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#### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Healy, Lillian, "The Kids Aren't Alright: China's cultural revolution and how the Red Guard impacted family" (2020). *History Undergraduate Publications and Presentations*. 32.

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The Kids Aren't Alright: China's cultural revolution and how the Red Guard impacted family

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in History  
University of Portland  
December 2020

When talking about the younger generation, many people think about their potential to change the world. As evident by modern social and political issues, young people are more likely to advocate for change. From social media platforms to protests, youth have become increasingly involved due to the information age that we live in. The narrative that kids receive is important, as how children are raised will impact what kind of person they will be. Whether its college students advocating for equal rights or younger students protesting for gun safety regulations, the world view children are exposed to will impact how they think and what they believe in. Due to the internet, kids are exposed to several different opinions and mindsets which is a new social development from the last 20 years. This leads to increased awareness of societal issues as well as perspectives which overall aids in informing young people today. However, given that the internet is a relatively new development, information wasn't always readily available. Often, what people understood was limited to their communities or their country and this often was taken advantage of. When a government attempts to control information or regulate what people can access, as seen in modern day China, it creates a population that is ignorant to other worldviews and limits that population's understanding of other ideology. When people in China can't access popular social media platforms like Snapchat or Facebook, it really emphasizes the fact that this intentional narrative and perspective controlling isn't a new development, and actually, historically, Chinese figures have always attempted to control what its people, and what its youth, can access.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a devastating time in Chinese history. Starting in 1966, the Cultural Revolution was Mao Zedong's attempt at maintaining his power as the head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Khrushchev fell in the Soviet Union in 1964, Mao became fearful that his colleagues in the CCP could turn against him and began to foster a

personality cult where, “loyalty to his *person* rather than his *policies*,” became a major aspect in the political moves Mao made from that point onward.<sup>1</sup> With the failure of the Great Leap Forward which had led to famine throughout China, the Chinese people were growing increasingly upset with the government, and Mao saw this as an opportunity to get rid of political opponents while fostering in a ‘modern China’. Through targeted propaganda and media, led by Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, students were mobilized in the name of a great revolution where Mao’s socialist ideology was put above China’s ‘old way’ of family and traditional Confucianist values as a way to usher in modernity. This ultimately led to violence and the destruction of foundational cultural structures that negatively impacted families throughout China. Students were encouraged to report or denounce anti-revolutionaries or those labeled as bourgeois in an attempt to target people who may have opposed Mao’s ideology. People who were suspected to oppose the revolution and subsequently reported to officials were often humiliated, forced into work camps, tortured, and killed all in an effort to cleanse China of any residual nationalist or anti-Mao sentiment which was led initially by the youth of China.

### **Thesis Statement**

The goal of this research is to take a closer look at the intentional brainwashing and targeting of the youth to bring about the Cultural Revolution and keep Mao in power. Through organizations like the Red Guard, programs that sent the youth away to the countryside to gain a ‘socialist education,’ and the mobilization of students, youth were strategically targeted through political campaigns and indoctrinated into Mao’s personality cult. In doing this, traditional family structures in China were broken down in order for students to put their loyalty to the state

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<sup>1</sup> Roderick MacFarquar, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 10.

above their loyalty to their families or communities in order for Mao to maintain control over Chinese families.

## **Historical Background**

The Cultural Revolution was a departure from traditional Chinese values and the systematic targeting of the youth was a political tactic that mirrors other periods in history. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, loyalty to one's family and Confucian ideology was a foundational aspect to Chinese identity. Confucian thought defined the Chinese family structure, highlighting obedience and loyalty to the head of the family, typically the father or paternal figure. Families were often close knit and many members lived together in large communal family households. Ancestral worship was also an important aspect of Chinese culture because ancestors were seen as people to look towards for advice and should still be cared for into the afterlife. Children were always taught to respect their elders and their ancestors. Communities were also close together. Frequently, in rural villages, families depended on each other for resources, entertainment, and a social system. Within cities, communities were formed among students, universities, and workplaces. Through Mao's personality cult and the Cultural Revolution, these structures were broken down as Mao became the youth's paternal figure and a Socialist China became the overarching community that the youth felt compelled to be loyal to and fight for.

The youth are especially at risk of taking part in a personality cult with the right amount of indoctrination. Early childhood and adolescence are important formative years for an individual's brain. During this developmental period, youth's minds are easier to mold as they have a higher degree of brain plasticity and current neuroscience has pointed out that, "if the brain is especially sensitive to experience during adolescence, we must be exceptionally thoughtful and careful about the experiences we give people as they develop from childhood into

adulthood.”<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that many leaders in the past have taken advantage of these formative years to push a political agenda and insure its livelihood into the future. This can be seen in how the Nazis targeted children through summer camps and Hitler Youth programs to create the next generation of Nazis. This was done through systematic education and required displays of worship that was similar to what people had to do in China. In the end of WWII, several people who grew up in the Hitler Youth needed to be deprogrammed, but during Hitler’s time, they played an integral part in bringing political ideology into the home and making sure that everyone was doing, saying, and acting like they were supposed to. Since the youth are so at risk of being manipulated, it does bring to question to what extent does this still happen to this day and how does a government manage to put itself as the priority above people’s tendencies to value their family first.

There also appears to be a pattern in socialist governments where there is systematic targeting of the youth to be indoctrinated into communist society. In the Soviet Union during the 1930’s young people were targeted for socialist education and, “recreational opportunities that improved their lives and forged their socialist consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> Through these options, which were not available prior to the rise of the Soviet Union, many young people responded with, “unquestioning loyalty,” to the party and the state.<sup>4</sup> This is similar to what happened in China because for the first time, with Mao backing the Red Guard, students were able to claim power that children in China had never had before. While in the Soviet Union, young people were given opportunities that they had not had before that greatly improved their lives, creating a sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 22.

<sup>3</sup> James von Geldern, “Childing under Stalin,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/childhood-under-stalin/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

loyalty to the state. Getting to youth on board with a government is essential to its longevity. However, in terms of socialist governments and even fascists, as seen with Hitler, intentional indoctrination was necessary to create people who would be easy to control and who had the same morality that aligned with the state's motives.

Historically, with socialist governments, finding ways to control or police its people was a dominant factor in maintaining socialist control over society. Michel Foucault, a French historian and philosopher highlights a model of modern discipline. Foucault highlights that after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, instead of inflicting direct pain onto people's bodies in order to control them, a new form of discipline can simply be accomplished by observing people.<sup>5</sup> Through, "hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the examination," this form of disciplinary control concerns itself with, "what people have not done," and, "a person's failure to reach required standards."<sup>6</sup> While Foucault was primarily writing on prisons, its hard to ignore the commonalities between this system of observation via indoctrinated peoples or youths, and socialist leaders exercising their control over people. As Foucault highlights, it makes people fearful of what they have not done, forcing them into compliance and a state of anxiety. This method of control can be seen in Hitler's Germany, the Soviet Union, and Cultural Revolution China due to the sheer amount of community policing by members of the community.

## **Histography**

Historians generally agree that the Cultural Revolution was a huge failure that resulted in unnecessary violence. Thomas Plaenkers, who works in clinical and social psychanalysis involving China with a background in psychological consequences of East German

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<sup>5</sup> "Michel Foucault," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 2, 2003, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/#HistPris>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

totalitarianism, is a member of the Sigmund Freud Institute. Plaenkers notes that the period leading up to the Cultural Revolution was filled with violence. During the second Sino-Japanese war that lasted from 1937-1945, 3 million soldiers and 18 million civilians were killed as well as 95 million people were displaced.<sup>7</sup> Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, the civil war resulted in 70 million deaths, and the Great Leap Forward, 1958-1962, resulted in the, “the greatest famine in human history,” with 30 to 40 million deaths.<sup>8</sup> These numbers are important to note because this is the society that the youths and young adults had grown up in and were dealing with the repercussions of when the Cultural Revolution started. Plaenkers actually argues that the Germans are familiar with traumatic moments in history but the 12 years of Nazi rule, “did not produce a socially anomic condition,” like the Cultural Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Plaenkers says this trauma came from the mass amounts of people being, “beaten, tortured, and perhaps killed,” as well as individuals committing suicide to avoid such punishments.<sup>10</sup> There was also a lot of looting, houses and records of 300 people being tortured to death by the Red Guards in a Beijing suburb.<sup>11</sup> There were also records of cannibalism in the name of ‘being red,’ to prove their spot as revolutionaries in a remote area of Guangxi.<sup>12</sup> Plaenkers summarizes these as, “psychic damages inflicted by social regression, a climate of persecution... constant danger, and the loss of autonomy over personal life choices.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), xix.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/06/world/a-tale-of-red-guards-and-cannibals.html>

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), xxi.



Natascha Gentz, a sinologist and Head of Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh also adds that the Cultural Revolution has created a sense of cultural amnesia about the whole period in which it is not socially acceptable in China to confront what had happened.<sup>14</sup> Gentz and other researchers have found in examining 50 autobiographies about the Cultural Revolution, published in China, all tend to follow the same plot line and have 4 similar themes.<sup>15</sup> Gentz highlights these themes as, “narratives of good people who become victims of bad ones; morality stories,” and how one triumphs over evil, “portrayals of absurdity of events and developments; and tales of misunderstandings.”<sup>16</sup> Gentz also points out that frequently, people are either good or bad and there are no gray areas.<sup>17</sup> The plot line each autobiography follows are meant to cater to a western audience by downplaying the involvement of the students, making them seem like politically active victims who were, “seduced and manipulated” only to be awoken and shocked by their actions and run away to the west for salvation and freedom.<sup>18</sup> This narrative plays into the reputation of western society which in hand takes away from the experience of those who were a part or victims of the Cultural Revolution. This in way, Gentz argument, contributes to the continued avoidance of encountering what really happened and the processing of the Cultural Revolution. This tone definely comes through in several of the interviews I used in my primary source analysis as many people who played a role in the Red Guard appeared to be ashamed of what they had done. While Plaenkers seems to suggest that the Red Guard and Mao loyalists took the destruction of ‘the four olds’ as an opportunity to take, “personal advantage, influence, and power, and the settling of old scores,” Gentz seems to contribute that there is an underlying

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

shame and active covering up that appears to be happening in China in regard to the Cultural Revolution. However, while Gentz goes through how the political climate of the time and currently in China to explain why that may be, they both seem to pay little attention to exactly how intentionally indoctrinated the youth were in Mao's personality cult by Mao, and his followers in the government, and the effect that this had on breaking down the traditional family structures to allow for a such a lapse in morality. Since Mao is still idolized today in China, there seems to be an intentionality once again behind controlling the narrative of the Cultural Revolution and a deemphasis on the active role the Red Guard played as a result of political manipulation.

A few other historians acknowledge that the Red Guard had an active role in the Cultural Revolution that ultimately propagated the violence. Roderick MacFarquhar was a Harvard University professor who specialized in Chinese history. MacFarquhar points out that Mao endorsed the violence of the Red Guard: "Mao craved a measure of catalytic terror to jump-start the Cultural Revolution."<sup>19</sup> MacFarquhar even quotes Mao saying, "The more people you kill, the more revolutionary you are," while also arguing that Mao endorsed, "student's rights to rebel," against people considered bourgeois.<sup>20</sup> This highlights how Mao not only called students to action, but also radicalized them towards violence. The Red Guard started out of an elite middle school connected to Tsinghua University, where there had already been political unrest in regard to the government, where these middle schoolers, "took it upon themselves to organize in order to defend the Chairman and his Thought."<sup>21</sup> Rolf Haubl, director of the Sigmund Freud Institute, also contributes that the Red Guard should be, "understood as a social movement,

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<sup>19</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 104.

specifically as a youth movement.<sup>22</sup> However, Haubl deviates from MacFarquhar's understanding of the Red Guard's motivations and tendencies towards violence by looking at the "psychosocial conflicts of adolescence."<sup>23</sup> While still believing the Red Guard were, "active agents of the revolution," Haubl attributes their violence towards adolescent's tendencies towards narcissistic development and regressions.<sup>24</sup> MacFarquhar tries to support this argument by pointing out that the parents of these initial Red Guards had a higher social and political ranking than their teachers, which created a power disparity that could have contributed to these initial Red Guard's narcissistic ego. By only looking at the Red Guard's actions through the lens of adolescents, Haubl neglects the historical implication of these student's experiences leading up to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>25</sup> I believe this psychosocial element is an important aspect to why the youth were targeted to champion this revolution because as Haubl points out, a foundational aspect within Confucianism is filial piety, respect, and loyalty.<sup>26</sup> Haubl gives the example that if a father were to kill his son due to consistent disobedience, then he would only suffer a mild punishment if any punishment at all while, "lack of piety towards the father... is one of the worst crimes that a son can commit."<sup>27</sup> This analysis along with MacFarquhar's narration of event's show that students were in a vulnerable state to be manipulated by the government.

Another aspect revealed by Friedrich Markert is the Cultural Revolution mirrored Mao's own feelings and desires to depart from the traditional Confucian value system in China.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 105.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Ironically, Mao promoted a form of individualism that was aiming to end, “the culture of infanticide” within China.<sup>28</sup> Mao believed that the Confucian family structure that defined the child’s role as always subservient to their parents was a cycle that represented, “feudalism and exploitation.”<sup>29</sup> Mao claimed that the young should not be subjected to the older generation and frequently rebelled against his own parents and Confucian thought.<sup>30</sup> Markert points out that contemporary historians can see this “Mao” form of familial freedom emulated in the Cultural Revolution which was really just Mao’s attempt to avoid his fears of his own death and the “end of “his” revolution.”<sup>31</sup> Through this psychoanalysis of Mao, one can see that he was using his personality cult to manipulate the youth into trying to form his own idea of what China should look like as a communist country. As MacFarquhar and Markert point out, Mao endorsed violence, rebelled against Confucian thought, and was struggling to maintain power. However, while, the Cultural Revolution was largely a product of Mao, Markert still refutes the idea that the Cultural Revolution was entirely caused by Mao.<sup>32</sup> This point is highlighted by the fact that eventually Mao and the government became unable to control the Red Guard and had to resort to sending them away to the countryside in order to maintain control over the revolution. This highlights exactly how indoctrinated the youth were in Mao’s original ideology through propaganda and Mao worship.

Propaganda, along with the hardships that China endured leading up to the Cultural Revolution created a time period where the youth were consistently exposed to several different aspects of political issues. Mao was already seen as a revolutionary leader that went on the Long

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

March to unite China under communism, or at least, that is what students learned in class. As Daniel Leese, a professor of modern Chinese history at the University of Freiburg, explains, the Mao personality cult really started to take off in the late 1930's as a way to compete with the cult that was being fostered around Chiang Kai-Shek.<sup>33</sup> Leese does make an interesting point to bring up the patterns that Chinese people have a history of worshipping leaders in China, beginning with the worship of the emperor as the son of Heaven, reference of other community leaders, and then Sun Yat-sen being seen as the, "founding father of New China."<sup>34</sup> With Mao's personality cult, Leese also points out that around the 1960's, "faming conducts according to short quotations from Chairman Mao," were becoming a ritualized behavior that would continue well into the Cultural Revolution.<sup>35</sup> Since there was such a heavy emphasis on being able to recall quotations, Mao's followers, "came to employ fitting quotations as an ultimate means if persuasion by invoking the authority of the CCP Chairman."<sup>36</sup> Leese outlines a 3 step plan in which propaganda and Mao's personality cult would mobilize people to take down political enemies and bring in Mao's form of communism. The first step was to have the people recall hardships which would cause, "hate toward the imperialist aggressors and internal class enemies," followed by, "oral presentations," and then the, "study of Mao writings," that particularly involved analyzing class issues.<sup>37</sup> These Mao writings would attribute the hardships that China has dealt with in the past were the result of, "capitalist exploitations and private ownership."<sup>38</sup> Finally capitalism and imperialism would be, "unmasked," and Mao's thought

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

would be the preferred systemic outcome.<sup>39</sup> This resulted in Mao's *Little Red Book* which would become a reference point, much like the Bible, to the Red Guards.

Mao mobilized the Red Guard to not only protect his personality cult but also spread it. Mao, "backed the idea of their crisscrossing the country and 'igniting the fires of revolution,'" showing that Mao expected those in the Red Guard to progress his political agenda.<sup>40</sup> With the formation of the Red Guard, one of their main goals was to destroy the 'four old's' meaning, "old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of exploiting classes," with goals being created for the Red Guard and Mao giving his seal of approval, Red Guards travelled outside of Beijing to spread the message to other students and schools.<sup>41</sup> Soon after, what historians call the Red Terror began. Based on how quickly the Red Guard was mobilized goes to show how engulfed the youth already were in Mao's personality cult, at least starting in Beijing, where most of these events were localized. With students in Peking University and then Tsinghua University becoming increasingly politically active, there is a progressive shift from young adults to middle schoolers as students are called to action. My research contributes to existing historiography because it looks at how the youth were systematically targeted by the government to dismantle the traditional family structures within China so that Mao Thought could remain in control the populace and the effect that this mobilization had on people living through the Cultural Revolution. Most existing historiography agrees that the Red Guard were active agents but does not investigate thoroughly exactly why this method of political youth integration was so effective. This indoctrination saw the youth manipulated into turning against their families,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Plaenkers, *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: the Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 110.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 113.

which traditionally is a bond formed naturally between parents and children and replaced with an artificial filial piety towards Mao's attempt to maintain power disguised as revolutionary thought.

### **Primary Source Analysis**

The primary sources that will be analyzed in this paper are interviews from former Red Guard members as well as people who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. The University of Pittsburgh created the CR/10 Project that is composed of several video interviews of people recalling their memories and experiences of the Cultural Revolution. Some interviewees refuse to show their faces, but even those who do, the interviews were anonymous and none of the interviewee's names were included. Through these interviews, it became extremely apparent that the Cultural Revolution was a 10-year period of confusion and fear where families were terrorized. Many sources frequently recalled that this movement created an unstable environment. As one interviewee remembers, "Today, you were really happy. Tomorrow, disaster would strike. That was the situation."<sup>42</sup> This parallels Haubl's argument that the Red Guard were active agents of the revolution that changed their targets moment to moment and acted impulsively. There are also several articles written by former Red Guards that detail the increasing violence they witnessed the change in familial relationships. Families were frequently broken up when Mao began sending the educated youth away in what is referred to by many interviewees as going 'up to the mountains and down to the countryside' as a way to control the violence of the Red Guard.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Joining in the Xiaohundan Incident," interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, September 5, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> "Each person carried a bit of dust when the Cultural Revolution ended," interview by Lily Kirkhoff, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 7, 2017.

This begs the question of why the youth were targeted first. It is worth noting that children and young adults growing up during the Cultural Revolution were born around 1940's-1950's, which meant that they grew up learning about the Civil War where Mao Zedong first declared the People's Republic of China. The Civil War concluded with many nationalists fleeing to Taiwan or other parts of the world due to persecution and fear of the newly formed government. However, not everyone was able to leave China. Many families, who still maintained their nationalist beliefs, stayed in China and did not talk about their political ideology. These people were systematically targeted later during the Cultural Revolution by the Red Guard. During the Civil war, Mao had already began creating his personality cult. Becoming extremely popular with his communist ideology with the peasant population, he was able to defeat the Kuomintang after rallying the peasant class. Due to this, Mao was seen as a hero by many and idolized by many communist and peasant supporters. Yu Xiangzhen, a former Red Guard member and one of the interviewees, was in middle school when the Cultural Revolution began. She recalls having, "overwhelming feelings of joy," just to catch a small look at Mao in Tiananmen Square while she was in the Red Guard.<sup>44</sup>

### **Phase One of the Red Guard: Emerging Power**

Students like Yu were the easiest for Mao to mobilize because they had been educated with political propaganda that idolized Mao. When Mao took power in 1949, China's literacy rate was around 10-15%.<sup>45</sup> In an attempt to increase literacy, Mao created education programs that primarily used communist or Maoist propaganda as the reading materials for the classrooms.

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<sup>44</sup> Yu Xiangzhen, "Confessions of a Red Guard, 50 years after China's Cultural Revolution." *CNN* (2016). <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/15/asia/china-cultural-revolution-red-guard-confession/index.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Judy Heflin, "The Single Greatest Education Effort in Human History" *Language Magazine*.



Mao's "Little Red Book" or *Quotations from Chairman Mao* became staple reading material for students and Red Guards by 1964. An example of a quotation from Chairman Mao is: "A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery... A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another."<sup>46</sup> This quotation shows one of the many ways that Mao actually provoked and approved of the violence during the Cultural Revolution. Students who read this in the classroom might be inclined to feel the same way.

Mao was idolized and regarded as a nationalistic figure in the eyes of the youth. Mo Bo, another former Red Guard recalls that Mao giving students a chance to act out in the name of revolution had, "meant a great deal" and acted as permission for the youth to behave violently.<sup>47</sup> Mao was able to take on this role of authority with the students because he was portrayed as a hero in the propaganda that was spread throughout schools in the period leading up to and into the 60's. Based on traditional Chinese Confucian structures that highlighted obedience, students that were consuming radical propaganda looked towards the leader and hero they grew up knowing, which was Mao. Mao was depicted in posters as a, "benevolent father," as well as, "a wise statesman, an astute military leader, or a great teacher."<sup>48</sup> Mao intentionally put himself into these metaphorical roles of leadership through propaganda. Children and young adults were led to believe that the only way to improve China was through Mao himself. Because of the turmoil, corruption, and extreme poverty that existed in China leading up to the Cultural Revolution, Mao was seen as the only person who could "fix" it all and bring China into modernity. Mao's

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<sup>46</sup> [https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/mao/Quotations\\_from\\_Chairman\\_Mao\\_Tse-tung.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/mao/Quotations_from_Chairman_Mao_Tse-tung.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Mo Bo, "I was a Teenage Red Guard." *New Internationalist*, (1987), <https://newint.org/features/1987/04/05/teenage>.

<sup>48</sup> Liliang Xin, *Chairman Mao gives us a happy life*, Illustration, March 1954. From Chinese posters.net online, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e16-269>.

strategy of manipulation and repeated exposure to political content successfully enabled him to assume a role of authority in student's lives and later gain more loyalty than a student's own family. Below is a poster from 1954 that depicts Maoist propaganda that is meant to emphasize Mao's role in bringing the Chinese people a better life, while also injecting himself into the everyday life of Chinese families.



Since many students already idolized Mao prior to the Cultural Revolution, Mao rallying students to break down the Four Old's within China gave the students a newfound sense of power. The Four Old's stood for old ideas, customs, culture, and habits of mind and this led to the destruction of and regulation of, "literature, art, and music."<sup>50</sup>As highlighted previously, traditional structure instilled respect for elders within Chinese youth as well as demanded complete submission to paternal figures. With Mao becoming increasingly viewed as a father

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> "After they came to our house, they cut off all of my mother's hair," interview by Shu Yue, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, January 28, 2018.

figure and the greatest leader in student's minds, he had elevated their social ability to overthrow the traditional structure. Mo recalls that, "this kind of experience was so intoxicating that some of us went off our heads," because for once, kids were allowed to have power.<sup>51</sup> In the minds of students many believed that they were going to create a better China with the targeting of the Four Old's. These were replaced with big character posters. Big character posters were at first created by Red Guard groups to announce the revolution. These posters had Mao's quotes written on them as well as revolutionary phrases that denounced counterrevolutionaries and encouraged people to be on the right side. Big character posters were important to the Cultural Revolution because they were how the Red Guard recruited its members from lower-peasant classes and started the trend of denouncing counterrevolutionaries.

As the student population became more indoctrinated into Mao's personality cult, the Red Guard movement branched out from just recruiting from schools. The Red Guard started with university and high school students but eventually would indoctrinate kids of many ages, primarily from lower-peasant background kids. It was generally understood that younger kids, typically who were of the age to start school or were in the lower grades of the elementary level, were too young to become Red Guards. However, there were programs to create 'red pairs.' This program indoctrinated young children into Mao's thinking by pairing them with Red Guard members. One interviewee recalls her 'big sister' who was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader and, "the head of the rebels," within their middle school.<sup>52</sup> She was paired with this Red Guard when she was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, at which point she didn't understand the political aspect behind the Red Guard or the

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<sup>51</sup> Mo Bo

<sup>52</sup> "One bad thing I did was to spit in the middle of the bread. Then, I gave it to that old man to eat," interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 22, 2017.

Cultural Revolution. She recalls her ‘big sister’ saying that a man they were supposed to be watching was, “really, really bad,” so while they were serving him his meal, as a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, she, “spit in the middle of the bread. Then, [she] gave it to that old man to eat.”<sup>53</sup> This account highlights how young children were manipulated into thinking the same way as the Red Guard which had a few purposes. A mentor program like this ensures that the kids who grew up in this program can continue the mission of the Red Guard and further Mao’s agenda. Also, this concept of ‘big sister,’ derives a certain aspect of respect and idolization for the older sister by the younger child. This can cause the child to want to strive to be like that mentor figure which creates another pair of eyes to watch out for someone who may be suspicious of anti-revolutionary thought without the younger child knowing they are being used to observe people. If these children were to report someone, they also would not understand the ramifications and would likely be praised for their role in weeding out the counterrevolutionaries, which reinforces the idea that what they are doing is “good.” Therefore, these younger kids could further Mao’s political agenda unknowingly. The interview went on to explain that she felt happy watching the man eat the bread that she spit in and now she wonders, several years later, why did she hate that man so much.<sup>54</sup> This is an example of how young kids were led to act in ways that the Red Guard considered revolutionary without knowing the true purpose behind it.

Many interviewees expressed their desire to become Red Guard members when they were children. Mo explains, “everybody wanted to join the Red Guard because nobody wanted to be ‘unqualified’, ‘backward’, and ‘non-revolutionary’.”<sup>55</sup> The youth’s eagerness to participate in

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Mo Bo, “I was a Teenage Red Guard.” *New Internationalist*, (1987), <https://newint.org/features/1987/04/05/teenage>.

this movement shows the extent to which they were affected by Mao's personality cult. Another interviewee explains that she, "cried every time I saw others wearing the red armband," because she was not allowed to become a Red Guard.<sup>56</sup> This interview revealed that kids who came from lower-peasant families were given priority to becoming Red Guard members, and this interviewee had come from a middle-peasant family. The irony of this situation is apparent and shows that the Red Guard were inconsistent with their beliefs. They targeted people in the 'upper-classes' like wealthy peasants and landlords because they felt that those positions were enforcing class division; however, they did not actively allow people from middle-peasant families to join their cause. This is an example of the confusion that surrounded whether or not Red Guards actually knew what they were fighting for during this revolution. These kids acted impulsively in whatever way made them seem the most revolutionary in the eyes of Mao and other Red Guard members. These reactionary attempts to seem revolutionary created extreme violence and resulted in terrorizing families throughout China.

Within this first phase of the Cultural Revolution, teachers became the first targets of humiliation and violence at the hand of the Red Guard. Teachers were harassed and humiliated as they were one of the first forms of authority that represented the Four Old's, so they were targeted in communities. Teachers, "had been intimidating," to students and were the main targets of Red Guard groups that started forming within schools.<sup>57</sup> Intellectual and educated people came next as fear and distrust began to grow in communities and these people became more suspicious of being anti-revolutionary due to their education. One interviewee recalls that

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<sup>56</sup> "Long live Chairman Mao; good health to Vice Chairman Lin!": Vivid Memories from the Countryside," interview by University of Pittsburgh, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, March 27, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Mo Bo, "I was a Teenage Red Guard." *New Internationalist*, (1987), <https://newint.org/features/1987/04/05/teenage>.

their neighbor was a strict teacher who had taught at a girl's school and one day a group of junior high students, "tortured [the teacher] and her husband," for a few days before tying them to a tree and beating them to death.<sup>58</sup> The students, "still weren't satisfied, so they also stabbed and kicked [the couple] to see if [they] were dead or not."<sup>59</sup> The Red Guard forced teachers to pull weeds while pouring ink on the teachers and beating them up.<sup>60</sup> This cruelty was extremely common with teachers and several other community members becoming victims of violence at the hands of the youth. Because of this, it is apparent that the old social structures that existed within Chinese culture was overthrown, and the Red Guard became a group to be feared. Yu outlines that her, "generation grew up drinking wolf's milk: we were born with hatred and taught to struggle and hate everyone."<sup>61</sup> This quote highlights the essence of the Red Guard. As Plaenkers points out, many members of the Red Guard took the Cultural Revolution as an opportunity to settle old scores; however, in doing this, the Red Guard only contributed to the overall fear surrounding their organization. By mobilizing the youth in this way, through Mao allowing them to use violence whenever they pleased, and the Red Guard created an air of distrust and terror which was used to control communities and later their own families.

### **Phase Two of the Red Guard: Community Policing**

The Red Guard began to police their own families after the second phase of the Cultural Revolution commenced. There are several interviews and accounts where Red Guard members

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<sup>58</sup> "After they came to our house, they cut off all of my mother's hair," interview by Shu Yue, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, January 28, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> "Joining in the Xiaohundan Incident," interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, September 5, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Yu Xiangzhen, "Confessions of a Red Guard, 50 years after China's Cultural Revolution." *CNN* (2016). <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/15/asia/china-cultural-revolution-red-guard-confession/index.html>.

denounced and turned in their own family members. This became relatively common as more people were being thrown into work camps and abused. In an interview, Zhang Hongbing, describes denouncing his mother, Fang. He recalls saying to her, “if you go against our dear Chairman Mao I will smash your dog head,” to which his mother, burned portraits of Mao.<sup>62</sup> In response to these actions, Zhang and his father denounced Fang. Fang was imprisoned, struggled against in struggle sessions for 2 years, and later executed.<sup>63</sup> Zhang recalls thinking that his mother had, “suddenly become a monster... She had become a class enemy and opened her bloody mouth.”<sup>64</sup> This evident aggression shows the extent to which Mao’s propaganda campaign had been successful in brainwashing kids. Under the guise of a “revolution” Mao manipulated children into policing their own families which broke down the previous family structure that existed throughout China. Because this traditional structure was uprooted and the youth were in charge, this ultimately made communities easier to control due to the mass amount of policing done by the Red Guard. The Red Guard humiliated, tortured, and killed people just suspected of counterrevolutionary ideology, which sometimes just meant being educated, and made examples of them to get the rest of their communities to submit to Mao’s thinking.

Young adults became so empowered by their authority that they frequently didn’t understand the consequences of their actions, resulting in the destruction of families. An interviewee recalls a girl who was about 17 or 18 who was in her singing troop. They would go around singing revolutionary songs throughout their communities. This girl had her Mao badge

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<sup>62</sup> Tania Branigan, “China’s Cultural Revolution: son’s guilt over the mother he sent to her death” *The Guardian*, (2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/27/china-cultural-revolution-sons-guilt-zhang-hongping>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

ripped off and it, “tore her clothes.”<sup>65</sup> This girl’s father, “scolded her,” for the ripped clothes and the girl, “reported him to the militia company leader, who discussed it with the political instructor.”<sup>66</sup> Her father was struggled against for 2 months then declared an, “active counter-revolutionary,” and was, “sentenced to death.”<sup>67</sup> This girl was not a part of the Red Guard but was still engulfed by the political agenda of Mao to the point of turning her father in. The interviewee recalls that, “the girl lost her mind,” after the execution of her father.<sup>68</sup> This case demonstrates that often, kids didn’t understand the consequences of their actions until after they happened. Unfortunately, this meant that many families were torn apart and Mao’s campaign worked by manipulating kids into believing that the state held a higher priority than their own families.

Both Zhang and this interviewee recall a popular song during the Cultural Revolution called “Father and Mother are dear, but Chairman Mao is dearer” that went like:

Heaven and earth are big but not as big as the Party’s kindness / Mother and Father are dear, / but Chairman Mao is dearer. / A multitude of goodness is not as good as socialism.<sup>69</sup>

There were many songs like this that praised Mao, but this song specifically is targeted at children. This song calls for the young, or kids, to turn in the old or their parents. This can be applied to young children turning in their parents or adults turning in their parents, either way it plays off Mao’s goal to get rid of the Four Old’s. It asks for loyalty from the newer generations

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<sup>65</sup> “Long live Chairman Mao; good health to Vice Chairman Lin!”: Vivid Memories from the Countryside,” interview by University of Pittsburgh, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, March 27, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Tania Branigan, “China’s Cultural Revolution: son’s guilt over the mother he sent to her death” *The Guardian*, (2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/27/china-cultural-revolution-sons-guilt-zhang-hongping>.



to the party and Mao and within the context of the Cultural Revolution and the violence surrounding it, it is asking for those who trust in Mao, which many were already brainwashed into, to put Mao and the party over their loyalty to their family. This is a direct attack on the traditional family structure, and it was used to keep Chinese families in line and obedient especially if a family had kids who were indoctrinated and watching their every move.

Since the Red Guard was composed of young people that had flipped the social structures in China, it was virtually impossible to retaliate against the Red Guard. The Red Guard used violence as a tool to maintain control. One interviewee recalls a conversation with his father who was a teacher when the Cultural Revolution started. His father was frequently beaten by Red Guards and the interviewee remembers pointing out that his dad was, “just over 30 at the time,” and he was, “young and strong,” before asking him why, “couldn’t you retaliate?”<sup>70</sup> His father simply explained that, “the students were Red Guards – how could you hit them, right? You couldn’t hit them.”<sup>71</sup> This was said with the implication that if one retaliated against a Red Guard, they would be convicted of being “capitalist-roaders” and executed. There was also the aspect that these were children and parents typically do not try to hurt kids. The only way to escape the wrath of the Red Guard was to run away and leave the community. Another interviewee recalls that during the Cultural Revolution, “[China] greatly regressed.” She explains, “some families were exterminated; husbands and wives became enemies; children turn their backs on one another.”<sup>72</sup> Also having a child join the Red Guard meant that even the home

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<sup>70</sup> “[We] were all brainwashed,” interview by Lily Kirkhoff, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 15, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “You may not believe in me, you may doubt me, but you may not doubt the Communist Party,” interview by Lily Kirkhoff, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 20, 2017.

was not safe as many were totally loyal to Mao because he had given them power. As Mo pointed out previously, many students who were suddenly given agency over their actions, after being controlled by their parents and school system, they took this power and fear to establish their authority. However, in doing this, Mao's political agenda was able to permeate into the home and control the actions and thinking of families.

Historians agree that the Cultural Revolution was a devastating and regressive time for China. Violence broke out all over the country as Mao rallied the youth to further his political agenda and destabilize his opponents. Unfortunately, this ultimately resulted in not only people considered intellectuals being terrorized, but soon evolved into mass distrust and community policing led by young people who rarely understood what they were doing. An interviewee recalls, "after 1968, it didn't really matter whether you were Red Guards or not; it was 'strike, smash, snatch.'"<sup>73</sup> As discussed previously, children are often the easiest members to manipulate due to the fact that they are still developing mentally and intellectually. This can be seen in Mo Bo's recollection of her time in the Red Guard as many students felt pressure from their peers to show that they were 'the most' revolutionary. In several interviews, kids who were unable to join the Red Guard due to their social status actually felt envy towards those who could. Most people today can remember the pressure that kids feel to fit in with their classmates and society. Given that this a relatively universal experience, peer pressure and students' *need* to fit in highly contributed to the widespread phenomenon of Red Guard brutality.

### **Phase Three of the Red Guard: Out of Control and Sent Down**

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<sup>73</sup> "My mom said, 'If you stay in Beijing, you'll turn into a little hoodlum,'" interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 21, 2017.

Throughout the decade of the Cultural Revolution, there was increasing escalation in the violence witnessed by children and students. Due to the growing violence and the attempt to increase the farming output in rural areas, Mao called for, “Educated Youth to go “down to the countryside” to receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle peasants.”<sup>74</sup> This would become known as the ‘send down’ program and is often referred to as ‘up to the mountains and down to the country side,’ which would break apart families in several different ways. First, this program targeted urban students. Since families in urban areas were typically more well off than other places in China, this meant that they were perceived as potentially having bourgeois ideology. This generalization is a possible explanation for why violence from the Red Guard was intensified in urban areas as a way to prove that they were in fact not bourgeois.

Class played an important role in the Cultural Revolution as students who were in the lowest classes had prioritized entry into the Red Guard, but students who were of a higher class were frequently the ones sent to the countryside to work. An interviewee stated that, “all the current graduates,” graduates being from middle school and high school, “all the young people of the appropriate age had to go ‘down to the countryside.’”<sup>75</sup> The interviewee also remembers that, “If you didn’t go, [Red Guards] came to your home banging drums and gongs, to press you to go.”<sup>76</sup> This shows the peer pressure that many young people were under to obey Mao’s call, again showing that the government put itself in a place of priority over ones family, as well as the outside pressure to appear a part of the revolution. This also shows that Red Guard members who were not educated were still around to police their communities.

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<sup>74</sup> “That time did provide a necessary tempering, but the duration was too long,” interview by Zhang Haihui, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 28, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

The goal of the 'send down' program was to separate students from their families and consistently reinforced Mao's ideology. While some students did not want to go, many went before their time as an escape from their homes or just to travel.<sup>77</sup> These students used the revolution to escape their home lives and were seen as revolutionary because they were so enthusiastic to go to the countryside for Mao. This highlights the fact that many kids who went willingly were acting out of childish desires to travel or that the youth that went were extremely indoctrinated into the Mao cult and they saw the send-down program as necessary for the revolution. These students were still just children and insisting on their own independence, as some kids do at a young age where it is not totally appropriate, another aspect that many teenagers today can relate to. However, students that were forced to go would be sent away for sometimes years, to a whole other area of China to do hard labor and be surrounded by other Red Guard factions and constantly exposed to the justification of their work there. Breaking apart families in this way made it easier for students to be policed by other young people as well as the families back home to be terrorized and controlled.

The educated Red Guard members that were sent down would spread the message of Mao to rural communities. While some enjoyed their time in the country, which was typically away from any major forms of violence that was being seen in urban areas, the labor was hard. One interviewee believed that the 'send down' program actually had some positive impacts. As a former Red Guard member he believes, "if children from the city could spend 2 or 3 years in the countryside, experience the hardships there, then later they would understand true difficulty, and

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<sup>77</sup> Mo Bo, "I was a Teenage Red Guard." *New Internationalist*, (1987), <https://newint.org/features/1987/04/05/teenage>.

learn how to persist in the face of adversity.”<sup>78</sup> This former Red Guard spent 8 years in the country and generally recalls it as an important part of his life, even believing that he should take his daughter there for a couple of weeks to do some farm work.<sup>79</sup> This interviewee reflects the effectiveness of Mao’s Socialist Education ideology and how some people in China still believe that while the Cultural Revolution was a violent time for China, there were still some benefits to what occurred.

Another interviewee who was also in the Red Guard from the rural countryside believed that the ‘send down’ program helped educate the rural population. He explains that, “most of the Educated Youths were humble about receiving education from the peasants,” which shows the extent to which Mao’s ideology had been effective on many students.<sup>80</sup> While the interviewee doesn’t go into detail about the kids who were forced out to the country, he does explain that the Educated Youths from the city would act as teachers for the rural students and teach them.<sup>81</sup> He explains that, “if we hadn’t had [the influence of] these Educated Youth, [we] could not have done better in college and work.”<sup>82</sup> He also talks about “Worker-Peasant-Solider” students, which was a title reserved for the Educated Youth that attended college. This role had become an option for peasant kids who were recommended for college admission. At this time, many peasant families did not have access to college. This interviewee became a Worker-Peasant-Solider student and explains that this was a desired title for many people. This title emphasizes

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<sup>78</sup> “That time did provide a necessary tempering, but the duration was too long,” interview by Zhang Haihui, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 28, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> “Educated Youth [...] gave local cultural enterprises a lot of help.”: A Farm Youth’s Perspective,” interview by University of Pittsburgh, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, February 26, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

the value that Mao Thought had put that being a working peasant that also was a solid for Mao's socialist ideology and the widespread desire of peasants to have access to those opportunities. While allowing kids in the peasant class to have access to this education, it also linked this access to Mao's political agenda by requiring them to be considered revolutionary, socialist, and loyal to Mao. The way that this impacted rural and urban families occurred differently. Rural families were relatively unbothered since they had the most to gain from the Cultural Revolution as long as they appeared to go with the message. Some families who truly believed in Mao's ideology purely benefitted from the situation. While there were some benefits to this program, it still acted as a way to manipulate the peasant class while also separating kids from the families. This aspect of separation was important to controlling families.

### **Cultural Revolution's Impact on Families**

Before the Cultural Revolution, many families already had a member of the family that would have to be away from home for most of the months out of the year. This practice still exists in China today which places a huge emphasis on Chinese New Year and whatever leave time these workers can get off. During the Cultural Revolution, workers who were already away from their families were unable to return, a lot of the time from fear. An interviewee recalls that for 7 or 8 years he hadn't heard from his father who was afraid to return home because he did not want to be suspected of being a spy.<sup>83</sup> This kept a few families already separated from each other while the violence of the Red Guard increased, creating an unstable home life for many people. The interviewee recalls believing that his father was dead and watching his mother go, "into

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<sup>83</sup> "There had already been a period of time where I was confused, thinking my father was dead," interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, August 10, 2016.

shock,” as well as, “having a break down,” and being unable to sleep at night.<sup>84</sup> While traditionally, Chinese families typically lived in multi-generational homes together and were strong family units, the Cultural Revolution actively worked to separate family members from each other through sending some members to work camps to be ‘reeducated’, beating and humiliating others, or imprisoning people for several years. As mentioned previously, students were also sent away, leaving smaller family units behind. Due to the widespread fear created in many areas of China, people who were still left over couldn’t even trust their communities.

Another interviewee who was in Wuhan during the Cultural Revolution remembers the breakdown of communities. She recalls:

All religions try to suppress one’s dark side and praise one’s virtues, but the Cultural Revolution was actually completely opposite. At the time, when you saw your friends or loved ones being struggled against, you couldn’t stay quiet. You had to – people would force you to – get up [to join in the struggle]. The better your relationship [with the accused], the more others forced you [to participate in the struggle]. Interpersonal relationships were thoroughly destroyed. That is why after the Cultural Revolution, though China has become rich and people’s material lives have greatly improved, interpersonal relationships are still a source of anxiety.<sup>85</sup>

This testimony conveys the essence of distrust in people’s communities towards each other. This interviewee’s mother was imprisoned because one of her friends had revealed that she and the interviewee’s mother had travelled to Nanjing for university after the Kuomintang, the nationalist party that was pushed out after the civil war ended, had promised free education.<sup>86</sup> She was branded as a spy and arrested.<sup>87</sup> The amount of pressure felt by people in their communities, which was propagated by Mao’s message, created an extremely stressful

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> “Turning every innocent person into a guilty one – this is the very worst aspect of the Cultural Revolution, in my opinion,” interview by Zhang Haihui, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, July 15, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

environment to live in. The interviewee explains that, “people around you reinforced the fear,” and that, “[back then], your business became everyone’s business.”<sup>88</sup> She then goes on to explain that her father had failed at making salted eggs, which spoiled. Instead of just throwing them away, her father had to go to the river dig a deep hole and burry the eggs at night.<sup>89</sup> This was because if they had thrown the eggs away someone would have said, “how wasteful, how rich you are, how could you spoil such good food? And so on.”<sup>90</sup> The small act of throwing away spoiled food and being seen doing so, could have gotten their family in trouble and punished under the ideology of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. This fact emphasizes the degree of community policing that the Red Guard led. While originally, people were protected within their communities, it became evident that during the Cultural Revolution no one was safe at this time. This type of pressure put on families and people show exactly how effective the Red Guard and members of the CCP instilled fear throughout China, especially in urban areas. This distrust and the need to seem revolutionary ultimately isolated families from their community support system. As explained throughout this paper, the intentional breaking down of existing social structures and mobilizing the students, overall weakened China’s population and made it easier for Mao to weaponize his ideology to control Chinese society.

This policing and the harassment of students directly resulted in an increased number of people who committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. Several interviews talk about knowing someone or having a family member try to or commit suicide to avoid persecution. One interviewee talks about her friend’s neighbor who was a teacher. The friend saw their neighbor leave without putting on their hat and laughed, but later that night, the teacher had committed

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



suicide.<sup>91</sup> The interviewee talks about that friend feeling guilty for the rest of his life, “thinking that because he was a student the teacher really liked, his laughter led to this tragedy.”<sup>92</sup> After the teacher committed suicide, “the teacher’s wife saw that her husband had committed suicide in the kitchen, and so she tried to hang herself.”<sup>93</sup> The rope broke and the teacher’s wife did not die, but the interviewee points out that, “the couple had three children, so if [she had died], I do not know how those children could have survived.”<sup>94</sup> This was extremely common throughout China during the Cultural Revolution. Family members would kill themselves in order to avoid being executed, imprisoned, and beaten while still leaving behind their family. Families were left broken after these deaths which were directly caused by the community terror led by the Red Guard and other communist party members.

## **Conclusion**

The Cultural Revolution was a violent period in China’s history where the youth were targeted and used to further Mao’s political agenda. Due to this, families were terrorized by their community members, separated from each other, and traumatized, all in an effort to for Mao to maintain control over the population. Mobilizing and radicalizing the students led to an internal police force composed of kids who were ready to follow a cause after being indoctrinated with propaganda and Mao’s ideology. However, while the trauma of the Cultural Revolution still exists to this day as seen in several interviews by its participants and victims, this radical point in China’s history brings up an interesting topic. The legacy that is passed down, generation to generation, is important, and most people can agree on this.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

One interviewee speaks on the lasting impact that the Cultural Revolution has on people today. With the destroying of the Four Old's, the interviewee explains that he feels, "the moral principles that our ancestors left us, such as benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and trust, have all been ruined."<sup>95</sup> He claims that, "the people nowadays will take what they want by any means necessary," and goes on to explain that due to his father's status as a landlord, all of his friends suddenly didn't want anything to do with him when the Cultural Revolution started.<sup>96</sup> He was also pressured to, "make a clean break" with his family as he went down to the countryside.<sup>97</sup> While in the countryside, he recalls a woman who complained about the new socialist system leaving their granary empty and remembers thinking that if he was in the city he, "would definitely go and expose her."<sup>98</sup> This interview demonstrates the connection that the man makes to how, in the Cultural Revolution, a lot of people did whatever they had to in order to survive and the essence of that still continues into today but in different forms like credit card fraud and exam fraud. <sup>99</sup> When the interviewer asks what influence he believes that the Cultural Revolution had on his life, the interviewee explains, "the influence on my life was that I went along with the party's propaganda and followed what the official newspapers said," which shows the extent that the content students are exposed to matters.<sup>100</sup>

The way children are raised to think and the media that they consume during their developmental years highly impacts the way they will act in their adult lives. Due to the effect that Mao's aggressive propaganda campaign and the indoctrination of children, students, as Mo

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<sup>95</sup> "The harm did not end after ten years, but rather, it lasts even now," interview by University of Pittsburgh, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: the CR/10 Project*, September 7, 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Bo phrased well, grew up angry and were molded to follow Mao. While it's difficult to see this happening today, children have been targeted to insure the well-being and lasting legacy of several different causes. The youth were manipulated in the Nazi party to insure the lively hood of Nazi ideology well into the future. Historically, in the United States and other Eurocentric countries, kids have been seen as a passive group and are often left out of political movements at least until their young adult age where people see high schoolers and college students emerge as social agents.

However, I would argue that kids start to become social agents in their developmental stage where they become conscious of the world around them. Kids who grew up in the period before the Cultural Revolution were exposed to violence and political unrest, which in hand resulted in their quick manipulation and then mobilization. This made students an easy target to further Mao's political agenda and be used to break apart families. Much like how, tobacco companies started to create smoking products that were colorful and flavored that socially we knew are meant for adults, but subliminally also introduces kids to smoking, small actions have large impacts on how the youth will turn out. For the children in China, it was Mao's picture posted everywhere following the civil war and the rituals to prove loyalty, today, it's hard to say what messages we are sending out to kids. Parents try their best to protect their children and shield them from bad influences, but as seen in the Cultural Revolution, that doesn't always work because the messages still get through or the parents are playing a role in a bigger picture that they may not realize. Due to this the Red Guard was sent to terrorize families and disrupt children's first line defense against "adult issues" like politics and societal issues. It is impossible to keep the next generation separate from these topics and it is important to keep kids informed.

While equally impossible to say that the Cultural Revolution could have been avoided by keeping the students informed, in today's world, we know that knowledge is key.

While kids shouldn't be exposed to everything, it is important to be aware of the nature versus nurture complex that exists in forming the next generation. In order to avoid the manipulation of children, they should be aware of different world views and ideology and be given the freedom to choose their own paths and be their own active agents. Throughout several periods in history, kids are readily able to be manipulated because they didn't know any better or they weren't aware of another way. The Cultural Revolution is an extreme example of this, and students did things that they would regret for the rest of their lives. It really brings to question exactly how much kids should be aware of while growing up and how we should be responsible for protecting, as well as informing, the next generation.

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