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The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered

Beyond Purge and Holocaust

Edited by

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"To Rebel is Justified": Cultural Revolution Influences on Contemporary Chinese Protest*

Elizabeth J. Perry

Stunned by the dramatic Tiananmen Uprising of 1989, China scholars and general comparativists alike have recently focused increased attention on the phenomenon of popular protest in contemporary China. For most analysts, the "democracy movement" of 1989 represented a fundamental break with previous patterns of collective action in Communist China. In contrast to the top-down mobilization that characterized earlier mass movements, Tiananmen (thanks in part to international influences on ordinary Chinese citizens) seemed notable for its populist, progressive flavor. Thus sociologist Andrew Walder describes mass involvement in the Tiananmen uprising as "something new on the political scene: massive, independent, popular protests. The old mode of regimentation and elite-sponsored turbulence has been broken, and Chinese politics appears to have entered a new era."¹ Similarly, political scientist Wang Shaoguang notes that "the protest movement of 1989 marked a turning point of changing class relations... the working class in China is no longer a pillar of continuity but a force for change."² The notion of a qualitative transformation in 1989 has been picked up by general comparativists as well. Sociologist Jack Goldstone writes that

[U]nlike other confrontations that involved mainly intellectuals, such as the Hundred Flowers Movement, or other events that were in some sense orchestrated by the regime, such as the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen marked the first time that intellectuals and popular elements acted independently to challenge the regime.³

Although the Tiananmen Uprising has been celebrated as a significant departure from earlier mass movements in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the breakthrough was seen as basically confined to city dwellers. Rural peasants were usually characterized as quite untouched by the "modern

democratic" values championed by urban intellectuals and workers in the spring of 1989. While Chinese cities were becoming increasingly enmeshed in international contacts of all sorts, the countryside apparently remained wedded to "traditional" beliefs and practices. The gap in political culture between urbanites and ruralites was evidently growing apace. Anthropologist James Watson thus writes of a "bifurcation of [contemporary Chinese] culture into rural and urban forms" with "rural people of all ages... more attuned to presocialist popular culture" whereas "urbanites no longer find traditional sayings, epics, songs and symbols relevant to their lives."⁴

Some have suggested that in the end the conservative drag of the Chinese countryside played a major role in preventing the Tiananmen Uprising from realizing its full political potential; unlike Eastern Europe, where urban "civil society" wielded the upper hand, in China the weight of the peasantry proved decisive. Historians Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom conclude that in 1989,

China's large peasant population remained largely preoccupied with its own immediate material interests, and it viewed these interests as dependent on continued political stability. Consequently, China's peasantry provided a reservoir of support for the hard-liners in Beijing that was missing in any East European regime.⁵

Whether depicted as staunch allies of Deng Xiaoping's agrarian policies or as simply apolitical, China's rural populace was generally seen as alienated from the waves of political protest sweeping the major cities in the post-Mao era.

Plausible as these assertions may have been in the spring of 1989, subsequent developments have cast doubt on many of their underlying assumptions. For one thing, sober reflections on the activities of Tiananmen protesters – including retrospectives by some of the principals themselves – now question the extent to which their behavior constituted a genuine rupture with earlier modes of protest. As Tiananmen activist Liu Xiaobo concedes,

Most of the resources and methods we made use of to mobilize the masses were ones that the Communist Party itself had used many times before... As soon as we began our revolution, we became extremely conceited – just as if we had reverted to the time of the Cultural Revolution and felt ourselves to be the most revolutionary. As soon as we joined the 1989 protest movement, we considered ourselves to be the most democratic. After all, had we not fasted for democracy and devoted ourselves to it and made sacrifices for it?... Our voice became the only truth. We felt as though we possessed absolute power.⁶

Liu's impassioned reflections are a stinging indictment of the Tiananmen protest as an undemocratic movement that unwittingly recreated many of the

worst features of Chinese Communist political culture. What masqueraded as the sprouts of civil society (for example, autonomous student and worker associations) or as novel cultural practices (for example, weddings on the Square) were in reality little more than variations on the repressive theme of Chinese Communist convention. The searing experience of the Cultural Revolution in particular, according to Liu Xiaobo, has continued to inhibit the development of a genuinely democratic perspective among Chinese intellectuals.

If historical hindsight makes urbanites now appear less liberated by "modern" progressive international values, peasants for their part seem less fettered by "traditional" Chinese conservatism. The huge tax protests that gripped rural China in the years immediately following the Tiananmen Uprising belied the image of a contented, compliant peasantry. Suddenly the press was replete with stories of angry farmers waging fierce battles against rapacious state agents.⁷

According to a top-level Chinese government report, the countryside witnessed some 1.7 million cases of protest in 1993, of which 6,230 were "disturbances" (*naoshi*) that resulted in severe damage to persons and or property. Among the so-called "disturbances," 830 involved more than one township and more than 500 participants; 78 involved more than one county and over 1,000 participants; and 21 were long-lasting conflagrations that enlisted more than 5,000 participants. In the course of these confrontations, a total of 8,200 township and county officials were injured or killed, 560 county-level offices were ransacked, and 385 public security personnel lost their lives. The following year showed a further escalation. In just the first four months of 1994, rural areas saw 720,000 protests of which more than 2,300 were serious "disturbances" that caused injury or death to nearly 5,000 township and county government personnel. The report noted with alarm that "in some villages, peasants have spontaneously founded organizations of various types, including religious or armed organizations, to replace the party and government organizations. They have established taxation systems on their own."⁸

How are we to interpret this impressive display of protest? By some accounts, the contemporary unrest bears an uncanny resemblance to pre-Communist patterns of Chinese peasant rebellion. The prominent role of secret society organizations, sectarian religious beliefs and imperial trappings in many of the incidents fuels such an interpretation. The official PRC press, anxious to discredit the incidents as an anachronistic expression of rural "feudal superstition," has highlighted this particular dimension of the recent disturbances. Significantly, however, the reports indicate that urbanites, too, are being affected by such "retrograde" tendencies. The following are typical press releases:

The resurgence of feudal superstition has provided a market to the purveyors of false gods and phony spirits. . . . In a village in northern Jiangsu,

there is a 40-year-old hoodlum surnamed Zhu who never did any work at all. . . . Over two years he put together the "Religion of the Yellow Altar," with 250 adherents in 64 families. . . . Then he went so far as to claim he was a divinity descended unto earth, that he would soon become emperor. . . . One dark night, Zhu conducted an "Ascension to the Throne" ceremony, conferring titles on seventeen people. . . . Especially worthy of note is the fact that in the more culturally developed medium and large cities, feudal superstition is increasingly cloaked in a pseudo-scientific disguise, using words like "modernized" to harm society. The *qigong* craze of recent years is a perfect example.⁹

According to the [Ministry of Public Security] circular, there are more than 1,830 underworld organizations, gangs and associations bearing the character of secret societies. . . . A small secret society may have dozens of members, while a large secret society may have 5,000 to 30,000 members with transregional branch organizations existing throughout the country. . . . In Zhejiang Province, some secret societies are even headed by party secretaries or party committee members in townships and rural enterprises. . . . So, they can organize tax-evasion activities or even refuse to pay taxes. . . . [S]ome set up their local armed forces to handle civil and criminal cases. . . . In cities of Liaoning and Heilongjiang Provinces. . . [secret societies] recruit new members by running *gong fu* classes, arranging jobs, showing free movies, and holding feasts. They also dissimulate heretical religions, regularly hold rallies and raise funds, control the work in some institutions and fight against the government policies.¹⁰

While the Chinese authorities are eager to denigrate contemporary dissent as motivated by backward values that bear no relationship to Deng Xiaoping's modern market reforms, scholarly interpretations have tended to portray the recent unrest as a direct result of government initiatives. Thus David Zweig argues that "dramatic post-Mao changes have altered the nature of peasant resistance."¹¹ Similarly, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li point out that "structural changes in cadre-villager relations related to: a) the dissolution of communes, b) marketization, c) increased mobility, d) administrative and political reforms, and e) improved legal protections, lie at the root of much villager feistiness."¹² According to these authors, the household responsibility system (which replaced collective agriculture in the post-Mao era) has encouraged ruralites to think of their relationship to the state in increasingly contractual terms.¹³ Accompanying this shift in perspective is a greater tendency on the part of the peasantry "to link their legal responsibilities with political and legal claims."¹⁴ In this view it is Deng Xiaoping's new program of liberalization, rather than some recrudescence of "feudal tradition," that explains the remarkable outburst of rural protest in recent years.

Is popular resistance in contemporary China better understood as a revival of "traditional" pre-Communist practices or as a response to "modern" market reforms? While a case can certainly be made for both positions, in this chapter I will argue for the importance of yet a third factor: the legacy of popular protest under Mao Zedong, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Although much of our scholarship has tended to see mass movements in Mao's China as little more than top-down mobilization efforts by a divided elite, I find that they evinced a surprising degree of bottom-up initiative.¹⁵ Mao's famous injunction, "to rebel is justified," encouraged a rich variety of grassroots spontaneity. Seen in this light, neither the Tiananmen Uprising nor the other protests of the Deng era represent as fundamental a break with previous Communist practice as has sometimes been suggested. Both the allegedly "traditional" and the ostensibly "modern" elements of contemporary resistance bear more than a casual relationship to established repertoires of popular contention in the PRC. The meanings of the Cultural Revolution, as Craig Calhoun and Jeffrey Wasserstrom argue in their chapter, are multiple and multifaceted. Yet there is little doubt that one lasting outcome of the Cultural Revolution was to imbue ordinary Chinese citizens with a greater awareness of the possibilities and practices of mass protest than we might normally expect in an authoritarian regime.

Cultural Revolution influences

Detailed information on recent protests is extremely limited, but the available data suggest a number of ways in which Cultural Revolution exemplars still exert a powerful influence on patterns of collective dissent. The motivations, demands, and methods of contemporary Chinese protesters – in city and countryside alike – point to the continuing salience of the Cultural Revolution experience.

Timing

Our first clue to the importance of the Maoist heritage lies in the matter of timing. Although only in the post-Mao period has the revival of folk religion attracted widespread attention, a surprising number of sectarian organizations actually sprang to life again during the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76). Despite (or perhaps because of) the Red Guards' virulent attacks on the so-called "Four Olds" (old customs, habits, culture and thinking), popular religion seems to have enjoyed something of a surreptitious resurgence during that tumultuous period.

Newly available sources establish that the Yiguandao, a millenarian religious association active in both urban and rural areas prior to its suppression in the early years of the PRC, began its comeback at the height of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶ For example, a group of peasants who had joined the Yiguandao back in the late 1930s and early 1940s, undertook "exchanges"

(*chuanlian*) in 1969 (after their release from prison) to restore their sectarian organization. Old members and new recruits were persuaded to join, lured by a prophecy that the Buddha would soon return to earth to usher in a new age in which the Yiguandao would reign supreme. In the ensuing world war (predicted to break out in 1984), only those who accepted the truths of Yiguandao would be spared destruction.¹⁷ In another case, a peasant who had joined the Yiguandao in 1963 began actively to draft new followers upon his teacher's death in 1970. After establishing a "Heavenly Soldiers Fraternal Army" (*tianbing dizijun*) with recruits from 120 villages in two provinces, the leader declared himself a reincarnation of the Jade Emperor. Practicing shamanistic rituals of spirit possession and exorcism, he succeeded in attracting more than 1,000 adherents. The Heavenly Soldiers pledged to fight for a new, divine regime free from social classes, authorities, grades and ranks, etc.¹⁸ Another group of peasants sought out a former leader of the Nine Mansions (like the Yiguandao, a sectarian outfit in the White Lotus millenarian tradition) in 1968 for healing purposes. Convinced of the efficacy of the cures, they pledged allegiance to the faith. When the healer died in 1980, his disciples took over the sect. One declared himself emperor, another prime minister, another party secretary, and yet another assumed responsibility for receiving foreign guests. Predicting the coming of a world war and the imminent appearance of a white dragon, the devotees recruited more than 100 additional followers. Their plans for an imperial assembly (*longhua hui*) to be held in Beijing amidst banners representing all nations on earth were cut short by the intervention of the Public Security Bureau.¹⁹

A similar incident, which received considerable press coverage in the mid-1980s, had also been brewing since the Cultural Revolution. As a Chinese legal journal recorded unsympathetically:

Chief criminals Zhou Zhengxiang and Wang Guiyun, who respectively styled themselves as "emperor" and "god," and who exploited feudal superstitions to carry out counterrevolutionary activities, were executed in Xiangtan, Hunan on 30 January (1985). Zhou Zhengxiang was a peasant from Baituo village, Xiangtan County. Beginning in 1975 he repeatedly spread reactionary utterances and fabricated a story about a fairy island giving spiritual messages. He described himself as "Emperor Zhou" in a vain attempt to ascend the throne in the year of Jiazi. In 1976, Wang Guiyun, a counterrevolutionary and head of the reactionary Yiguandao secret society, styling himself as a "Maitreya [the future Buddha] god," acted in collusion with Zhou Zhengxiang. Together they went to more than 30 villages, distributing over 40 pictures of themselves marked with the so-called five Chinese characters of Yiguandao representing truth.²⁰

Religion

Although we usually think of the Cultural Revolution as having temporarily eradicated religious practice in China, these cases show that for some villagers the period was replete with rather remarkable sectarian activities. Presumably part of the explanation for this phenomenon lies simply in the political chaos of the day. With cadres under attack and party branches in disarray, monitoring citizens' movements was often a good deal more difficult than the official press led us to believe at the time. The result was substantial space for local resistance to central authority. As Vivienne Shue notes, "by the 1970s, at least in the countryside, state power had been... deeply compromised and fettered by the forces of localism."²¹

The tendency for state immobilism to give rise to religiously inspired rebellion is of course a familiar theme in Chinese history. Moreover, the Red Guards' assault on temples, shrines, ancestral tablets and other accoutrements of religious worship may have had the ironic effect of stimulating a powerful nostalgia for the very practices that were subject to attack. But the popular movements that erupted during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath are not simple replicas of age-old patterns of millenarian rebellion. These incidents also exhibit the unmistakable impact of the Maoist environment in which they were incubated.

The quasi-religious dimensions assumed by the cult of Mao over the course of the Cultural Revolution surely helped to blur the distinction between older forms of worship and new Communist practices. As Anita Chan and her co-authors describe the Cultural Revolution routines in one South China village:

Before every meal, in imitation of the army (where the Mao rituals were reaching extraordinary proportions), Chen Village families began performing services to Mao. Led by the family head, they intoned in unison a selection of Mao quotations; sang "The East is Red"; and as they sat to eat they recited a Mao grace.²²

Similarly, in his memoir of the Cultural Revolution, Liang Heng describes how his father – an urban intellectual sent down to the countryside for "reeducation" – conveyed city rituals to his new peasant neighbors. After converting an old ancestor-worship shrine into a place of adulation for Mao Zedong,

He put up fresh posters of Chairman Mao and [Defense Minister] Lin Biao wearing soldiers' uniforms... "Fellow countrymen," he announced to the fascinated crowd, "from now on we are going to be like the people in the city. In the morning we are going to ask for strength, in the evening make reports"... Then he turned to face the Great Helmsman

and the Revolutionary Marshal and bowed, with utmost gravity, three times to the waist. There was a general titter of nervous laughter. Father looked so serious, and the peasants had never seen anyone bow to anything except the images of their own ancestors. But they were eager learners, for they loved Chairman Mao. At last they had an earnest teacher to show them how to express their love.²³

The lasting impact of these religious observances can be seen in the remarkable nostalgia for Mao Zedong that has swept the Chinese countryside of late. In Mao's home province of Hūnán, a monastery dedicated to the deification of the Chairman has attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims in recent years. The devotees, who come from as far away as Guangxi, Jiangxi, Guangdong and Fujian, undertake a three-day fast before the journey to demonstrate their piety. Once at the monastery,

Some pray for the safety and harmony of family members while others ask Mao to cure chronic diseases. The latter group are given a glass of "holy water" after their prayers. Those who feel Mao has listened to their prayers thank him for the kindness received.²⁴

When more than 1,000 armed police stormed the monastery in a drive to expel the throngs of pilgrims lodged at the temple dormitory, peasants from surrounding counties rushed to defend their sacred site. Local government authorities "considered blowing up the temple but later dropped the idea for fear it might trigger civil unrest."²⁵

Syncretism

The intriguing *mélange* of beliefs and practices embodied in recent forms of Mao worship continues the Cultural Revolution tendency of blending contemporary concerns with much older discourses. When a 1 June 1966 *People's Daily* editorial urged the masses of China to participate in the Cultural Revolution, it called on them to "sweep away all ox devils and snake spirits." Rooted in Buddhist demonology, the phrase "ox devils and snake spirits" proved a potent weapon in the battle to discredit academic and political authorities.²⁶ As an ex-Red Guard explained, "We forced the teachers to wear caps and collars which stated things like 'I am a monster [snake spirit]'... Our feelings changed to hatred as soon as we denounced them as 'monsters and ghosts [cow devils and snake spirits].'"²⁷ In the spring of 1967, the public struggle session against top Party officials Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Tao Zhu was punctuated by strident cries of "Down with Liu, Deng and Tao! Down with ox devils and snake spirits!"²⁸ Verbal abuse was accented by material symbolism; victims were made to don five-meter-high dunce caps decorated with paper cutouts of skeletons, monsters, turtles and oxheads.²⁹

Despite the strident attack on "feudal" tradition, the struggles of the Cultural Revolution era actually served to resuscitate and reconfigure many features of pre-Communist political culture. As recent research by German Sinologist Sebastian Heilmann shows, ordinary citizens proved themselves remarkably astute at adapting old repertoires of resistance to contemporary concerns:

An archaic form of protest gained new life in the mid-seventies: widows' public lamentations and complaints (so-called *guafu shijian*). These widows were women who had lost their husbands during the class struggle campaigns of previous years. They gathered on the streets, surrounded and attacked individual cadres and even laid siege to the homes of these officials in order to force a posthumous rehabilitation of their husbands. The number of women who participated in such activities was not large. But what they did was extremely awkward for the cadres they targeted. One high-level cadre admitted in an interview that some officials had even applied to be transferred to other cities because of the widows' unnerving presence.³⁰

The Cultural Revolution afforded opportunities for the redirection of earlier patterns of popular protest. Although we have barely begun to scratch the surface of this complex phenomenon, making sense of it is a prerequisite to understanding the contemporary political scene.

The syncretic religiosity of popular Maoism – in city and countryside alike – probably contributed significantly to its lasting impact on the mentality of ordinary Chinese. Information on the discourse of contemporary protesters is fragmentary, but what we can piece together points to a continuing reverence for certain Maoist values. In the case of the Heavenly Soldiers, discussed above, the commitment to rid China of classes (*jiejì*), authorities (*quanwei*), and factions (*sanliujiu pai*) seems an obvious throwback to Cultural Revolution egalitarianism. In another intriguing resistance movement, the 29-year-old peasant leader claimed to be Mao Zedong's son who had come to lead a rural uprising. The would-be Mao penned treatises on the "thirty great relationships" (Mao Zedong had limited himself to ten) and assumed the titles of party chairman, military commission chair, state chairman, political consultative conference chair, and premier. The imposter also sent letters to various government offices praising the radical ideas of the Gang of Four, attacking Deng Xiaoping's market socialism, and calling for armed rebellion, student boycotts and workers' strikes.³¹

A common feature of today's rebel organizations is the promulgation of a constitution, party program and party regulations – in obvious imitation of the Communist Party exemplar.³² Even in what would appear to be the most "traditional" of peasant uprisings, the slogans have a distinctly "modern" ring to them. Take the case of a rebellion which got underway in the mid-1980s

along the Yunnan-Guizhou border after its leader claimed (in the manner of Hong Xiuquan, commander of the Taiping Rebellion – the enormous millenarian uprising that rocked China in the mid-19th century) that he had dreamed of an old man with a white beard who lent him a sacred sword. The contemporary insurgents slaughtered a chicken and swore a blood oath in the ancient style of Chinese rebels, but alongside the age-old slogan of “Steal from the rich to aid the poor,” they emblazoned their battle banners with new mottoes: “Support the left and oppose the right!” and “Down with birth control!”³³

Class struggle

In particular, the rhetoric of class exploitation that was so pervasive during the Maoist era has bequeathed a tool of criticism for contemporary protesters as well. In 1990–91, three incidents of tax resistance occurred in Jiangsu’s Shuyang county:

Several hundred peasants held meetings and decided to take “united action” against communist cadres when they came for tax collection. Holding hoes, shovels, brooms and other things, the peasants waited for the arrival of these cadres. They also pulled down loudspeakers, took away accounts boxes, and chanted slogans everywhere they went.³⁴

The peasants’ slogans revealed resentment at the gap between their own impoverished living standards and the luxurious privileges enjoyed by cadres: “Eels and turtles, every cadre likes to eat; but each mouthful is the peasants’ flesh and blood.”³⁵

Metaphors of exploitation – often with a Chinese gastronomic flavor³⁶ – are symptomatic of a general tendency to frame political criticism in the terms of Maoist class struggle. In early August 1993, some 2,000 peasants from seven villages in southern Anhui rallied against the government’s use of IOUs (in lieu of payment for agricultural products) with banners that read: “All power to the peasants!” “Down with the new landlords of the 1990s!”³⁷ The “collective action frames” that evidently resonate among today’s militants differ substantially from those of pre-Communist rebels,³⁸ and indicate the continuing appeal of Cultural Revolution-style class analysis among some elements of the populace.

For city dwellers, as well, class rhetoric plays a prominent role in contemporary protest. This was evidenced in a manifesto issued by the Beijing Workers’ Autonomous Association at the height of the Tiananmen Uprising in May 1989:

We have carefully considered the exploitation of the workers. Marx’s *Capital* provided us with a method for understanding the character of our oppression. We deducted from the total value of output the workers’

wages, welfare, medical welfare, the necessary social fund, equipment depreciation and reinvestment expenses. Surprisingly, we discovered that "civil servants" swallow all the remaining value produced by the people's blood and sweat! The total taken by them is really vast! How cruel! How typically Chinese! These bureaucrats use the people's hard earned money to build luxury villas all over the country (guarded by soldiers in so-called military areas), to buy luxury cars, to travel to foreign countries on so-called study tours (with their families, and even baby-sitters)! Their immoral and shameful deeds and crimes are too numerous to mention here.³⁹

Further evidence of the attraction of class analysis to contemporary Chinese workers was seen in Beijing in the summer of 1992 when an informal group calling itself the "Association of Sanitation Workers and Staff" announced a strike by the city's street sweepers and janitors. If this non-state organization implied a nascent civil society, its rhetoric nevertheless harked back to the language of the Cultural Revolution. Big-character posters in the eastern district of Beijing showed that even the humblest of China's workers had absorbed some lessons from decades of Communist education in exploitation and class struggle:

We are the masters of society. The honchos depend on our hard work to stay alive, but all they show us is their butt ugly scowling faces. They take all the credit and the rewards and the biggest pay envelopes, while we workers get paid less. We are the ones sweeping the streets and cleaning up the city. Where do the honchos get off acting like lords?

We say to our fellow workers, comrades-in-arms, brothers and sisters throughout the city: We cannot put up with this any longer. We are people, too. We cannot be mistreated by these honchos. All of the workers and staff at Eastern District Sanitation Team No. 1 are uniting to recover the money that those blood suckers and parasites have taken from us workers. We are taking back whatever has been embezzled from us. We are going to show those honchos that the working class is not to be trifled with, that the working class is the master of society, that it is a class with lofty ideals. We are going to make every social class and every prominent person sit up and take notice of the ones with the lowest social position, the ones everyone looks down upon, the ones everyone regards as smelly; the sanitation workers who sweep the streets!

Officials are so cocky and proud. They go everywhere in cars, and bark out what they want to eat, like chicken, duck, fish, squid rolls, swallow's nest soup.... The gnawed bones they throw out are the compensation that we, the working class, get. In today's socialist society, can we the working class allow them to treat us this way?⁴⁰

Urban-rural links

The shared vocabulary of peasants and workers owes much, it would seem, to the flow of propaganda that linked city and countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Although we sometimes think of Mao's China as distinguished by population immobility, with citizens frozen in place by the rigid household registration (*hukou*) system, the Cultural Revolution actually afforded considerable opportunity for movement in the form of Red Guard excursions, sent-down programs for youth and cadres, exchanges (*chuanlian*) of "revolutionary experiences," etc. Secret society and sectarian leaders used the pretext of "exchanging revolutionary experiences" to travel from village to village in search of new recruits. In the post-Mao order, where geographic mobility has been substantially relaxed, protest leaders still often refer to their mobilization efforts as "carrying out revolutionary exchanges (*jinxing geming chuanlian*)."⁴¹ In presenting themselves as missionaries of revolution, today's rebels lay claim to an honorable Maoist pedigree.

The methods of protest adopted by contemporary malcontents show substantial overlap in city and countryside, with both patterns reflecting the inspiration of earlier precedents. In their insightful study of recent rural resistance movements, O'Brien and Li associate the rising popularity of "lodging collective complaints at higher levels (*jiti shangfang gaozhuang*)" with changes in the "political opportunity structure" brought about by decollectivization, marketization, increased mobility, and political-legal reforms.⁴² While they are undoubtedly correct in highlighting the significance of post-Mao structural transformation in encouraging the phenomenon, it is worth remembering that the filing of collective, written complaints with government authorities has a long history in China. Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom note that during the imperial period, "the one legitimate political activity that provided an opening for political theater was the right to petition officials for the redress of grievances.... Such mass petition movements were surely unusual, but the script was well enough known to be replicated when necessary."⁴³ Thus when student protesters in 1989 submitted a petition demanding an explanation for the ouster of toppled Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, their style of presentation – falling to their knees and kowtowing on the steps of the Great Hall of the People – resonated with longstanding styles of popular remonstrance.

Protesters did not have to consult their history books to retrieve such repertoires, however. Previous instances of popular protest in the PRC had provided ample opportunity for rehearsing the requisite drills. During the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956–57 (when Chairman Mao called on the masses to criticize "bureaucratism"), workers frequently lodged formal written protests (*gaozhuang*) with government authorities when their initial demands to the factory leadership were ignored. The protesters set deadlines by which they expected a satisfactory response and often staged rowdy

meetings to publicize their grievances. These initial steps were classified by union authorities under the rubric of *maoyan* or "giving off smoke." But if the demands did not meet with a timely response, the protest would often evolve into a strike (*bagong*), slowdown (*daigong*), collective petition movement (*jiti qingyuan*), or forcible surrounding of cadres (*baowei ganbu*) – activities that were categorized as *naoshi* or outright "disturbances."⁴⁴

The protests of the mid-1950s evinced a remarkably wide range of activities. Participants put up big-character posters (*dazibao*) and wrote blackboard newspapers explaining their grievances, some went on hunger strike, some threatened suicide, some marched in large-scale demonstrations – holding high their workplace banners as they paraded vociferously, some staged sit-ins and presented petitions to government authorities, some organized action committees, pickets and liaison officers to coordinate strikes in different factories and districts. In many cases, protesters surrounded factory, Party and union cadres, raising demands and imposing a deadline for a satisfactory response – refusing to disband until their requests had been met.⁴⁵

Most of the Hundred Flowers strategies resurfaced a decade later during the Cultural Revolution. Take the case of Wang Hongwen, the leader of Shanghai's worker rebels who later became a member of the notorious "Gang of Four" and Chairman Mao's putative successor. In the spring and fall of 1966, Wang Hongwen put up several big-character posters at his factory attacking the managerial authorities. He and his followers also founded their own rebel group which they dubbed "Warriors Sworn to the Death to Carry through with the Cultural Revolution to the End." But it was the presentation of a formal complaint to higher authorities that won Wang Hongwen national attention. Initially unable to prevail at their own factory, the Warriors decided to venture north to plead their case directly to Party Central. Accordingly, Wang Hongwen led 15 followers off to lodge a written complaint (*gaozhuang*) with the top leadership in Beijing.⁴⁶ Wang's trip to the capital was a bold move that gained him the lasting admiration of other rebels among the Shanghai work force. Prior to his foray, the "exchange of experiences" (*chuanlian*) had been the exclusive prerogative of student Red Guards. Now workers, too, were performing on a national stage.

As O'Brien and Li point out, the post-Mao legalization effort has lent the activities of contemporary protesters a "modern 'proactive' twist (such as citing laws and policies to back up their claims for a greater share of local political power)."⁴⁷ But during the Maoist era, as well, citizens demonstrated a legalistic bent. In 1957, even pedicab drivers, before going on strike, first sought legal counsel to ascertain that their demands would be considered legitimate.⁴⁸

The practice of using the regime's own words as a weapon of resistance is of course a familiar strategy which was raised to an art form during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Heilmann notes that

In most cases, angry workers skillfully made use of official campaign slogans to camouflage their "economistic" interests. Officially approved slogans like "Down With the Capitalist Roaders" were deliberately used as a means of confronting an unresponsive leadership. . . . Under the cloak of rebellion against "revisionist" forces, diverse groups of workers used the opportunity to complain about specific grievances in their respective work units and about economic hardship.⁴⁹

Thus temporary and contract laborers (many of whom were of rural origin) were emboldened by the attack on State Chairman Liu Shaoqi to call for the abolition of the peasant-worker system, a program that had been developed by Liu in the aftermath of the disaster of the Great Leap Forward. In a five-hour meeting with Jiang Qing and other core members of the Cultural Revolution Small Group, worker representatives castigated the exploitation suffered by contract and temporary laborers at the hands of "capitalist roaders."⁵⁰

The contemporary tendency to cite official laws and policies in order to oppose what the peasants consider to be unfair state exactions is a continuation of this trend. The largest rural tax protest in contemporary China, which occurred in Sichuan's Renshou county, offers striking evidence of the phenomenon. In January 1993, peasants in Renshou began a six-month siege of government offices to protest the exorbitant taxes that required them to turn over some 20 to 30 percent of their net income to the state. While this might appear to be a classic case of "reactive" protest against state initiatives of the type often seen during China's Republican era (1911-49),⁵¹ in fact the Renshou peasants did not make their claim on the basis of "moral economy" notions of customary rights. Instead, led by a former soldier well schooled in interpreting bureaucratic rules, the protesters pointed out that the excessive levies stood in violation of a recent central directive which stipulates a 5 percent ceiling on the tax level. Demanding refunds for the extra taxes and fees remitted over the previous several years, the Renshou peasants claimed that "according to the regulations announced by the central authorities, we have already paid taxes and levies up to the year 2000!"⁵²

Again it is not only the countryside which evidences this complex mélange of Communist and pre-Communist influences. Urban protest, especially in the form of labor unrest, has continued apace in the post-Tiananmen era. A confidential report of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions estimated that more than 50,000 Chinese workers engaged in strikes or other protests in the two years following June 1989 "to air grievances over the socialist system's failure to meet their basic needs." No sectors of the industrial economy were spared, but state and collective enterprises were the worst hit and foreign-owned firms were also a prime target, according to the report.⁵³

In the incidents about which we know some details, it is clear that workers often respond to contemporary stimuli – for example, the threatened closure of inefficient state enterprises – with a sophisticated mixture of familiar protest repertoires. Take the example of the Chongqing Knitting Factory, which announced in November 1992 that it was declaring bankruptcy and that its 3,000 workers would have to seek alternative employment on their own. Moreover, retired workers were to be reduced to monthly stipends of only 50 *yuan* – in contrast to their original levels of 150 to 250 *yuan*. To protest these injustices, a petition movement was launched:

The retired workers who led the demonstration procession knelt down before the armed policemen, pleading tearfully that they only wanted to lodge a petition to be able to receive their original pensions. . . . The retired workers said that the pensions represented the work accumulation they had made in the past decades and belong to part of the surplus value they had created. . . . Workers on the job said: We just worked according to orders, and business losses were caused by mistakes in the economic plan for guiding production; the blame should not be placed on the workers.⁵⁴

While the act of kneeling to present one's petition to the government authorities was of course an ancient protest repertoire,⁵⁵ claims based on production of surplus value and mistakes in the economic plan are obvious efforts to frame the critique in state-approved terms.

Conclusion

The argument here is not that nothing in China ever changes (the "China is China is China" position) nor that China has been utterly transformed as a result of recent liberalization policies (the "China is now Western Europe or the USA" position), but rather that Communism made a critical difference. This is not a variant of the "China is the former Eastern Europe or the USSR" position, however. Maoist China, at least with respect to popular protest, stands in a class by itself.

Sidney Tarrow writes of authoritarian states in general,

That authoritarian states discourage popular politics is implicit in their very definition. In particular, they suppress the sustained interaction of collective actors and authorities that is the hallmark of social movements. . . . Repressive states depress collective action of a conventional and confrontational sort, but leave themselves open to unobtrusive mobilization.⁵⁶

Like other socialist societies, the PRC has certainly witnessed the development of what James Scott terms a "hidden transcript" of critical dissent

against the political authorities.⁵⁷ But Maoist China differs markedly from these other countries in having periodically encouraged – indeed compelled – its citizens to express their private criticisms publicly in the form of big-character posters, struggle sessions, denunciation meetings, demonstrations, and the like. The Cultural Revolution was the most dramatic, albeit certainly not the only, instance of this effort.

Although it is common these days to dismiss China's mass campaigns as state-directed mobilization drives that afforded virtually no room for independent popular action, first-hand accounts of these movements reveal the sense of exhilaration that subordinates felt when first giving voice to pent-up grievances against their superiors. Whether struggling against landlords and rich peasants during the Land Reform campaign, denouncing capitalists during the Five Antis, criticizing bureaucrats in the Hundred Flowers Movement, attacking village cadres during the Four Cleans, or assailing everyone from State Chairman Liu Shaoqi down to one's workplace supervisor in the Cultural Revolution, the opportunity to hurl invectives against powerholders was often a heady experience. The Tiananmen Uprising of 1989 was not the first time in PRC history that China saw a "highly charged atmosphere created by the open declaration of the hidden transcript."⁵⁸

State sponsorship of public criticism has had a number of important repercussions. For one thing, ordinary Chinese are simply more familiar with modes of collective protest than we would expect of a population living under such tight political supervision. Ritualized as some aspects of mass criticism became during the Cultural Revolution, these routines nonetheless constituted part of a rich repertoire of protest techniques available to city dwellers and country folk alike. This may well explain why it was China that got the revolutionary ball rolling in 1989. It surely helps explain how the Tiananmen protesters proved so skillful at capturing worldwide attention with their dramatic actions: festive marches complete with colorful banners and stirring music; stinging attacks on political authorities in wall posters, speeches, and televised debates; even somber hunger strikes – all found precedents in earlier popular protests under the PRC.

Yet ultimately the voicing of the hidden transcript proved far more unsettling elsewhere in the Communist world than turned out to be the case for China. Precisely because protest was both routine and officially circumscribed, once the top leadership decided resolutely upon a course of repression most of the populace was quick to fall into step with concerns for stability rapidly overshadowing the euphoria of public criticism. After all, this too was a familiar drill – harking back to the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, the military suppression of Cultural Revolution mass activism in 1969, the clearing of Tiananmen Square in April 1976, and the clampdown on Democracy Wall in 1979. In China, unlike Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union, both leaders and ordinary citizens knew how to put the genie of mass protest back into the bottle of state socialism.

What all this augurs for the future is of course impossible to predict with confidence. Certainly the post-Mao reforms are generating new pretexts for protest as concerns about excessive taxes and factory closures join long-standing resentment toward official privilege and bureaucratic corruption. Regardless of how these evolving tensions play themselves out, however, upcoming popular responses are certain to bear the imprint of past practices – including those of the Maoist era. Although (as Calhoun and Wasserstrom show in their chapter) the Cultural Revolution bequeathed a complex – even contradictory – legacy, its importance in shaping the trajectory of contemporary Chinese popular protest seems beyond dispute.

Notes

- * This paper was originally prepared for the colloquium series of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University, 17 November 1995. My thanks go to members of that colloquium, especially James Scott and Wang Shaoguang, for their helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to Nara Dillon and Robyn Eckhardt for research assistance.
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- 2 Wang Shaoguang, "Deng Xiaoping's Reform and the Chinese Workers' Participation in the Protest Movement of 1989," *Research in Political Economy*, vol. 13 (1992), pp. 163–97.
- 3 Jack A. Goldstone, "Analyzing Revolutions and Rebellions: A Reply to the Critics," *Contention* (1994), no.3, pp.177–98.
- 4 James L. Watson, "The Renegotiation of Chinese Cultural Identity in the Post-Mao Era," in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 77–8.
- 5 Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Acting out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China," in Wasserstrom and Perry (eds), p. 53.
- 6 Liu Xiaobo, "That Holy Word, 'Revolution,'" in Wasserstrom and Perry (eds), *Second Edition* (1994), pp. 315, 318.
- 7 For foreign press reports, see for example *Business Week* (5 July 1993); *Far Eastern Economic Review* (15 July 1993); and *South China Morning Post* (5 April 1994).
- 8 Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 8 August 1994, p. 18.
- 9 *Inside China Mainland* (January 1994), pp. 75–7.
- 10 FBIS, 14 May 1992, pp. 29–30.
- 11 David Zweig, "Struggling over Land in China: Peasant Resistance after Collectivization, 1966–1986," in Forrest D. Colburn (ed.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), p. 152. See also Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Collective Violence: The Fruits of Reform," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Christine Wong (eds), *The Political Economy of Reform in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- 12 Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China," *China Quarterly*, no. 143 (September 1995), pp. 756–83.
- 13 Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Chinese Villagers and Popular Resistance," *Modern China*, 22: 1 (January 1996), pp. 28–61.

- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 15 For a recent analysis of collective action during the Cultural Revolution as state manipulation, see Xiaoxia Gong, *Repressive Movements and the Politics of Victimization: Patronage and Persecution during the Cultural Revolution* (Harvard University PhD dissertation, 1995). For case studies of the role of peasants and workers in various Maoist campaigns, see Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Violence in Socialist China," *China Quarterly* (September 1985); Elizabeth J. Perry, "Shanghai's Strike Wave of 1957," *China Quarterly* (March 1994); and Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1997).
- 16 A valuable source on contemporary protest are the legal casebooks that have recently been published. See especially Li Kaifu (ed.), *Xingshi fanzui anli congshu - fangeming zui (Compilation of criminal cases - counterrevolutionary crimes)* (Beijing: Chinese Procuracy Press, 1992). For background on the Yiguandao, see Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissident Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); and David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- 17 Li Kaifu, 1992, pp. 173-5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 20 *Zhongguo fazhi bao (Chinese legal journal)* (11 February 1985), p. 2. See also FBIS, 28 February 1985, p. K-9.
- 21 Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 147.
- 22 Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 170.
- 23 Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 174.
- 24 *Eastern Express*, 5 October 1995, p. 39.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 On the origins of this metaphor, see H. C. Chuang, *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution - A Terminological Study* (Berkeley: University of California Center for Chinese Studies, 1967), pp. 23-4.
- 27 Gordon A. Bennett and Ronald M. Montaperto, *Red Guard: The Political Biography of Dai Hsiao-ai* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 39.
- 28 William Hinton, *Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 104.
- 29 Gao Yuan, *Born Red* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 75. Here again we can find precursors in earlier protest movements. For analogies with the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, see Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 256; and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 223.
- 30 Sebastian Heilmann, 1995, "Turning Away from the Cultural Revolution: Political Grass-Roots Activism in the Mid-Seventies," unpublished paper (April 1995), p. 21.
- 31 Li Kaifu, 1992, pp. 132-3.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40, 143, 145, 150, 180.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 154-5. Anger about the state's family planning programs has figured in a number of rural uprisings. One group, the Humanitarian Lovers of the Way

- (*renxue haodao*), began its revival (having been outlawed in 1953) in 1972 and three years later had recruited new followers by preaching Confucian values and martial arts techniques. In the 1980s, its leaders predicted the imminent coming of a messiah and railed against the state's birth control policy. *Ibid.*, p. 182. Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 143 (September), pp. 756–83 also identifies opposition to the birth control policy as a central animus in a petition movement they studied in one north China village.
- 34 FBIS, 28 October 1991, p. 55.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 A common pun in the countryside, rendered by a change in tones, transforms the official slogan "Our Party is an experienced and glorious party" into "Our Party is experienced in alcohol and large of stomach (*Women de dang shi jiujiang kaoyan weida de dang*)." See *Nanyang Shangbao* (*South Seas Commercial Journal*), 20 September 1993, for this and other peasant witticisms.
- 37 FBIS, 10 September 1993, p. 40.
- 38 David Snow and Robert Benford define a collective action frame as "an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment." See their "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 133–55. See also Sidney Tarrow's "Mentalities, Political Cultures, and Collective Action Frames: Constructing Meanings through Action," in *ibid.*, pp. 174–202.
- 39 Mok Chiu Yu and J. Frank Harrison (eds.), *Voices from Tiananmen Square* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 109.
- 40 Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS), 14 January 1993, pp. 20–2. The previous year, in the summer of 1992, Beijing sanitation workers had put up an eight-page poster demanding a substantial wage hike, criticizing officials in the sanitation department for corruption, and calling for a general strike. See FBIS, 11 August 1992, pp. 24–5.
- 41 Li Kaifu, 1992, p. 131.
- 42 O'Brien and Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints," *op. cit.* On the role of "political opportunity structure" in facilitating collective action, see especially Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 43 Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994, pp. 48–9. For one example, see Elizabeth J. Perry, "Tax Revolt in Late Qing China," *Late Imperial China*, 6, 1 (1985), pp. 83–112.
- 44 Shanghai Municipal Archives (SMA), #C1-1-189.
- 45 SMA, #C-1-1-189.
- 46 *Shangmian 17chang wenhua dageming shiji* (*Annals of the Cultural Revolution at Shanghai's #17 cotton mill*) (Shanghai: 1975).
- 47 O'Brien and Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints," *op. cit.*, 1995.
- 48 SMA, #C-1-1-189.
- 49 Sebastian Heilmann, "Turning Away from the Cultural Revolution: Political Grass-Roots Activism in the Mid-Seventies", unpublished paper (April 1995), pp. 15, 17.
- 50 Wang Nianyi, *Da Dongluan de niandai* (*Decade of Great Turmoil*) (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press, 1988), pp. 155–6.
- 51 On "reactive" protests, see Charles Tilly, "Rural Collective Action in Modern Europe," in Joseph Spielberg and Scott Whiteford (eds), *Forging Nations: A*

Comparative View of Rural Ferment and Revolt (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1976), pp. 9–40. On Republican period tax unrest, see Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), chapter 5.

52 FBIS, 11 June 1993, p. 13.

53 FBIS, 29 August 1991, pp. 31–2.

54 FBIS, 6 April 1993, p. 67.

55 For the example of a labor movement in the pre-Communist period adopting a similar demeanor, see Perry, 1993, p. 44.

56 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, pp. 92–3.

57 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

58 *Ibid.*, p. 222.