Western rationalism since Descartes, a cleavage he deems essential to the scientific crusade to conquer nature. In his view, Mao's revolutionary romanticism incorporated neo-Confucian voluntarism à la Wang Yangming rather than scientific rationalism. Li infers that the CR represents a resurgence of antimodern "feudalism," economically rooted in small-scale family farming, which needs to be overcome through a more scientifically and democratically efficient socialism. Having been heavily criticized for "promoting bourgeois liberalism," Li left China in 1992 and has since lived and worked in the West, returning only for occasional visits.

Liu Xiaobo, a former lecturer in Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University, while sharing Li's interest in Western intellectual traditions, veers off from Li Zehou's concern with collective progress through reason in an existentialist direction that rejects rationalist logic as ultimately bankrupt. Salvation may be found not in some Hegelian collective "spirit" but in the existential Nietzschean hero who affirms life amid absurdity and creates meaning and culture ex nihilo. Liu Xiaofeng, a Christian theologian and Shenzhen University philosopher, differs with Liu Xiaobo (and concurs with Li Zehou) in his rejection of radical individualism and his affirmation of a concept of the collective good or public interest. But unlike Li Zehou, he finds this not in scientific rationalism or in Chinese tradition but in Christianity: only belief in a transcendental god of love can anchor collectivism securely to a compassionate humanism, without which it will lurch into "nihilism" (by which he means moral relativism—the denial that there are absolute standards of good and evil), unleashing some to create hell on earth for others. Thus while all three of these thinkers, educated under Mao, reject simplistic attempts to blame the CR on Mao or the Gang of Four, and can even agree

that a root cause of the tragedy was a sort of vitalism run amok (*hubris*), they differ with respect to the origins of this impulse—with Li attributing it to the traditional Chinese belief in the transformative powers of the moral subject, Liu Xiaobo to the sacrifice of individual creativity and freedom to collectivism, and Liu Xiaofeng to the absence in Chinese thought of a transcendental God and the concept of original sin.

These attempts to transmute the CR via various artistic media or to comprehend it through philosophical schemata were undertaken within a broader sociopolitical context in which the party and government leadership sought in some way to monitor and contain the popular effort to come to grips with the CR experience.⁴ Most of the artists and thinkers reviewed above tended to take the dramatic motif of victimization as a starting point, as in the “scar” literature, with palpable wounds and identifiable culprits (first the Gang of Four, then after their trial in 1980 increasingly embracing Mao Zedong). In time, however, they deepened the critique and eventually transcended this category, usually graduating in the late 1980s and early 1990s into some form of cultural criticism. Thus there is a clear logical nexus between the “scar” motif and the onset of cultural self-criticism.

Yet the officially sponsored review of the issue has its own thematic predilections. The most ambitious governmental campaign to resolve the issue was the 1984–1986 campaign to “totally negate” the CR, which focussed the critique not on unjust oppression or victimization but on mass factionalism, “extensive democracy,” and ultraleftist radicalism. Behind this movement it is not hard to detect the bureaucratic interest of the leadership in ensuring that such an upheaval, whatever its historical or social “roots,” should never recur. Protecting Mao and the party core seems to have been very much a part of this effort, paradoxically. Yet this drive was accompanied by a spontaneous quest welling up from the halls of academe in 1986 to *xun gen fan ci* (search for roots and reflect about the past), which coincided with some of the core concerns of the cultural self-critics and climaxed in a “cultural fever” (*wenhuare*). When such intellectual activism melded into (and, in the eyes of the authorities, helped to precipitate) a series of student protest movements beginning in the fall of 1986 and culminating in June 1989, this line of inquiry was of course officially discredited.

Indeed, in 1988 a decision was apparently reached by the leadership that, in order to spare the feelings of those directly involved in the movement—now including many veteran cadres since risen to eminent

posts—further publications on the topic would be discontinued. Although in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, Deng Liqun, a former secretary of Liu Shaoqi and CC Propaganda Department Chair who by the late 1980s had grown increasingly critical of reform, reportedly had a team of writers compile a series of textbooks putting the CR in a more favorable light (“Chairman Mao was right to bombard the capitalist-roaders. It was only its execution that was adulterated.”). In a June 1991 Politburo meeting it was resolved that “any attempt to rehabilitate the CR in any way goes counter to the will of the public, the Party, and the army.”⁵ Thereafter the official policy has been “total denial” of the CR.

The Chinese people have been obsessed with coming to terms with the memory of the Cultural Revolution ever since it was authoritatively repudiated, but their motives for doing so have been ambivalent. On the one hand, they seem desirous of learning from the past—why the CR occurred, what it accomplished, what went wrong. On the other hand, they have been eager to use such historical reconstructions to protect or advance various interests, both material and ideal. To some extent, the two motives are complementary—surely the need to manipulate history would not arise in the absence of any interest in it—but in a more fundamental sense they are incompatible, as the wish to learn has been consistently frustrated by the need for political closure. Yet the CR itself was full of contradictions that defy facile closure: both anti-elitist and worshipful of leadership, both anti-traditional and replete with “feudal” superstition, both anarchic and tyrannical. Little wonder that the attempts to come to terms with the event have run in so many different directions. Although it appeared that the three thrusts of post-Cultural Revolution critical reflection were converging in a new master narrative, neither the critique of ideological tyranny nor cultural self-criticism were acceptable to the forces of a rising nationalism (on which the regime increasingly staked its legitimacy) and the discussion was authoritatively terminated.

The attempt to come to terms with the memory of the CR in some ways parallels the debate concerning one of the issues the original movement raised, highlighting without resolving it: political reform. Efforts by CR radicals at political reform—the “three in one revolutionary committees,” urban communes, open-door revolving elites, etc.—all came to grief. This agenda was passed on to the reform grouping, and the 1980s thus commenced with some quite ambitious proposals, pointing vaguely toward some form of constitutional democracy. These ideas, far more

far-reaching in conception than in their eventual realization, have nonetheless had an undeniable impact: the secularization of China's socialization system, the marketization of the economy, the emergence of a legal culture (including widespread court challenges), and the proliferation of local elections. These are all trends that can trace their pedigree, however tortuously, back to the CR. Yet even as the CR energized the "masses" for the recurrent spontaneous movements that have provided an impetus for political reform, at the same time it seems to have stiffened the bureaucratic resistance to popular activism that has slowed progress. Thus the end of the millennium found China's national leadership sitting uneasily on the lid of a historical Pandora's box containing some very "hungry ghosts."

Notes

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1. The literature on discourse theory, narrativity, the "linguistic turn" and so forth is rich and suggestive. See for example Best and Kellner 1991, 26 et passim; Chatman 1978; Genette 1980; Baker 1990; Pratt 1977; and Ricoeur 1976.

2. See Dittmer 1998.

3. While many *zhiqing* had been Red Guard activists, many others were sent down out of junior high or high school and never played any significant part in Red Guard activities.

4. For an interesting commentary on this effort, see Chan 1992.

5. Jiang Zemin, as quoted in Yu Ching 1991.