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# TEACHING ABOUT IDENTITY: LESSONS FROM THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION



# **Teaching About Identity: Lessons From the Cultural Revolution**

A Project of FAIR in Education

## Introduction

In the field of K-12 education, there is an ongoing conversation about how to frame and teach about human identity. As researchers and teachers who have worked with diverse groups of students in public and private schools, correctional facilities, centers for youth experiencing homelessness, and universities, we know firsthand the importance of approaching identity-related topics with care and awareness of students' vulnerabilities, especially connected to mental health. We wondered if a historical understanding of other countries' experiences with teaching about identity might help us recognize patterns and avoid mistakes. We began investigating twentieth century contexts in which teachers made grave mistakes in teaching about identity—mistakes that at the time seemed scientific, unifying, correct, and culturally necessary—but ultimately laid a tragic foundation for inter-group hatred.

We chose three contexts: 1930s Germany, 1960s China, and 1980s-1990s Rwanda. We read history texts, memoirs, lesson plans, textbooks, and other primary source materials, searching for artifacts to illustrate the dominant approach to identity education in each historical context. Drawing on these materials, we have curated a series of quotations and images meant to convey the flavor and feeling of identity education in each context. We hope you find this collection of artifacts from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to be thought provoking, and that you will look forward to our forthcoming publications on 1930s Germany and 1980s-90s Rwanda.

These artifacts are a tiny fraction of the relevant material available, meant only as an introduction. In looking outside our national and temporal context, we've discovered important insights to apply to our teaching practices. Our hope is that you, too, will find insights to support your work and students, and that you will be inspired to continue learning from the past in an effort to constructively address the present and future.

# The Chinese Cultural Revolution

## Historical Context

In 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded as a Communist state. This event marked the culmination of a number of turbulent events that began in 1911, when the Qing Dynasty, seen as decadent and stagnant in its rule and relationship with the people of China, was overthrown during the Chinese Revolution of 1911. In 1935, Mao Zedong ascended to the helm of the Chinese Communist Party as Chairman, where he remained in power until his death in 1976.

As with other rising Communist states around the world—most notably the Soviet Union—Mao Zedong oversaw a massive modernization program within China in an attempt to industrialize the country and streamline agricultural production to support the growing population. Land was collectivized, farmers' work was restructured and directed by government officials unversed in agriculture, and many were forced into factories, steel smelting, and industrial labor in an attempt to modernize the country. Known as the Great Leap Forward, this program had the unintended consequence of widespread famine and the deaths of some 30 million Chinese, as crops failed, farmland was destroyed by flooding, and the government confiscated grain in the form of tax, leading to massive food shortages.

In the mid-1960s, Chairman Mao launched a Cultural Revolution designed to “refresh” Chinese culture and eliminate elements of the culture that he deemed to be backward, bourgeois, feudal, or otherwise counter-revolutionary. In particular, Mao wanted to dispense with what became known as the “Four Olds”: Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits (or “Habits of Mind”). To help attack these institutions, ideas, and artifacts, Mao called upon the youth of the country (symbolic of the “new”) to rise up against and destroy anything perceived to be part of the Four Olds: this included books, art, architecture, religious edifices, music, and even traditional modes of education seen as too bourgeois, Western, or Confucian. Students across the country were

called to form groups of “Red Guards,” paramilitary bands of ideologically driven teens and young adults who first plastered schools and buildings with large-character anti-Olds and pro-Reds (or pro-Revolutionary) propaganda, before then openly targeting teachers (who were seen as representative of bourgeois, intellectual, or even feudal society that must be attacked) and students who either were seen as ideologically opposed to the Revolution or, as soon developed, impure in their bloodline. The Cultural Revolution therefore took an “ethnic” turn and began polarizing teachers and students along their perceived connections to what became known as the “Five Black Categories”: landlords, rich peasants, anti-Revolutionaries, criminals, Rightists, and capitalists. Instead of being purely class-related labels, these labels were now ascribed hereditarily: You were a “black” landlord, for example, because your parents or grandparents were landlords. Your corrupt “badness” was in your blood.

This ideological and quasi-ethnic polarization—fueled largely by student, rather than teacher, ideologues—quickly morphed into public pillorying and widespread violence. All across the country, teachers (and sometimes students) seen as revolutionarily “impure” were paraded in front of jeering crowds and forced to wear dunce caps and self-incriminating placards announcing their perceived counter-revolutionary thinking, actions, or identities. In what became known as “Struggle Sessions,” they were forced to publicly atone for their “crimes” and, if they did not, were stripped, beaten, humiliated, or killed. This class and “bloodline” polarization between the historically oppressed and the historical oppressors forced students into camps pitted against their teachers and each other, where to be seen as having the wrong ideas, the wrong class belonging, or the wrong “blood” identity could lead to public shame, murder, or suicide.

By the time the Cultural Revolution ended with Mao’s death in 1976, it left in its wake anywhere from 750,000 to 7.7 million dead—either from murder or suicide—and over 125 million who had suffered directly or been targeted in the chaos.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Yongyi Song, “Chronology of Mass Killings During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976),” SciencePo–Mass Violence and Resistance-Research Network, Aug. 25, 2011, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/chronology-mass-killings-during-chinese-cultural-revolution-1966-1976.html>, accessed Jan. 1, 2024.



# Artifacts from the Cultural Revolution

## 1. The Chinese Are Called to Eliminate “Bad Elements” of Society

From a June 1, 1966 editorial in the magazine *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), we see a Maoist directive to mercilessly attack vestiges of the “bourgeois” and “feudal” society that stand in opposition to the Revolution. Note the dehumanizing language of “monsters” to refer to the “bad” elements of society. This attitude quickly swept through the country, soon appearing in schools as Red Guards—youth paramilitary groups enacting Mao’s calls to root out vestiges of the “Old” society—targeted teachers, students, and anything they perceived to be “counter-revolutionary”:

For the last few months, in response to the militant call of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao, hundreds of millions of workers, peasants and soldiers and vast numbers of revolutionary cadres and intellectuals, all armed with Mao Tse-tung's thought, have been sweeping away a horde of monsters that have entrenched themselves in ideological and cultural positions. With the tremendous and impetuous force of a raging storm, they have smashed the shackles imposed on their minds by the exploiting classes for so long in the past, routing the bourgeois "specialists," "scholars," "authorities" and "venerable masters" and sweeping every bit of their prestige into the dust.

(*The Great Socialist Cultural Revolution in China* [3], Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966. p. 1)

Later in the same editorial, we see further use of such language as “evil,” “poison,” and “old” from which “liberation” is to be achieved, to refer to large parts of Chinese society. This is the task that Mao set before the Red Guards:

The proletarian cultural revolution is aimed not only at demolishing all the old ideology and culture and all the old customs and habits, which, fostered by the exploiting classes, have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years, but also at creating and fostering among the

masses an entirely new ideology and culture and entirely new customs and habits—those of the proletariat. This great task of transforming customs and habits is without any precedent in human history. As for all the heritage, customs and habits of the feudal and bourgeois classes, the proletarian world outlook must be used to subject them to thoroughgoing criticism. It takes time to clear away the evil habits of the old society from among the people. Nevertheless, our experience since liberation proves that the transformation of customs and habits can be accelerated if the masses are fully mobilized, the mass line is implemented and the transformation is made into a genuine mass movement.

## **2. Mao Defines the Purpose of Education**

(ibid., p. 4)

Mao was explicit in his views on the ideological role of schools. He saw education as producing a binary effect: either teachers could be revolutionary or anti-revolutionary; there was no in-between. Anti-bourgeois (and, thus, pro-revolutionary) ideology had to be woven throughout all curriculum. Furthermore, if teachers espoused the “wrong” ideology, they were not fit to instruct:

"In all its works," said Mao Tse-tung, "all schools should aim at transforming the ideology of the students." [...] The schools "must resolutely execute the proletarian revolutionary line represented by Chairman Mao and thoroughly criticize and repudiate the bourgeois reactionary line." This is the meaning of the "two-line" struggle or "line education." Schools must "carry out struggle, criticism, and transformation"; they must "practice economy while making revolution." Political and military training is prescribed for teachers as well as students, and "the ranks of teachers must be reorganized and purified seriously." [...] In the study of academic subjects, political and ideological themes must be interwoven with the subject matter[...]. The chemistry or mathematics teacher has as much responsibility as the teacher of the political course to teach the Thought of Mao Tse-tung and to remold the students' ideology. [...] Armed with Mao's directives and Party guidelines, the [government propaganda] teams visit classes and

check on the performance and attitudes of teachers and students. Many a college teacher has been called to task for expressing ideas in the classroom that do not adhere strictly to what the team members understand to be the correct ideological line. Some have been relieved of teaching and permitted to resume their work only after satisfactory evidence of ideological change. [...] Ideological remolding is more than a negative process of rectification. It is the implanting of the correct ideology and the shaping of a proletarian revolutionary outlook. In all its work and lessons, if a school is not educating students with proletarian ideology, it is poisoning them with bourgeois ideology.

(Theodore Hsi-en Chen, *The Maoist Educational Revolution*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1974, pp. 32, 51, 54, 91, 152-153)

Mao felt that knowledge itself could be divided neatly into two categories:

What is knowledge? From ancient times down to the present, there have only been two types of knowledge: one type is knowledge of the struggle in production; the other is knowledge of the class struggle. Knowledge of the national struggle is also included in these. What knowledge is there aside from this? There is none. Natural science and social science are nothing but the crystallization of these two types of knowledge. Philosophy is then a generalization and summary of natural science and social science. Aside from these, there is no other type of knowledge.

(Mao Tse Tung, excerpted from speech on “Reform in Learning, the Part, and Literature,” February 8, 1942, cited in Boyd Compton, *Mao’s China: Party Reform Documents, 1942-1944*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952, pp 14-17, 21-22)

### **3. School Curricula Transformed**

Mao’s ideas quickly overran school curricula, as previous textbooks—seen as representative of “bourgeois” or “feudal” ways of thinking—were replaced with Mao’s books. The most important of these was *The Little Red Book*, a compilation of Mao’s sayings, which students were required to study and read



aloud in class. Maoist thought divided Chinese society into “good” people and “bad” people, classified as the Five Black Categories (bad) and the Five Red Categories (good). The former group consisted of landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, “bad elements,” and “right-wingers.” This group was seen as “bad” because, according to Mao, they stood in opposition to those groups who supported his ongoing Marxist revolution. The latter, “good” group consisted of “poor and lower-middle peasants, workers, revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary cadres, and revolutionary martyrs.” Here, we see Mao’s wife, one of the most influential figures in the Cultural Revolution, exhorting Mao’s followers in a speech on July 28, 1966 to have no mercy on the “bad” people:

When good men beat bad men, the bad men get what they deserve. When bad men beat good men, it is an honor for the good men. When good people beat good people, it is just a misunderstanding which could not be cleared up without a fight.

(Cited in Youqin Wang, *Issues & Studies* 37, no. 2, March/April 2001, p. 35)

#### **4. Children Are Exhorted to Hate Certain Social Groups**

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, the curriculum included inviting peasants and workers in to teach the children about the evils of the exploitative classes in sessions called “Recalling Bitterness Big Meetings.” Here is a first-hand account of such lessons:

From my reading and my personal experience, usually in these meetings a peasant or a worker was invited to present the cruelty of landlords or capitalists, the coldness, hunger, and physical abuse they had suffered in the Old Society. Students were expected to bring a handkerchief with them, for when it reached the most bitter part, everybody was supposed to burst into tears. One or two students would be contacted beforehand to shout slogans at this moment. The slogans would be like this: “Down with the exploiting class,” “Never forget class struggle,” “Never forget class bitterness and forever remember hatred of tears and blood,” “Forever be loyal to the party,” and so forth. At the end of the meeting,

there was usually a “recall bitterness dinner.” This dinner exaggeratedly imitated the poorest people’s life in the Old Society. It was usually soup with a few grains of rice, a lot of bitter wild vegetables, and some sand or small stones. One was not supposed to frown while drinking the soup; instead one would comment: “Oh even this is better than before the Liberation.” After the meeting, the Chinese language class would use this as a topic for students to write their “hearty feelings” about the two different societies, and the politics class would use this to illustrate points regarding the permanent existence of class struggle. I remember several meetings of this kind. Once a peasant was invited. He had really lived a poor life. In winter he had had no shoes to wear, so he would follow the cows and put his feet in the cows’ dung to get some warmth. But in talking about the landlord, he giggled: “We often kidded each other. He loved boasting, this funny guy.” We were mad and reproached him: “How come you are smiling? Whenever you call about the Old Society, you should be sad and angry!” The man said, “Actually he was a pretty nice guy, he didn’t have too much land either.” We all shouted: “Incredible! You must not have raised your class consciousness!” And the meeting was turned into a class struggle meeting against this man...

(Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 116)

## **5. Emotional Impact of Instruction**

In one memoir on growing up during the Cultural Revolution, the author describes the impact of such lessons:

Every semester  
the school invited peasants to our classrooms, to tell us about their  
suffering in the old society. It was a special class held in every school,  
called Compare Past Misery with Present Happiness.  
One year an old couple was invited  
to tell the sad tale about a New Year’s Eve  
when they were young parents

with a baby and no home.  
The husband started:  
“It was after a drought year and  
the field had produced nothing by autumn.  
Unable to pay any rent,  
right before the new year,  
we were kicked out of our home by the evil landlord.  
Hoping to go to our relatives for shelter,  
we started for the city.  
Carrying our baby, only a few months old then,  
we walked in the midwinter cold for days,  
begging along the way.  
By New Year’s Eve we still had twenty miles to go.  
It started snowing as it was getting dark.  
Holding the baby in her arms,  
my wife couldn’t move any farther.  
I decided to walk around and beg for food.  
My wife waited with the baby under a bridge.”  
The wife continued for her part:  
“As my husband was looking for food,  
I took snow from the frozen ground,  
melted it in my mouth and fed it to the baby.  
He was crying from hunger,  
but gradually turned quiet with cold...  
[...]  
As the story went on,  
the classroom was at first in total silence.  
Then the boy next to me started sobbing.  
He put his face  
on his folded arms on the desk.  
Here and there my classmates were crying all around the room.  
What injustice.  
What unfairness.  
And what evil society had caused such misery?  
Our little hearts were filled with indignation  
against the great injustices of the old society.

When I went home, Nainai was cooking in the kitchen. The air was filled with the scent of stewed pork and stir-fried vegetables.

I told her the story from school, and asked her, “Why were the landlords so bad?”

(Chun Yu, *Little Green: Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2015, pp. 75-77)

## **6. Students Are Taught Which Social Groups Deserve Praise**

We see a further shift in curriculum as students are explicitly taught to revere the working classes. From a first-grade textbook:

When I grow up, I will be a peasant,  
And I will build new villages for my motherland.  
When I grow up I will make machines,  
And I will send them to the villages.  
When I grow up, I will join the Army,  
To protect our motherland and fight our enemies.  
Workers, peasants, and soldiers are very important and very revolutionary.  
When we grow up, we will be workers, peasants, and soldiers.

(*Volume 2, Grade One, Text Three: What Will I Be When I Grow Up?*, cited in Jing Lin, *The Red Guards' Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 87)

## 7. Literacy Curricula and Children’s Literature Center Polarizing Themes

Jing Lin, who lived during the Cultural Revolution and has studied school curricula of the time, draws our attention to other such lessons, in which students are encouraged to view certain parts of society as “evil”:

In grade two, while continuing to emphasize the love Chairman Mao has for the people and the people for Chairman Mao, students are first warned of being cheated by people who are evil-hearted. A story is told about a wolf who disguised himself in sheep’s clothing and ate many sheep without the shepherd realizing it. When the shepherd found that out, no leniency was possible: “The shepherd raised the wooden stick in his hand and struck fiercely at the wolf, saying as he struck: ‘Death to you, you wolf in sheep’s clothing! Death to you, you wolf in sheep’s clothing!’” (*Volume 3, Grade Two, Text Seventeen: A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing*). As a child, I also learned this text. The teacher helped us to relate the wolf to “class enemies,” who would cover themselves to get good people. For several generations of young Chinese people, the wolf became a synonym for “class enemies,” who, once found out, should be punished severely.

(Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 88)

## 8. Learning Objectives Connected to Political Objectives

From literacy to history to math, political objectives infused the new curriculum. One guide instructs teachers on a lesson for teaching a story at the elementary level: “The Story of Li Ch-un-hua.”<sup>2</sup>:

*Objectives of instruction:*

1. To cause the students to know that peasants and their children in the old society suffered oppression and exploitation by the landlords, so that

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<sup>2</sup> The following quote is an opening excerpt from a lesson plan reproduced in Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991. Note that the brackets in this quote are used by Lin in his study, and not by the present curators.

they led lives like this of oxen and horses, and to evoke the sympathy of the pupils for the oppressed peasants and their hatred for the oppressive landlords; to cause the students to know that after the Liberation the lives of the people became better from day to day, that the Communist Party and Chairman Mao led the people in destroying the injustices of the old society, and that the lives of the children of peasants of new China are very happy;

2. To allow the pupils to learn the new characters and compounds in the lesson;

3. To practice reading aloud with emotion.

*Preparation for Teaching:* Preparation of four picture strips.

1. Li Ch'un-hua Living a Hard Life at Home;
2. Li Ch'un-hua Being Punished at the Landlord's House;
3. The House of Li Ch'un-hua after the Liberation;
4. Li Ch'un-hua's Mother Sending Li Ch'un-hua Off to School.

*Period of instruction:* Three class sessions.

### Session One

1. Initial talk: Classmates, can you think of a lesson in which you studied about a landlord's oppression of a peasant and of what the peasant's life was like after the Communist Party came? (*Old Uncle Chu*. Before the Liberation, old Uncle Chu planted rape for the landlord for 18 years and suffered oppression under the landlord. After the Liberation, the tables were turned and the rape garden was given to old Uncle Chu.) So you know about the oppression that the peasants suffered at the hands of the landlords? (In the movie *The White-Haired Girl*, we saw how Hsi-erh's father Yan Pai-lao suffered oppression under a landlord. Yang Pai-lao couldn't pay his rent, so the landlord forced him to sell Hsi-erh to him and forced Yang Pai-lao to kill himself.) What happened to Hsi-erh? (She was taken away by the landlord.) What was Hsi-erh's life like in the landlord's house? (It was hard for Hsi-erh. She served the landlord Shih-jen's mother all day and into the evening and she was often beaten and cursed.) Before the Liberation, the hardships suffered by peasants and the



children of peasants under the oppression of landlords were more than can be told. Today we are talking about a new lesson. This lesson is the story of a peasant child before and after the Liberation...

(Manual for language teachers at the elementary level by Wen I-chan, 1957. Lesson plan for teaching “The Story of Li Ch-un-hua.” pp. 143-49. Full citation Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991. p. 103)

## 9. Propaganda Overtakes Schools

Maoist propaganda overwhelmed schools during the Cultural Revolution. Large-character posters (propaganda posters with very large lettering) hung in school entrances, hallways, and classrooms. Such posters read:

Pledge to fight to the death to defend the dictatorship of the proletariat!  
Pledge to fight to the death to defend Mao Zedong Thought! [...]  
Whoever disobeys Mao Zedong Thought, no matter who he is, no matter how high his position is, no matter what banner he flaunts, will be smashed to pieces. (*ibid.* p. 38)

(Beijing Middle and Elementary Schools Revolutionary Teachers and Students Rebel Committee, “Fight and return to the schools, thoroughly go in for Revolution!” Feb., 1967, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1967-040>, Accessed Jan. 1, 2024)





(Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House Propaganda Poster Group, "Criticize the old world and build a new world with Mao Zedong. Thought as a



weapon,” Sep., 1966, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e15-699>, Accessed Jan. 1, 2024)

(Designer Unknown, “Completely smash the capitalist class and the reactionary line of Liu and Deng!,” ca. 1967, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e16-338>, Accessed Jan. 1, 2024)



## **10. The Red Guards Are Primed to Target Class Enemies**

Here, Jin Ling explains the mindset of the Red Guards and how they viewed different groups of society:

Here I attempt to bring an understanding of how the Red Guards, who were teenagers and young adults, could commit such brutal deeds as putting their neighbors in pig cages and throwing them around, tying up their teachers and ordering them to light the explosives they were forced to sit on, or forcing old men and women to kneel on broken glass and whipping them until they were too tired to raise their arms, declaring a total break with their parents and ruthlessly plunging their friends into piles of thorns. I try to reveal what brought the Red Guards to regard doing this as ‘conducting class struggle,’ ‘seeking liberation for the oppressed’ and ‘being master of the country.’ [...] Having been born and raised in China, and having lived there more than 20 years, gives me a reality-based sense about the cultural and political system there. Studying in the United States has allowed me to look at the movement from other perspectives as well, and more objectively than would have been possible in my own country. Over the past three years, I have been probing my way through information, theories, and studies, and I have been reflecting critically on what happened in those years. In the process it has become clear to me that in large part it was noncritical categorical thinking that had taken over the Red Guards which led to their destructive behaviors. This destructive categorical thinking came as a consequence of features in the political, cultural, and educational system that prevailed long before the Cultural Revolution, features that prepared the Red Guards psychologically to engage in such massive damage to human dignity and precious lives...

The political socialization experience for the Red Guards was provided within a system that had long taken achieving human liberation to be a matter of the proletariat overthrowing their oppressors and becoming oppressors themselves. Through the school curriculum, differential treatment of students of different origins, class struggle activities, and national role models, they were trained to think and act as oppressors over “class enemies,” to be absolutely loyal to the government and the

political idol — Chairman Mao. Their character of obedience and rebelliousness was displayed in showing gratitude to the savior Chairman Mao, in doing justice for the poor, and in struggling against “class enemies” to protect the new “just” system. The schools, families, and society as a whole all provided a single, simple, consistent message about class struggle, which eventually turned students into tools for the government to maintain their oppressive position. Thereby it became even harder for the oppressed “class enemies,” being in the minority, and their basic existence as human beings being under total control, to change their situation. In circumstances like the Cultural Revolution, they became extremely vulnerable targets for the Red Guards, who are trained to see them as inhuman beings, as obstacles on the socialist road. In short, the Cultural Revolution, which ended with millions dead and many millions more uprooted homes, is the inevitable result of the kind of education the Red Guards had received.

(Jing Lin, *The Red Guards' Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991. p. 2, p. 131)

## **11. Students Are Called Upon to Take Up Revolution**

Mao placed a great deal of importance on the role of young people to advance the Revolution. Not only did he urge the Red Guards to prosecute revolutionary ideals in schools and throughout the country, but also young people in general were exhorted to act:

Revolutionary youngsters in middle and primary schools: Our great leader Chairman Mao has said: “The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China’s future belongs to you.” In this great proletarian cultural revolution without parallel in history, you have already made many contributions. Now, you should respond to the Party Central Committee’s great call to re-open classes and make revolution, raise high the great red banner of



the thought of Mao Tse-tung, forge ahead by exploiting past success and win new victories!

(Jen-min Jih-pao Editorial. From Peking Jen-min Jih-pao, March 7, 1967, translation in Theodore Hsi-en Chen, *The Maoist Educational Revolution*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1974, p. 240)

## **12. "Oppressor" and "Oppressed" Groups Are Hereditary in Nature**

The class distinctions between "good" and "bad" people became framed in terms of bloodline; one's categorization in a Black category or a Red category depended upon one's lineage, as we see in the following Red Guard song, which was sung in schools by student members:

The old man a truman, the son is a hero.  
The old man a reactionary, the son is an asshole.  
If you are a revolutionary, then step forward and come along, If you are not, damn you to hell.  
Be faithful to the revolution and the party.  
The party is our mother and father.  
Whoever dares say one bad word about the party,  
We'll send him to Yama immediately.  
Damn you to hell!  
Depose you from your fucking post! Kill! Kill! Kill!  
It is basically so.

(Zhai Zhenhua, *Red Flower of China: An Autobiography*, New York: Soho Press, 2003, Kindle Location 1389)

## **13. Children Internalize Group Labels**

These hateful ideas had a powerful impact on young people at the time. Here we see the impact that social labeling had on a child growing up during the Cultural Revolution:

The Party had a system to classify social members. Intellectuals,  
especially teachers,  
Were categorized as the number nine  
Type of despicable social members  
Among landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, Bad elements,  
rightists, spies, and so on.  
They were taunted as “Stinky Old Nines.”  
There were many “Stinky Old Nines” in our family, Including Mama and  
my big auntie  
Who taught in my elementary school.  
We “stunk” quite badly through those years.

(Chun Yu, *Little Green: Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, pp. 84-85)

#### **14. The Red Guards Bullied Other Students for Ideological Impurities**

Students in the Red Guard targeted students from the perceived “Black categories,” students not deemed revolutionary enough. As one former Red Guard recounts:

When off duty, we Red Guards would monitor how [the other students] were doing. We would walk cockily in front of them and at times stop before a student. She would be directed to recite a quotation from Chairman Mao’s books or to report her progress in her own personal reform. Whenever we felt like it, we would mount the platform and give them lectures. In my most memorable lecture, [...] I bawled: “This is called the ‘proletarian dictatorship!’ It is the opposite of the ‘capitalist dictatorship’ your parents imposed on the working people before Liberation. You probably think that we’re too hard on you, but let me tell you, compared with what your parents did to our parents, we’re gentle! What have we done? We only push you a bit so that you become better people. Let’s imagine how it would have been if we were still in the evil old society. How would you have treated us? You wouldn’t have allowed

us to sit in the same classroom with you! No, you would never even have allowed us in school! You would ride roughshod over us, starve us, and make us child laborers! [...] Yes, you would have made us toil in the field, work in factories, or crawl in the pits. Yes, taught by your parents, you would have brandished your whips over our backs! [...] Listen carefully! The days of you and your parents are gone forever! Your world is finished! The power is in our hands today, and it will always be! Don't you ever nurse resentment towards us! It will only rebound and harm you!

(Zhai Zhenhua, *Red Flower of China: An Autobiography*, New York: Soho Press, 2003, Kindle location 1859)

## **15. Everyday Language Reveals Propensity for Violence**

The students' language and rhetoric underlay a propensity to inter-group violence. Calls for violence were no longer just in big-character posters, but they now permeated everyday language:

The language used in daily life and in struggle meetings by the proletariat was readily picked up by students and had the effect of triggering overt aggression. "Revolution" and "struggle" were two of the most frequently used words in the mass media and by the government. "Revolution" in Chinese is expressed in two characters, the first, *ge*, means "cut off," "destroy," or "kill," and the second character, *ming*, means "life," "head." "Struggle" in Chinese is also expressed with two characters: the first, *dou*, means "attack," "fight," and the second, *Zheng*, means "argue" or "struggle." Negative words such as "wolf," "snake," "ghost," and "bad egg" were frequently used to describe class enemies. "Dog" is a shameful word in Chinese. "Class enemies" old and new were often referred to as "capitalist running dogs" "dog stud," "dog's son of a bitch." These words appeared daily in the mass media and in people's lives. As adolescents, many students took the words literally. "Revolution is justified" carries the same meaning as "cutting heads is justified," so long as the heads were those of the "class enemies." In correspondence

with their words, they actually rushed into people's houses with hammers and axes to "smash to pieces" pianos, furniture, and windows, to "fell the enemies to the floor and stamp a foot on them," to "apply clubs to the drowning dogs," to write big character posters against their parents, teachers, relatives, and neighbors with insulting caricatures to "criticize so-and-so until he becomes stinky," and on and on. Aggression can also be triggered by pictures. The Red Guards drew many aggressive pictures in which they pierced through the "class enemy's" heart with sharp pens, they wiped them away like wiping away dust, they struck the head of "class enemies" with great strength, they broke their snake necks, and the like. Their pictures often form striking contrasts between the proletarian forces and the "class enemies." The proletariat and the students are made to look tall, strong, angry, and the "class enemies" to look shabby, thin, short, and ugly, trembling before the power of the proletariat.

(Jing Lin, *The Red Guards' Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991. pp. 152-53)

## **16. Students Required to Identify Themselves by Class**

Though many students were aware of each other's backgrounds, some schools required public identification of students' belonging to the oppressor or oppressed categories, including formally registering after the takeover of the Red Guards.

The second day of the student takeover, there were three registration tables outside the front door, each manned by Red Guards. A large banner hung above them, reading, "Throughout the world, throughout eternity, this is truth." Underneath, a smaller banner read, "Acknowledge your true identity or suffer the wrath of the Revolution." To the left, a vertical banner proclaimed, "The son of a hero, a hero shall be." At the far right, a similar banner read, "The son of a Rightist is our enemy." The table on the left had "Registration for Five Classes of Reds" written above it, and a list of the five types of Reds: working class, peasants, soldiers, sons of the Revolution, inner-city poor. Since those who were

classed as Reds were supposed to fight for and protect the Revolution, they were also called Red Guards. The middle table was for the Whites: clerks, bureaucrats, and small business owners. The right-hand table had a sign that read, “Registration for the Six Classes of Blacks.” Listed were the six types of Blacks: landlords, rich peasants, anti-Revolutionaries, criminals, Rightists, capitalists. I had to register as a Black, while Ah-di, a brickmaker’s daughter, registered as a Red.

(Zi-Ping Luo, *A Generation Lost: China Under the Cultural Revolution*, New York City: Avon Books, 1991, p. 22)

### **17. The Red Guards Focus on Pure Blood Lineage**

Regarding the “blood lineage” aspect of class, we read in another memoir that your classification as a “good element” or “bad element” was determined by your birth:

The Red Guard movement, from its birth, put its faith in blood lineage: “A dragon breeds a dragon, a phoenix breeds a phoenix. The children of mice can only dig holes.” Many of the very first Beijing and Shanghai Red Guards were the sons and daughters of top Communist Party officials such as He Long, one of the ten marshals of the People’s Liberation Army. By contrast, the party had a deep distrust of the children of the Black Fives, the former landlords, wealthy peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists.

(Nanchu, *Red Sorrow: A Memoir*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012, p. 51)

Students perceived to be “bad elements” were often targeted by other (Red Guard) students, who forced them to publicly confess their disgraceful lineage. As one classroom sign read, “Down with the children of dogs.” Students were then forced to repeat in front of their jeering classmates and Red Guard members: “I am a child of a dog. I am a rotten egg. I deserve to die.”

(Cited in Youqin Wang, “Student Attacks Against Teachers,” *Issues & Studies* 37, no. 2, March/April 2001, [http://ywang.uchicago.edu/history/docs/2001\\_03\\_05.pdf](http://ywang.uchicago.edu/history/docs/2001_03_05.pdf), p. 38. Accessed Jan. 1, 2024)

Teachers explicitly taught children that their inherent worth dependent upon their lineage:

In political class, teacher Duo instructed us to search our hearts for inner contradictions. Family origin was important: those of us from good (proletarian or “low”) backgrounds had to be certain not to stray from the path, and those from bad (landlord or bourgeois or “high”) backgrounds had to struggle against their inferior inheritance. Yizhong had only a handful of students of “high” antecedents, which included capitalists, landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, rightists, and bad elements. Most students were of ‘low’ origin, meaning their parents were poor or lower-middle peasants, farmhands, workers, or revolutionary cadres.

(Gao Yuan, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 25)

## **18. Mao Charges Students to Educate Their Teachers**

During the Cultural Revolution, great responsibility was placed on the youth (the Red Guards)—not only to advance the Revolution, but to upend the traditional teacher-student hierarchical relationship:

Because the teachers have made big strides in revolutionizing their thinking, the relationship between them and the students has greatly changed. Many teachers realize that in the past they and the students were not on good terms, the main responsibility lay in their incorrect attitude towards the young fighters’ revolutionary rebel spirit. This is not a question of method, but of basic attitude. Therefore, they take the initiative in examining their own mistakes before the students, fight self-interest and identify themselves with the students, and together they study, engage in revolutionary criticism and repudiation, do productive



labor and take part in military drill and recreational activities. As a result, the few mischievous students have also examined their own shortcomings and errors. A new relationship has thus been established between teachers and students. Teachers teach students, students teach teachers and students teach one another. Teaching and studying supplement each other and standards are raised together.

(Excerpt taken from “Report of an Investigation into the Experience Gained by the Shuiyuan Commune in Yingkou County in Carrying out the Revolution in Education, By Jen-min Jih-pao and Hung-ch’i Investigators,” from *Hung-ch’i*, no. 3, 1968, translation in *Peking Review*, September 27, 1978, as cited in *The Maoist Educational Revolution* by Theodore Hsi-en Chen, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1974, p. 268)

## **19. Psychological Impact of Ideological Training**

Jin Ling recounts a key educational practice and its impact on students:

The meetings are so arranged that all students may have a turn at expressing their loyalty to the party and Mao, at criticizing each other, and at confessing any inner thoughts that are contradictory to the ‘correct’ Communist ideology. When students make mistakes, these are either pointed out by group members or confessed by the students themselves. Then group members set out to ‘help’ each person to realize the ‘wrongs’ in behaviors or ideas and to suggest ways for correction. Participation is required, and students are all supposed to engage themselves actively in discussions. Sometimes meetings are not dismissed until a consensus is reached. Self-criticism and mutual criticism are used to sort out different viewpoints and values and to monitor the process of ideological development. Confession serves to dig deep into the roots of ‘incorrect ideas’ in one’s subconscious and is taken as an effective way to ‘conduct revolution in one’s deep soul.’ Criticism and confession have the effect of both self-education and mutual education among group members. After many years’ mutual criticism

and self-criticism, the students come to feel that there can never be enough effort put into 'raising socialist and class consciousness,' that they are responsible for watching out for themselves and their group members so that they will never 'slip into the capitalist road.'

And here, Jin Ling recounts the impact of long term discrimination on students of "bad" origin:

This reverse discrimination regarding students of so-called bad origin bore very deep, long-term effects on the treatment of those children. It implies that even though they might do well in school, they did not deserve a reward. Once differential treatment as to the learning outcomes was established, they were also discriminated against in the learning process and in daily life. They had great difficulty getting admitted into student organizations, gaining positive feedback from teachers, making peer friends, and the like. Moreover, this treatment directly or indirectly served to justify the assumption that people's class background decided their ideas and behaviors[...] Children so characterized were placed in a kind of catch-22 situation: they could not choose not to be born into bad origin families, and they could not choose to find a way out. If they tried hard to demonstrate their loyalty to the system, they were always suspected as pretentious. If they kept silent, they were blamed for hiding inner dissatisfaction toward the system. As time went on, discrimination was taken as "deserved" for them. Students of good origin came to take it for granted that they would get favorable treatment in school and in society, and students of bad origin came to blame unfavorable treatment on their bad luck or became convinced that as human beings they were inferior to others, or that their lives were doomed to be spent replaying all the evils their parents had done. They were called "dog's sibling," "the landlord's son of a bitch," "little crawling snake," and many other tables. Many of them severely blamed their parents for having given birth to them.

(Jing Lin, *The Red Guards' Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1991, p. 85, p. 113)

## **20. Letter from Peking Students to the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao**

Many students came to passionately embrace Mao's principles, driven by a grand vision of their purpose in world history, as we see in this letter urging abolition of the old college entrance examination system:

June 6, 1966

Dear Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Dear Chairman Mao,

We are senior graduating students of the Peking No. 1 Girls' Middle School. With powerful revolutionary sentiments filling our hearts, we are writing to you to express our determination to stand for a thorough revolution, for the thorough destruction of the old educational system in its entirety.

With the advance of the world revolution and the steady deepening of the great socialist cultural revolution in our country, we feel increasingly that the young people of our generation are definitely a key generation in the Chinese and world revolution to carry on what has been achieved and to press ahead to the future. The history of the proletarian revolution has pushed us into the arena of the world revolution, has turned Peking into the center of the world revolution and our respected and beloved Chairman Mao has become the great Standard Bearer of the contemporary world revolution; the Chinese people have become the main force of the world revolution and China has become its red base. It demands that we defend the red political power won at the cost of the blood and lives of countless revolutionary martyrs and predecessors; inherit the spirit of our predecessors in carrying on the revolution resolutely through to the end; shoulder the heavy task of carrying China's socialist revolution through to the end, wiping out imperialism, revisionism and the reactionaries of all countries and carrying the world revolution through to the end. It demands that we take over Mao Tse-tung's thought which is great, correct and invincible, and pass it on to the

coming generations. This generation of ours is truly a most crucial generation!

Dear Central Committee of the Party and Dear Chairman Mao, you place boundless hopes on us. You have said: ‘The world is as much yours as ours but ultimately it is yours. You young people are full of vitality and at a stage of vigorous growth; you are like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. We put our hopes on you... The world belongs to you and the future of China belongs to you.

Dear Central Committee of the Party and Dear Chairman Mao, we are students who will soon graduate from senior middle school. In this great cultural revolution, the responsibility falls first of all on our shoulders to smash the old college entrance examination system. We wish to express our views on the existing system of admittance to higher schools.

We hold that the existing system of admittance to higher schools is a continuation of the old feudal examination system dating back thousands of years. It is a most backward and reactionary educational system. It runs counter to the educational policy laid down by Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao says that education must serve the politics of the proletariat and be integrated with productive labor. ‘Our educational policy must enable everyone who gets an education, to develop morally, intellectually and physically and become a cultured, socialist-minded worker.’ But the existing educational system is not set up in accordance with this directive of Chairman Mao. In fact it is extending and prolonging the three major differences—between manual and mental labor, between worker and peasant and between town and country. Concretely, we make the following charges against it:

1. Many young people are led not to study for the revolution but to immerse themselves in books for the university entrance examination to pay no heed to politics. Quite a number of students have been indoctrinated with such gravely reactionary ideas of the exploiting classes as that ‘book learning stands above all else,’ or ‘achieving fame,’ ‘becoming experts,’ ‘making one’s own way,’ ‘taking the road

of becoming bourgeois specialist,” and so on. The present examination system helps the spread of these ideas.

2. It makes many schools chase one-sidedly after a high rate in the number of their students who will be admitted to higher schools and as a result many become “special” and “major” schools which specially enroll “outstanding students.” These schools have opened the gates wide to those who completely immerse themselves in books and pay no attention to politics and have shut out large numbers of outstanding children of workers, peasants, and revolutionary cadres.

3. It seriously hampers students from developing morally, intellectually and physically and particularly morally. This system fundamentally ignores the ideological revolutionization of the youth. It is, in essence, exactly what is preached by the sinister Teng To gang: “teaching one in accordance with his ability” and “using one in accordance with his ability.”

Therefore, this system of admittance to higher schools serves a capitalist restoration; it is a tool for cultivating new bourgeois elements and revisionists. No wonder the sinister Teng To anti-Party gang regards it as its finest treasure and that the U.S. imperialists gleefully place their hopes of “peaceful evolution” on China’s “bureaucrats in the field of technology” and “experts in the field of ideology.”

Respected and beloved Chairman Mao, you have repeatedly taught us that “we should support whatever the enemy opposes and oppose whatever the enemy supports.” As the enemy claps his hands and applauds the old system so desperately, can we allow it to continue to exist? No! Not for a single day! Today, in this great and unprecedented cultural revolution, we must join the workers, peasants and soldiers in smashing it thoroughly. We suggest in concrete terms that:

1. Beginning this year, we abolish the old system of enrolling students to the higher schools.

2. Graduates from senior middle schools should go straight into the midst of the workers, peasants and soldiers and integrate themselves with the masses.

We think that at a time when their world outlook is being formed, young people of seventeen or eighteen years old should be tempered and nurtured in the storms of the three great revolutionary movements (of class struggle, the struggle for production, and scientific experiment — Ed.). They should first of all get “ideological diplomas” from the working class and the poor and lower-middle peasants. The Party will select the best from among the fine sons and daughters of the proletariat, young people who truly serve the broad masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, and send them on to higher schools. We absolutely do not agree that one should go among the workers, peasants and soldiers, after one’s graduation from college because at that time one’s world outlook will have basically been formed, and any remolding will have become difficult. Moreover, some persons who have acquired “knowledge” think that they have got the “capital” to bargain with the Party and the people.

3. If a number of students must be admitted to institutions of higher learning this year, we request the Party to select them directly from among the graduates of the senior middle schools. Everything we have belongs to the Party and the people, we have no right to bargain whatsoever. We will go with firm determination to any place we are asked to go to by the Party and wherever we go, we must take root, germinate, blossom and bear fruit there.

We are young people armed with Mao Tse-tung’s thought, we have been imbued with a revolutionary consciousness. The old system of entrance examination can only recess our demand for revolution. If we smash it, we will study even more consciously for the revolution.

We hold that by acting in this way we will not only save a great deal of manpower and material resources for the socialist construction of our country, but, what is still more important, we will uproot the poisonous revisionist sources of “bureaucrats in the field of technology” and “experts in the field of ideology” and do away with an important



condition which engenders ideas of “achieving fame and fortune,” of “making one’s own way” and “following the road of becoming bourgeois specialists.” It is a great revolution in the education circle.

Of course, we know that to thoroughly smash the existing entrance examination system of enrolling students to higher schools needs time and experience. It calls even more for the heightening of the people’s level of political consciousness. But anyway, our proletarian revolution will not allow it to exist any longer. If a change of the entrance examination system throughout the whole country is unfeasible at the moment, then we ask that it be done experimentally here in Peking. If this cannot be carried out for the time being in all Peking’s schools, then we ask determinedly that it be experimented with in our class. In the present great socialist cultural revolution, our whole class has furthermore come to understand that we must be staunch, dependable successors to the proletarian revolution, that we can never allow Mao Tas-tung’s great thought to be lost in our generation, that we can never let the proletarian revolution, both of China and the world, cease to continue in our generation. We have also come to understand that the present great cultural revolution is a great revolution that touches the people to their very souls, a great creation in world history! We know that the road we are going to take is an untrodden road. But we are the youth of the Mao Tse-tung era. The Chinese revolution as well as the world revolution call on us to be the revolutionary vanguard of the world’s youth. We must be those who dare to think, to speak, to do, to break through, and to make revolution. We know the road we are going to take is a new road, a road that leads to communism. We must and can tread out our proletarian road. Of course, we will still meet many “tigers” on the road of revolution. But can revolutionary youth be frightened by them? We regard the obstacles put up by backward ideologies, by our families, and by public opinion as nothing. We are determined to cleave through and to overpower the ill winds and evil forces! What we need is the dauntless, heroic spirit of a revolutionary who “knows there are tigers on the mountain, but insists on taking that road.”

Dear Central Committee of the Party, dear Chairman Mao, please rest assured! We are fully prepared to wipe out all the tigers on our way! We have a most extremely powerful weapon—Mao Tse-tung's great thought. With that weapon in our hands we will fear nothing, neither heaven nor earth, nor any monsters. With that weapon in our hands, we can follow this road to its end. No one will lag behind. Dear Communist Party, respected and beloved Chairman Mao, the youth here by Chairman Mao's side should be sent to the most difficult places. Please rest assured, Chairman Mao; we are standing by, awaiting your instructions!

Dear Central Committee of the Party, dear Chairman Mao, please rest assured, Our generation is a generation that persists in the revolution, in thorough revolution. We will assuredly take over the great red banner of Mao Tse-tung's thought, and hand it down from generation to generation!

We hope, if it is agreed by the Party's Central Committee and Chairman Mao, that this letter be sent as a proposal to all senior middle school graduates this year and to the teachers and students of all schools in Peking.

Long live our dearest and most respected leader Chairman Mao! 45

The Fourth class of the Senior Third Grade at Peking No 1 Girls' Middle School

June 6, 1966

(Translation in *Peking Review*, June 24, 1966 As cited in Theodore Hsien Chen, *The Maoist Educational Revolution*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1974, pp. 225-229)

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