

## Original Paper

# Analysis on Ordinary People's Memory of Chinese Cultural Revolution Based on Micro-History Perspectives

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### **Abstract**

*This project's goal was to interview people who'd lived through the Cultural Revolution and extract firsthand perspectives for a more accurate representation of history that may not exist in history textbooks. Through face-to-face or telephone interviews with witnesses of Cultural Revolution, I reflected on their respective attitudes and mentalities, trying to associate these individualities with possible causes rooted in their experiences. While the narrativization is inevitably coupled with subjectivity, hearsay history presents the basic conflict between individual experienced past and historically reconstructed past. My own stance concerning such disjuncture is more optimistic and moderate. Actual life experience is often messy and opaque, whereas rebuilding history brings order and clarity into the chaos. Thus, a historical researcher like me concerns as much with the fashioning of a past that is has validity in its direct participants' eyes as with uncovering the "truth" in a rigorously objective manner. For the participants in Cultural Revolution, retelling stories taken place in that historical period enables them to restore their past values and cultural recognition: although the eventual outcome is universally known, individual explanations for how it develops to the end vary. This is why I mainly developed this essay through two subjects: the ordinary people who have gone through this time period and the abusers (Red Guards) who demonstrated brutish nature in the revolution. It turns out that approaching a same story from different perspectives render us with multiple interpretations and each historical actor takes part in the revolution with diverse motivations. This is why some people chose to become Red Guards and some other struggled to maintain sanity in the chaotic age. In the meanwhile, I would discuss about deductive findings in this essay: selective memory, revelation of human nature, personal cult mixed up with national allegiance, historical-context-blindness of historical actors, and class struggle. Overall, the report aims to demonstrate how the complexity of human nature spawned in political turbulence interferes with*

*historical progress in a significant way. As the author, I'd recommend the readers to form their independent judgments on Cultural Revolution rather than to absorb information indistinguishably. Certain radical information is included only for the sake of authenticity.*

### **Keywords**

*Chinese Cultural Revolution, micro-history, memory*

## **1. Introduction**

“In 1966, China’s Communist leader Mao Zedong launched what became known as the Cultural Revolution in order to reassert his authority over the Chinese government. Believing that current Communist leaders were taking the party, and China itself, in the wrong direction, Mao called on the nation’s youth to purge the “impure” elements of Chinese society and revive the revolutionary spirit that had led to victory in the civil war 20 decades earlier”. This is the typical description of Cultural Revolution which I would read on my history textbook. However, the brief, generalized definition failed to resolve many mysteries surrounding this time period. Seeking for more specific narratives, I arranged interviews with witnesses of Chinese Cultural Revolution. The material for this report was gathered from their individual narrations and various websites which will be referred to later. It is written especially for readers who are interested in East Asian or Chinese history and would like to gain detailed descriptions alongside novel perspectives upon the revolutionary ten years.

## **2. Scope of Report**

The report will mainly cover factual descriptions of Cultural Revolution and psychological interpretations of historical actors. The two factors intertwine with each other as the recount on historical scenes is influenced by narrators’ mental state and mass psychology plays an important role in the progression of revolution. My analysis on the internal causes of particular phenomenon during revolution include selective memory, revelation of human nature, and historical-context-blindness of historical actors. Such analysis is manifested by authentic circumstances typical of the revolution such as personal cult mingled with patriotism, atrocious class struggle, pervasive propaganda, and reform in education.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### *3.1 Primary Sources of Information*

Two telephone interviews (each lasted for about an hour) with Mrs. Cheng, who was once a teacher in the revolution.

Two telephone interviews (each lasted for about two hours) with Mr. Chen, who was an expert in hearsay history about Chinese Cultural Revolution.

One Wechat text interview (lasted for an hour) with Dong Zhong, who wrote a documentary novel on

the topic of Chinese Cultural Revolution.

One telephone interview (lasted for an hour) with Liang, who was a member of the Red Guard in Chinese Cultural Revolution.

One face-to-face interview (lasted for 45 minutes) with my uncle who grew up in Cultural Revolution.

One face-to-face interview (lasted for 30 minutes) with my grandfather who was once an intern factory worker in the revolution.

Field Investigation in the Red Guard Graveyard, Chongqing.

#### **4. Detailed Findings**

##### *4.1 The Aftershock of Cultural Revolution*

“I am more willing to look forward rather than sticking to the tragic past.” This is the brief remark on the Chinese Cultural Revolution by Mrs. Cheng, who lived through and witnessed this historical event. When I gathered her narratives, I found that most parts of her memories were filled with gratitude and warmth. It turns out that an individual living through historical turmoil often infuses strong personal perspectives into mainstream historical narratives. Personal narratives of the history are associated with their personal stories. The specific language individuals adopt to retell these stories is complicated. When people are telling about painful experience, they are actually uncovering their wounds. Therefore, most of the narrators would choose to convey more positive messages about their past to avoid showing their pain to others.

Distortion of historical narratives is highly individualized. People make retrospect on the past based on their own perspectives and memories, and during the process, they tend to use specific language to deal with the way in which their stories are told—they are more likely to remember historical events as perceived in a way that best suits their interests or feelings at that time. When individual actors are selecting the content of narration, it is natural for them to re-think about their past and convey their subjective messages. Thus, the process of retelling history is also a process of restoring past values and cultural recognitions.

During my first interview with Cheng, I was deeply moved by her optimistic attitudes. She repeatedly said that she was relatively “lucky” in the Revolution. Although she was classified into the five categories of disgraced people during the Cultural Revolution, she was accompanied by five other girls who were also in this politically stigmatized category. They became very good friends and often stayed together as a group in case other people would bully them. The time she spent in the Performing Arts Propaganda team was unforgettable as she made a lot of new acquaintances and they supported each other to go through those difficult years in countryside. In addition, she was among the first group of students who passed the resumed college entrance exam in 1978 and got into her dream university.

In contrast, during my second interview with Cheng, more unexpected details were revealed. When her friend’s father was unjustly wronged and persecuted because of his identity as principal of a high

school, all the other five girls went to hospital to visit them and brought whatever food they could get. Cheng subconsciously filtered further details on how the principal was persecuted and how difficult it was for these girls to gather food. Due to their special class, all the assets of their families were confiscated. I noticed that Cheng seemed reluctant to tell more about the dark side of the story, and yet she would rather to regard this experience as a proof of their valuable friendship.

Before Cheng was assigned to the propaganda team, she actually worked in the fields of Shanxi for two years. To my surprise, she never mentioned this part of experience in her previous narration and no more details about those two years could be dug out though I asked some relevant questions. Cheng was more willing to recollect the stories happened in the propaganda team. According to Adrian Newman, B. A. in his article “Selective Memory: Replace Bad Experiences with Positive Ones Long-Term”, people can suppress certain memories by focusing on other memories that are either more preferable or are recalled more frequently. Repeated recollection of certain segment of memory can result in adaptive forgetting. This also explains why Cheng had more obscure memories about painful experiences and subconsciously chose to neglect on those details. Selective memory is actually a way for people to reconstruct past self-recognition and defend their most cherished values which might be destructed in history.

However, the intentional selection of certain positive details doesn't necessarily expunge the negative sides of story. Indeed, it is this selection that gives the whole story an overwhelmingly power of pain. After all, the grief can never be consoled by time as long as it is covered by the appearance of joy. While the narrators are recalling their past memories, it is inevitable for them to touch some parts that they still don't have the courage to face. But the existence of such reminders will invoke their authentic recognitions on the past. A metaphor that can be used here is a person who is wakened from a deep sleep. Though people are consistently paying more attention to the gains, they are also reminded of the price of those gains each time they mention it. When these two extremes of attitudes become more and more closely connected, the deep ends of story can no longer be camouflaged.

The aftershock of Cultural Revolution is not limited to the negative impact on victims' mentality. More significant conflicts focus on the attitude we should take towards Cultural Revolution, where discrepancy of national decision and individual voice appears.

When I was investigating the graveyard of Red Guards in Chongqing, a middle-aged woman was also visiting one of the graves with her child. I asked her a question, “What do you think is the value of his death?” The woman was silent for a moment. She then answered, “It seems to have no value because Cultural Revolution has already been negated. But I personally think there is value to his death since the revolution is something he has been fighting for.”

This woman's answer was quite simple and straightforward; however, it left plenty of room for interpretation. The negation of Cultural Revolution is actually a political decision; it is not based on the analysis of history and society. It remains a problem to know for sure how persuasive the negation is.

People make the judgment only because Cultural Revolution has brought massive losses of human lives, destruction on social productivity, and trampling on legal order. When they look at the revolution with more scrutiny, they find it hard to describe at which moment the revolution went wrong and led to such serious consequences.

This ordinary woman's feeling towards Cultural Revolution is tied up with her past life experience. She and her husband used to be members of a same organization and took part in many group activities under the instruction of the leader of the organization. Neither one of them gained much benefits from these activities. They attended this kind of mass movement out of sheer dedication to the revolution with little self-interest. These impassioned experience related to Cultural Revolution could not be negated arbitrarily by external force. Although the woman admitted that this revolution was disastrous, she reserved a dose of skepticism and was not willing to say it was totally wrong. In this light, there is a basic conflict between her personal experience and the general politicized conclusion.

Such disparity widely existed between politicized narratives and personal judgment of history. The problem is whether the former necessarily overrides the latter. Because I appeared to be interested in this topic, the woman told me another story about the graveyard. When relatives of the Red Guards renovated the damaged graves (many graves were dilapidated due to lack of protection), they expunged words like "martyrs" or "sacrifice" on the epitaphs. This mourning over the loss of kin was more of a family grief rather than national remembrance. This behavior gave rise to some controversy from people who thought the relatives should not personalize the tragedy of a nation. From my perspective, national martyrs are definitely of more value than departed individuals in family, but that doesn't mean individual right should be ignored. The autonomy to weave historical narratives not only belongs to the nation from top, but also belongs to every individual from bottom. When we talk about a general historical change, we should not forget the mass public that makes up a large part of this change.

The Red Guard's graveyard not only serves for people to commemorate the Revolution, but also to contemplate on the past. They gather at the graveyard, hold a memorial ceremony for the departed, and recount their stories to others. In other words, the graveyard is the best place for survivors to be open with emotions and to soothe their trauma through talking to people with same experience. During the process of recalling their own stories, survivors help each other to complement and confirm the memory. Time cannot heal such poignant combination of vivid youth and tragic history, but the relics need a way to express their grief. This solution must be personal, without any adulteration of national allegiance, because they also suffer from the pain for all these years only by themselves.

The close relationship between ordinary people's lives and social change also determines the nation's particular treatment of history. As for the early stage of Cultural Revolution in which many social movements are bound up with people's lives, relevant historical documents are rarely available to the public. This specific time period becomes tattoo in Chinese history. This tension in attitude forms a sharp contrast with the deafening debate on events happened during later stage of Cultural Revolution.

Those protests against certain political leaders and Chinese philosophy were farther away from normal citizen's lives, so retrospect on this history would not disturb the current society. Apart from maintaining social order, the proscription of investigation on this page of history is indeed a compromise with the survivors who still reject to have their scars revealed. This zone of buffer is necessary to offer reconciliation to public opinions.

#### *4.2 Atrocity in Cultural Revolution*

In the Cultural Revolution, some of the most brutal executions and tortures were actually conducted by some 15-year-old. When Mrs. Cheng recalled all these details of Cultural Revolution, the pathos of man's cannibalism was so strong that I could hardly believe it did happen in human history. The transformation of a decent citizen into a bloodthirsty beast became a commonplace during the Revolution. When humans are given the opportunity to do whatever they want without restrictions of law, like in the case of Cultural Revolution, the darker side of humanity will eventually outweigh the power of moral principles. Once people realize that exposure of their malice receives no punishment, the whole society will fall into chaos because everyone is able to release the destructive forces in humanity.

Without the rule of order and moral restrictions, the society fell into class struggle. Such historical context produced a new social group: the Red Guards. The Red Guards were free to spread violence as long as they asserted they were fighting against the class enemies of this nation. Such extreme freedom not only plunged the land into deeper darkness, but also gave rise to the darkness in man's inner world. An analogy would be the holocaust of Jewish people in WWII. Among the six million Jewish people, only a small part of them were humiliated because the Germans were not willing to get in touch with them. In contrast, the Red Guards were not satisfied at only killing their enemies. The Red Guards came from all levels of society and came onto the historical stage under the acquiescence of those higher up in the food chain. At first they were still constrained by traditional moral power in Chinese culture, but with the expansion of silence on all sides of society, the Red Guards became more radical than ever before. My uncle, who grew up during the Revolution, described the Red Guards as "a bunch of frenzied beasts". They set classical books and paintings on fire, smeared places of historical interest, and persecuted people in all sectors of society—from the national marshal to their close family. The violence extended to mental devastation and the victims must suffer death by a thousand cuts.

People were forced to draw demarcation lines with their family or friends in Cultural Revolution in order to show commitment to "revolutionary" actions. According to my uncle, the mutual denunciation between family members was so intense at that time that each member would expose a crime of others to police officer several times a day. "The discontent of life, the jealousy towards others, and the repressed avarice, were all fermented at this time. The ugliness of human nature was multiplied by the magnification of a magnifying glass," my uncle recalled. In his school, there was an idle student who wrote a sentence on the windowsill: "Sailing on the sea depends on the helmsman, proceeding with

revolution depends on...” Someone called him to go outside and he didn’t finish the sentence. Then one of his classmates who disliked him completed the sentence by adding “counterrevolutionaries” in the end. Another student saw this sentence and began shouting, “Here is the remark from a pro-capitalist rightist!” The student who wrote the original sentence was then dragged out and publicly denounced in front of the whole school. It is obvious that in contrary to a civilized, rational society where solidarity and respect among people are promoted, the savage society in 1960s encouraged people to conceive a profound hatred towards each other. The invisible social pressure was omnipresent and dominated all levels of society.

All violent behaviors in Cultural Revolution were eventually limited in their protracted and ruthless nature, but crazy slogans like “Only a man who is able to disdain his parents is a good revolutionary” could spread infinitely and brought barbarous beliefs to every corner of this country. Such beliefs vested among the Red Guards instigated them to seek pleasure through brutal killing and maltreat. When people were giving speech on the “struggle session”, they often dumped extremely humiliating labels on their enemies with “righteous indignation” and they paid no consideration to feelings of the victims in a manner of histrionics. Abusers regarded physical torture as a way to highlight their strength and victory. In Cultural Revolution, the standard of measuring good and evil was totally reversed and legitimized countless maltreatment driven by the destructive force of human nature.

Excessive indulgence of brutal lynching produced raging class struggle. According to Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, “human beings have bestiality internally, yet humanity externally and beyond.” Kindhearted people were forced to stay silent seeking self-insurance, and in this situation crimes were no longer crimes. Within such crazy atmosphere, any good element in human nature rapidly shrank due to omnipresent environmental restraint. In the contrary, savage elements like group unconsciousness would burst out in response to the crazy resonance. When the “unlimited personal cult” and “fight till death” became the zeitgeist, coupled with the unprecedented popularization of mass movements, violent rivalry between factions and classes were inevitable. The blindness and frenzy of class struggle were unstoppable despite the so-called “majority solidarity” advocated by public officials. It was easier to release a beast than to keep it in a cage.

Apart from destructive forces at work in human nature, frequent occurrence of atrocity can also be attributed to party fanaticism. When I asked Mrs. Cheng to describe the personal cult of Chairman Mao in the Cultural Revolution, she said, “We worshiped him as God.” This analogy directly pointed out the significant similarities between religious beliefs and hero-worship. Also, the illusions about a political leader can be far more intensive than normal religions because all institutional and political resources are directed by a single cult figure. I once watched a video on YouTube recording the scene when the Red Guard first saw Chair Mao on the Tian’anmen Square (Shearer, Susan, & Flynn, 2017). Millions of people were gathering on the square, shouting “Long Live Chair Mao” as loudly as they could with tears brimming in their eyes. For many people, it was an encounter they would never forget in their

whole lives. The feverish and passionate crowds reminded me of a particular performance for a religious ritual. Being immersed in the unprecedentedly widespread veneration of Chair Mao, Chinese people at that time acted in the way exactly like the Catholics who dominated the Middle Age Europe. Mao's cult of personality well explained why many atrocious actions happened in the revolution. Most Red Guards did not have much political knowledge. Uneducated and narrow-minded, this group of people committed ruthless torture to prove their allegiance to the nation. Because the Politburo never offered them proper and detailed guidance on how to proceed with the revolution, they thought of Chair Mao's words as the supreme guidelines. Mao once said, "Revolutions need violence. Don't be gentle and polite to your enemies," which encouraged thousands of Red Guards to fanatically loot schools, residences, and libraries, causing irreversible ravages. The most sarcastic thing was that when they were committing all manners of crimes, they alleged they were defending justice. Many young Red Guards died in those violent riots under the name of "sacrifice for the noble undertaking of revolution". I've interviewed a writer who spent many years investigating and recording the tombstones of Red Guards who died in factional fight in Chongqing. He told me that the epitaphs praised their contributions to the revolution and it was not hard to deduce that the youngsters took pride in their sacrifice.

Surprisingly, many Red Guards were students, including even primary school students. They voluntarily took charge of the rummage, interrogation, and punishment, making the mechanism subjective but extremely effective. It might be hard to believe that innocent children would involve in the ferocious political struggle, but they were indeed the most loyal followers of Chair Mao. As Cheng said, "in such chaotic anarchy, many students supposed that abusive atrocity is an expression of their loyalty to the state, and that explains why they would become a member of the Red Guard with utmost passion." Growing up in an environment filled with slogans emphasizing Mao was everything in China; these children were easily swayed by the fanatical trend. What's more, teenagers still immature in mental development were susceptible to brainwashing. Because teenagers were forced to drop out of school during the revolution, they recited the quotations of Mao as their sole source of knowledge. At that time, almost everyone got a "Little Red Book" in hand and could recite each quotation of Chair Mao in it. The book helped indoctrinate the population and once again strengthened Mao's image. According to Cheng, it was a mandatory requirement for everyone to carry this book all the time. The Red Guards would routinely investigate whether you brought it or not. They also punished those who could not recite Mao's words in the book.

The omnipresent propaganda in Cultural Revolution meant to associate Mao's cult of personality with Chinese patriotism. During this period, the Chairman was depicted as an ideological visionary, a political genius, a guardian of his people and a kindly and benevolent leader. Mao's achievements were exaggerated and glorified, while his shortcomings were suppressed or concealed. The failings and brutalities of Mao-era China were concealed or explained away and blamed on others. Meanwhile, as



this personality cult intensified, Mao's power over the Party and China increased. Public perceptions at that time acquiesced in the notion that only Mao could lead China to embrace a prosperous and powerful future. The leader then became almost unchallengeable and impervious to criticism.

The political leader also directly expressed his support for revolutions in person, which led to even higher enthusiasm among the revolutionary teenagers. "Mao's god-like image was also reinforced by his public appearances, which were not often and were usually in the form of speeches to millions of young 'revolutionaries'." Such public speeches greatly enhanced the morale of Red Guards, who felt that Chairman Mao had already recognized their work. The encouragement from Mao was the strongest propelling force behind the increasingly fierce "class struggle" and worsening social crisis.

Mao's self-image was also elevated to an inviolable degree. "Images of Mao's face appeared everywhere, from portraits in schools and government buildings to street signs and wall murals. It was not unusual for private homes to have a picture of Mao displayed in a prominent place, or even a small Mao shrine." As with the 'Little Red Book', not having an image of the Chairman in one's home was considered a sign of disloyalty and potential dissidence.

#### *4.3 Closer Look at the "Abusers"*

A story in the anthology written by Zhong, one of my interviewees, caught my attention: it was about a "virtuous" Red Guard. She used to be a student of good character and fine scholarship in her school, and had a good relationship with her math teacher who appreciated her talents. In 1966, the revolution broke out and she attended the organization of Red Guards. However, her math teacher was labeled as "Rightist" soon after she became a Red Guard. When the other Red Guards were going to criticize and prosecute those "Rightists", she would purposely assign her math teacher to some remote departments so as to escape the "struggle session". Because of her secret help, although the teacher was imprisoned in a cowshed (or the "ideological reforming class") for three months, he was never beaten by Red Guards during the "struggle session". Since the late years of the Cultural Revolution, the situation in China became calmer and this math teacher finally got rid of the "right-wing" label. To express his thanks to the young Red Guard, he introduced a demobilized soldier who was also once his student to be her husband. Because the Red Guard failed to find a husband in the countryside, her math teacher even introduced a demobilized soldier to her in return for her help during the revolution.

This story seemed counterintuitive because the female Red Guard was no longer a malicious-looking fanatic. Despite her enthusiasm in overthrowing the "capitalist-roaders", she kept rationality that enabled her to protect her teacher. This example proved that Red Guards should not be stereotyped; instead, they were independent individuals who harbored distinctive emotions and aspirations. In most cases, the Red Guards were considered the initiators of tragedies and spread darkness to every household. But when one exception appeared, I began to wonder whether there were reasonable explanations for the choice of majority to release the evil of human nature.

Liang was once a member of the Red Guard organization in her school. I asked her what drove her to

be fearless in the face of knives when fights between factions flared up. She answered, “Standing in front of us were our enemies, not humans.” Red Guards commonly held this idea at that time and it showed the class nature of Cultural Revolution. Killing class enemies was very reasonable and even noble because it defended Mao Zedong Thought. Teenage students were immersed in such ideology as early as they were still in school under the slogan of “fight till death to eliminate class enemies”. Behaviors resulted from this kind of mindset distinguished the generation growing up in the Cultural Revolution from other generations that came before it or since. They held uniform loyalty and enthusiasm towards revolution; even though they might take pity on the victims sometimes, such tender emotions were soon overwhelmed by the strong fanaticism.

Today, many previous Red Guards admitted the mistakes they made in Cultural Revolution and rethought profoundly on the terrible past. Wang, a 62-year-old who used to be the leader of a Red Guard organization, chose to stand out and confess his sin: he bludgeoned a 19-year-old boy to death during a factional fight. After 43 years, he finally had the courage to face his dark past. Teenagers like him who actively participated in the violent demonstrations might be driven by the same sense of heroism, which often took place in the romantic minds of teenagers. They believed the national consciousness was necessary for a hero to show his great virtues, and they attempted to save their country by doing something ridiculous. Wang said, many Red Guards didn’t want to recall their past because the tragedy was actually caused by collective guilt, and no specific person should shoulder all responsibilities. However, the sin of individuals could not be concealed, and he felt compelled to admit that he killed a person during the Cultural Revolution.

#### *4.4 Ordinary People and Education in Cultural Revolution*

In the book *Gui Yuanshi*, Zhong Dong describes that most of students like him had already been immersed in propaganda for a long time before the Cultural Revolution actually began. Newscasters blared over the loudspeakers in school all the time, reciting the quotations of Chairman Mao and theories of Marxism-Leninism; China National Radio broadcasted revolution-related news every day; all the newspapers, from Party’s mouth piece *People’s Daily* to local newspapers, were reporting the upcoming Cultural Revolution. Besides official documents and mass media, students were often told to take part in meetings where they criticize their teachers. Zhong noted that criticism always overtly politicized the content of the courses. For example, mathematics teachers were not allowed to impart excessive knowledge on achievements of foreign mathematicians, which might be understood as provoking heretical ideology among students.

Constant exposure to propaganda and routine meetings made students over-obsessed with revolutions and ready for mass movements at any time. However, even these “brainwashed” students didn’t have a clue of what revolution meant, needless to say how to start a revolution. Then what kind of mentality drove the public to attend the “struggle sessions” and join the Red Guards if they didn’t even know the purposes of these events? Cheng said she went there only out of peer pressure, coupled with some

curiosity. In fact, most people who watched the “struggle session” of prosecuted political leaders or their own teachers were actually ignorant bystanders. They didn’t have too much hatred towards these “public enemies”, but neither could they express their sympathy for them—they were passive on-lookers of violent struggle sessions. They felt pressured to attend the struggle sessions because otherwise they would be seen as “counterrevolutionary”.

At first all the ordinary people were confused about the purpose of such sessions. However, as the prosecution became more widespread and “struggle sessions” took place almost every day, they lost both motivation and courage to ask why. The only thing they could do when witnessing the frequent misfortune was following the stream of people and acting like real spectators. Soon their fake indifference turned into true indifference when watching the exhibition of absolute torture, as long as the objects were not themselves. They had no choice but to follow suit and watched the “show” as real spectators. Their original anxiety and fear gradually faded and been replaced by indifference. They only hoped that they would not become the ones being tortured.

For the mass public, they were not aware of the severity of the upcoming revolution. They even acted as its supporters because of the demagogic propagation and group conformity, which caused them to be “blind” in the face of flagrant atrocities like “struggle sessions”. This mentality could be called “blindness of the historical context”.

Another indication suggesting people’s total blindness of the historical context would be their active participation in the “great networking”. Because the Politburo offered free transportation for Red Guards to travel to all cities of China so as to spread the revolution, many young people used this opportunity to visit many places of interest in China. My grandfather was one of them, and he managed to take the train and went to Beijing. It was his first and only time to visit Beijing; now he still remembers the Tiananmen Square and the magnificent Forbidden City. In the Revolution, with regard to political life, the masses were passively following the instructions from above. However, when I focused my interview on the daily life of common citizens, they often gave me a more detailed answer on questions such as what their lives were like in Cultural Revolution rather than to what degree Cultural Revolution influenced the society they lived in. Only when the historical event became tightly associated with daily life did these citizens begin to realize the existent nature of the revolution.

Historical actors’ lack of experiential awareness of the historical context may be explained by the over-comprehensive and over-sweeping nature of the Cultural Revolution. The Revolution had affected political ideology, economy, politics, education, and so on. Because the revolution was so extensive and profound, even the seniors in Politburo were not able to give a clear definition of this revolution (which also explains why the revolution eventually became uncontrollable). On the other hand, the social movements in China during the 1950s and 1960s were so frequent that they linked with one another. The Five-Year Plan, The Great Leap Forward, The People’s Commune.... Chinese people gradually got used to constant political turmoil and policy changes.

Zhong recalled, “it was suddenly announced that the Cultural Revolution had commenced, and most of us did not know that a unique historical stage had arrived. Since 1949, various kinds of political movements pushed us to do this or that. Now, suddenly, I tell you that the “Cultural Revolution” just kicked off. You will think this is simply another new movement, won’t you?

However, the sharp contrast between ordinary beginning and extraordinary tragedy exceeded everyone’s expectation. Though no one was able to predict how long exactly this revolution was going to last, a majority of people regarded it as no more than a new movement. They couldn’t imagine that this movement eventually overthrew the whole social structure of China and had far-reaching impact on Chinese political system.

A social change that is tied up with ordinary people’s lives would be the vagary of educational reform. In 1967, the Politburo announced that students should stop attending the Red Guard networking and go back to schools. Cheng was one of the elementary school students who returned to school at that time and thus got access to the revolutionized content of education. He recalled that all quotations of Chairman Mao were added to all the science textbooks; the music class was mainly learning how to sing some revolutionary songs and Chinese literature class focused on teaching famous works on ancient revolutions; he also remembered that they repeated the sentence “Long Live Chairman Mao” during English classes. When recounting these stories, Cheng said with a smile, “the impression those classes left on me was ridiculous. They put some revolutionary semblances to the courses, but in a mechanical and blind manner.”

Under this background, the reasons for the torturous development of educational revolution in China could be shortened to two key words: “break” and “practice”. The guideline Politburo provided for educational revolution mainly focused on “criticize the old educational style and encourage new teaching reform plans”, which led to the dazzling display of varieties of educational reform schemes. Due to the need of revolution, all educational systems belonging to the past era, whether foreign or native, were included in the black list. The Chinese government aimed to conceive a brand new educational ideology that was purely proletarian and applied equally to everyone. There was a famous slogan to express this idea, “Only by breaking the old things can new things be established.” Inspired by this general direction, teenagers who were still obsessed with “the spirit of rebellion” carried out a series of educational reform in their schools. They invited workers, peasants, and soldiers to be their teachers, promoted interactive discussions in class, encouraged everyone to go to countryside to exercise manual labor.... Although such experiments on education were in full swing all over China, their superficial and unrealistic nature was obvious. No one believed these forms of education could last long.

Mao also emphasized the practicality of knowledge taught in classes. By stripping the theoretical, “gaudy” content, science classes could concentrate on the utility of scientific principles. Cheng recalled that biology class was renamed as “fundamental agriculture” and physics class was called

“fundamental industrial agriculture”. In fact, these so-called fundamental classes didn’t introduce the basic knowledge structure of the subjects, neither did they mention the process of hypothesize and deduction. The only thing mattered was practice. Students had lots of opportunities to engage in real agricultural or industrial activities. In this way, schools had turned into short-term training programs for the students to adapt to the working environment as soon as possible.

Under the instruction of such guideline, the relationship between teachers and students was being turned upside down. As the primary target of the sweep of “capitalist” class ranks, an overcautious pessimistic attitude widely existed amid the team of teachers. Provoked by the left-wing extremism, students no longer treated their mentors with respect; instead, they were constantly picking some mistakes in the lecture that enabled them to criticize the teacher. One of my interviewees, Cheng, was once an English teacher in a junior high school during Cultural Revolution. She told me teachers often suffered from humiliation from students in her school. Many students would throw chalks or erasers to the teachers when they turned their back at students to write something on the blackboard. One of Cheng’s colleagues was badly hurt in head because a student threw a schoolbag at him. Thus, most of the teachers just skimmed their teaching content and left the classroom in a hurry as soon as the bell rang. It was a tragedy because when teachers were so despair and helpless, dogmas like “knowledge is power” would seem very feeble.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

Based on the detailed findings above, the holistic feature of Cultural Revolution can be approached from individuals’ memories about their past experience. While the narrativization is inevitably coupled with subjectivity, hearsay history presents the basic conflict between individual experienced past and historically reconstructed past. My own stance concerning such disjuncture is more optimistic and moderate. Actual life experience is often messy and opaque, whereas rebuilding history brings order and clarity into the chaos. Thus, a historical researcher like me concerns as much with the fashioning of a past that is has validity in its direct participants’ eyes as with uncovering the “truth” in a rigorously objective manner. For the participants in Cultural Revolution, retelling stories taken place in that historical period enables them to restore their past values and cultural recognition: although the eventual outcome is universally known, individual explanations for how it develops to the end vary. To further investigate the underlying reasons for various human behaviors and social changes during the revolution, the author incorporates personal interpretations as well as reasonable deductions into the report to demonstrate that retrospective assignment of historical meaning entails a revival of the past in its pristine wholeness and a complex set of negotiations between past and present. It is hoped that this documentary report derived from hearsay history will benefit readers in at least two ways. First, to provide comprehensible explanations for certain inconceivable phenomena in Cultural Revolution. Secondly, to help readers look at the historical issue from a perspective of specific individuality.

As the author, I would like to recommend the readers to retain their independent judgments on this topic of Cultural Revolution and understand that certain radical information included in this report is for reference only.

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