**Grassroots Factionalism in China’s Cultural Revolution: Rethinking the Paradigms**

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In the 1980s, Western scholars developed a powerful paradigm to explain mass political factionalism in Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966-69) in rational terms, rather than portraying the movement as mere “madness.” They explained mass factionalism as the escalation of latent conflicts between groups from different social backgrounds and with different political interests in the period before the Cultural Revolution. This influential paradigm has since been challenged from several angles, most prominently by Andrew Walder in his book *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement* (Harvard University Press, 2009). Walder and several other scholars have argued that the roles of social background and ideological differences in explaining factional divisions have been exaggerated, and that contingent events and instrumental interests were far more important. The aim of this discussion is to bring new light to this debate. How was grassroots factionalism linked to conflicts at higher levels? How did the social and political backgrounds of participants impact factional participation? Did different interpretations of Maoist ideology matter? Were ordinary participants fighting mainly to avoid the consequences of defeat?

**I.**

**Felix: Andy, in your book on the Red Guard Movement in Beijing and your articles with Dong Guoqiang on Jiangsu, you are challenging the argument that factionalism can be explained with pre-1966 conflicts and the social background of activists. What are your major arguments and how representative are these cases? In Beijing, factionalism at elite universities can partly be explained by manipulations from the central leadership, but is this factor really important in the case of Nanjing?**

**Andy**: The questions about “how representative” are these cases logically can only be answered after detailed research has been conducted in other settings; and so far such research has yet to be completed. We need to move from speculation to evidence.

But the real question is not whether factions can or cannot be explained by social background. It is under what circumstances social background could become expressed in factional conflicts. What we generalize about is the political processes that leads to outcomes—not what the outcomes were “on average” or “mostly”. It is meaningless to ask the question “in general, did factions reflect underlying social backgrounds of participants”? Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn’t. The real question is why they did or why they did not, and in what kinds of settings and circumstances?

At the most basic level, a social interpretation rests on the idea that some factions were more favorable to the “status quo”, while others were more antagonistic. One obvious logical problem plagues this interpretation as one looks at patterns of factional conflict. Rebel groups that were united at certain stages of local conflicts frequently split apart at other stages. If rebel factions were united at one point but divided at another, it seems logically impossible for them to have consistently expressed social backgrounds. Either they did at first but didn’t later on, or vice versa. If we insist on the causal importance of social background, we have to address this obvious logical problem.

The real question is how do we think about the political processes that generate factions? The biggest misunderstanding about the politics of this period in China is that individuals could observe rapidly changing and in many ways unprecedented circumstances and draw obvious conclusions about what is and what is not in their interests if, for example, they are a party cadre, a party member, a political activist, or from one or another kind of family background. The status quo was falling apart, and people had to decide what stance to take. Perhaps in some settings and circumstances this choice was clear; but we cannot simply assume that this was the case in all settings and circumstances. What we have shown in the case of Beijing’s red guards and in a variety of settings in Nanjing is that this way of thinking about politics simply does not square with observable patterns.

The core of the argument is that activists in any situation had to interpret their environment and make political choices. Social interpretations assume that such a choice is relatively clear—that activists can look at the situation facing them and make consistent choices congruent with their presumed interests (as we interpret them, based on their occupational or family background). In Beijing’s universities, and in a variety of settings also in Nanjing, we find a common pattern. In universities and many factories, activists had to come to conclusions about the actions of “work teams” sent down from above to conduct purges. It was assumed, largely without evidence in the past, that such “work teams” sought to protect incumbent leaders and shield the party from attack. We now know that this was only sometimes the case, that work teams altered their actions drastically over short periods of time, and perhaps such a stance was rare. So activists had to decide whether the actions of work teams, many of which conducted massive purges of a unit’s leadership, were acting in ways congruent with individual interests (say, as a party member or as someone connected to local power structures).

These kinds of difficult and hard-to-interpret choices abound in China during this period. For example, was the army’s intervention something that you should or should not support as a rebel? As it turns out, if the army’s initial actions served to weaken your factional opponents in another wing of the rebel camp, you concluded that the army’s actions were worth supporting. If, however, the army’s actions served to weaken your own faction’s claims to have seized power, then you tended to oppose the armed forces. The decisions are situational in such cases (which were repeated virtually everywhere that the armed forces intervened). It becomes even more complicated in many regions where, as it is now evident, different army units supported different rebel factions. They cannot simply be interpreted in the way that we once did: “if you supported the army, you did so because your social background made you more favorable toward the ‘status quo’; and if you opposed the army, it was because you opposed the restoration of the status quo ante”. This kind of reasoning does not make any sense if you follow closely the patterns of local politics. Militant rebels who overthrew local party committees split over the intervention of the armed forces.

Another example is the accumulating evidence about the active participation of cadres in rebel factions. When student rebels arrived in government offices in Beijing to “seize power”, they discovered that the cades who worked there were already divided into two antagonistic rebel factions. They had to decide which faction to support; when allied student rebels arrived at the same government agencies to seize power, they frequently decided that the other government rebel faction deserved support. These kinds of complex decisions served to generate new factions in the Beijing student movement, splitting former allies and re-aligning factional lines of conflict. This turns out to have been a universal phenomenon across China; in fact it now appears that most of the power seizures in small cities and counties were actually carried out by internal cadre rebels without significant participation by student or worker rebels. If cadres themselves are divided into antagonistic factions, how are student or worker activists able to interpret such conflicts in terms of their occupational or family interests, or in terms of some notion of what “the status quo” represents?

In short, the question is whether we can assume that individuals enter the politics of this period with fixed and static identities based on occupation or party affiliations or family origins. Our alternative conception is that interests and identities are fluid, situational, and based on a series of political interactions that serve to change political actors’ motives and self-understandings over time. These interactions would have to evolve in a certain way in order for factions to express clearly defined interest groups that existed before the Cultural Revolution. My hunch is that those situations were fairly rare, and that conflicts would have to unfold in a certain way for cleavages to map onto pre-Cultural Revolution identities. Our task is to explain how and why factional identities evolved as they did, not to argue over whether or not, or to what extent they expressed the underlying pattern of inequalities in Chinese society.

**Felix: Jon, in 1980 you co-authored an important article “Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Canton” that established the paradigms to explain factionalism based on the case of Guangzhou, using interviews with former Red Guards in Hong Kong. How do you respond to the challenge by the work of Andy and other scholars?**

**Jon:** In the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of us, as PhD students and young scholars, did a considerable amount of research about what had occurred at the grassroots in the Cultural Revolution turmoil of 1966-68, but almost all of us turned to other subjects in the following decades. Andy Walder is a notable exception, and he deserves praise for turning back in time to do much-needed in-depth research on the local-level Cultural Revolution conflicts of 1966-68. He and several of his former PhD students are illuminating important new aspects of what occurred back then, and why.

In a fundamental way, though, it is a different type of research than we did three to four decades ago. Back then, we had documentation available to us, including lots of Red Guard and factional worker newsletters, but we discovered that the newsletters largely deliberately hid the personal interests and grievances that motivated people in schools and work units to divide into antagonistic factions and to battle former classmates and colleagues. People during that period were not *supposed* to be concerned about personal interests, and so the writers of these partisan factional grassroots newsletters pretended they were just loyal followers of Chairman Mao with no personal interests at stake. Because of this, back in the 1970s and 1980s we young academics (including Andy) largely relied on interviewing people who had participated in these factional conflicts, hearing from their own lips what their and their mates’ attitudes, grievances and motives had been. It was revelatory, and enabled us not only to gain an understanding of why groups of people attacked other groups of people in their places of work and study, but also enabled us to learn about the hidden pre-existing tensions and antagonisms in China in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution.

In contrast, today Andy and his colleagues rely almost entirely on documentation, since the memories of participants have badly faded after so many decades. But documentation provides a very different and, I think, incomplete perspective on what underpinned the initial grassroots fighting at schools and workplaces.

Your question mentions an article that I co-authored with Anita Chan and Stanley Rosen in *China Quarterly* 83 (1980) about the bitter Red Guard factionalism in Guangzhou’s high schools. In the mid-1970s we were able not only to interview lots of former participants but also to gather extensive data from them about all of their classmates in 50 high school classrooms, some 2,200 high school students in all. The data is striking. Of all the students in these classrooms who became Red Guards, 81% of the red-class students joined what was colloquially called the Loyalist or Conservative Red Guard faction, while in sharp contrast, 74% of the middling-class (*yibande chengfen*) participants joined their school’s Rebel Red Guard faction. And it’s not just Guangzhou. We also obtained information from former students from other cities, and the results were very similar.

As we explained in our article, using information from extensive interviewing, in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, high-school students had faced increasingly difficult chances of getting admitted to a university, and increasingly difficult prospects if they were not admitted. In these same years, the criteria laid down by the government for getting into university gave progressively greater play to a parent’s class origin and less to a student’s academic achievement. The students of middling-class origins (whose parents before the revolution had been peddlers, white-collar workers, professionals, intellectuals, and so on) were disturbed by this, including by policies in the mid-1960s that gave increased priority in Communist Youth League admissions to students of red-class origins (the children of pre-Liberation workers, poor peasants and Communist Party cadres). The middling-class youngsters were becoming frustrated about both their career prospects and—also important to them—their chances of ever proving their political devotion.

When Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in mid-1966, the high-school students of red family origin took advantage of the new campaign’s thrust against “bourgeois authorities” and “white experts” to set up proto-red-guard groups and to exclude non-red-origin students from participating. In the autumn and winter of 1966, when Mao shifted the fledgling Cultural Revolution campaign to focus against “capitalist roaders *in the Party*”, the middling-class high-school students had a chance to form their own Red Guard groups and to “turn the spearhead” away from “bourgeois authorities” and toward errant local Party leaders, a group that, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, included many of the parents of their red-class schoolmates. Violent clashes between the opposing Red Guard factions erupted among high-school students across China, and in particular at the élite high schools where students had been competing most vigorously to get into a university.

Our data for those 50 classrooms show that while the children of the officials overwhelmingly participated in the Conservative Red Guard faction, and the middling-class students from educated families gravitated overwhelmingly into the Rebel Red Guard faction, students from pre-revolution industrial working-class families split more evenly in their factional allegiances, with 36% in the Rebel camp and 41% Loyalists. One reason was that at the low-ranked senior high schools, where they predominated, fewer students were vying to climb into higher education. The split among students in these working-class senior high schools was often between, on the one side, each classroom’s Communist Youth League members, who had stood over their classmates in positions of authority, versus the less ambitious non-activist students, who resented these student political activists and became Rebel Red Guards. It should be noted, though, that the working-class students who joined the loose city-wide Rebel Red Guard coalition tended to form their own groups separate from the Rebel Red Guards of less politically-correct class origins. Too, most bad-class high school students shunned any Cultural Revolution activity, knowing that they would be vulnerable and likely to suffer retribution**.**

The “class” issue that divided the students at elite high schools was not the most vital issue at universities or in most work places. The students at universities were already the “winners” in the competition to advance through education. They did not need to worry about the same issues of class preferment and tightening university admissions that troubled ambitious high school students. Instead, at universities outside of Beijing and in most of the workplaces that I know about, the main divide seemed to be between successful political activists, who had been happy with the pre-Cultural Revolution grassroots *status quo,* versus ordinary non-activist university students and employees. In short, the most common scenario in China—political activists versus non-activists--was similar to what divided students at the working-class high schools.

Many years ago, this was Andy Walder’s own finding vis-à-vis factories. He published an article based upon interviewing in Hong Kong during the 1970s as well as reading worker-faction newsletters (it’s in Elizabeth Perry, ed., *Putting Class in its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (University of California, 1996). Walder emphasized there that “conflicts within factories during the Cultural Revolution were shaped heavily—though not exclusively—by divisions created in the workforce by the Party’s political networks”. He observed that the loyalist factions were formed from among those workers who, prior to the Cultural Revolution, had been the trusted clients of a factory’s Party branch. They were opposed during the Cultural Revolution conflict by non-activist workers who had felt disfavored.

In short, we essentially are engaged in a debate today between the early Walder and the elder Walder. I think the young Andy Walder was right. I did some interviewing with factory workers during the late 1970s, and what I found fit very well with what the early Walder published about this in the 1980s and 1990s. Our fellow panelist Joel Andreas has done extensive research about Mao-era factories, and he will be able to speak more about this.

A final point: because of the way that strong animosities had been allowed to develop at the elite high schools between middling-class and elite red-class students, they divided rather neatly into solid supporters of the Rebel or Loyalist factions throughout the twists and turns of the Cultural Revolution turmoil. The small local factional groups of other mass constituencies, such as groups of like-minded university schoolmates or workers or officemates, more often maneuvered to protect their little groups as the Cultural Revolution fighting ebbed and flowed, and sometimes these small groups eventually joined forces with, and then sometimes split from, higher-level umbrella factional groups that did not always represent their particular interests or social statuses. This is what Andy is talking about in the question he just answered. But an important point is that whatever maneuvering for group survival took place at higher levels, within work units and universities the membership of the small grass-roots groups of like-minded colleagues usually seemed to remain pretty firm throughout these turbulent years—because at the very bottom, at a face-to-face level among themselves at their workplaces, the members of these small groups did share common interests and similar grievances. So it seems that few defected to other small groups. As time went on and participation became dangerous, individuals either dropped out altogether from fear and exhaustion and stayed at home, or they continued to participate in their own grassroots group alongside their close mates.

**Felix: Joel, in your book on Qinghua University (*The Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China’s New Class*, Stanford University Press, 2009) you are explaining factionalism mainly with struggle over political and social capital. How would you respond to the challenge by Andy who also wrote about the elite universities in Beijing?**

**Joel:** I find a lot to agree with Andy’s reinterpretations of grassroots factional conflict during the Cultural Revolution, but today I’ll focus on some differences in our interpretations. I’ll discuss two important questions. The first involves the conventional understanding that student factions divided along social origin lines. This understanding was advanced by Jon Unger and his colleagues, among others, in their analysis of factions in elite middle schools in Guangzhou, where they found that children of Communist cadres faced off against children of intellectuals. Andy argues, to the contrary, that students’ pre-existing social positions and identities didn’t play an important role in determining factional alignment. The second question is broader. It involves the conventional understanding that the Cultural Revolution pits clearly defined “rebel” factions that attacked the party establishment against “conservative” factions that defended it. Andy argues, to the contrary, that the ideological and political positions students took were mostly for show; what was really going on was simply a struggle for power at the top and at the bottom, and students were mainly fighting to gain the advantages of winning or avoid the disadvantages of losing.

It is, of course, true that the Cultural Revolution involved struggles for power. That’s true of *all* political conflicts. There are few political conflicts, however, in which the motivations of the actors can be reduced to instrumental calculations about the costs and benefits of winning or losing, and that was certainly not the case in the Cultural Revolution. Students on all sides were inspired by fervent beliefs and these beliefs were often connected with their social identities and backgrounds. We misinterpret the times if we don’t recognize how ideologically driven these students were.

Let me briefly review what I found at Tsinghua University and its attached middle school. Both were very elite institutions. The factions at both schools were defined by profound political differences, but the factional alignment at each school was quite distinct. I attributed these distinctions largely to the different social compositions of the students at the university and the middle school.

At Tsinghua’s Attached Middle School the student composition was similar to those at the elite Guangzhou middle schools that Jon studied and the factional alignment was also similar. Almost all students were from elite backgrounds—the majority were children of intellectuals, while a significant minority were children of revolutionary cadres. During the Cultural Revolution—from start to finish—the school divided very clearly along family origin lines. It was political vs. cultural capital. This is a familiar story that Jon has told well and I won’t go into it here. I’ll just note that in Andy’s book on student factions in Beijing he included an excellent chapter on the early middle school Red Guard factions organized by cadre kids, but ignored the later wave of rebel factions, which in elite middle schools were led by intellectuals’ kids. A chapter on these factions would have lent credence to the social origins explanation.

At Tsinghua University, the student composition was different—there were very few cadre kids (most had not yet reached college age) and most students were children of intellectuals, while a growing number were of peasant origin. The first Red Guard group at the university, like their counterparts at the middle school, stressed “good” class origin. It was led by a handful of cadre kids, but was mainly made up of peasant kids. They cooperated with the work team, attacking school leaders for being too accommodating of the old educated elite and for stressing academics over politics. They especially attacked school leaders and professors who had bad class origins and historical political problems. In my shorthand terminology, they focused on attacking cultural capital.

The rebel groups, which arose later in the fall, were opposed to class origin exclusions and they included both peasants’ kids and intellectuals’ kids. The main rebel group, Jinggangshan, was supported by Mao’s agents and it enthusiastically took up Mao’s call to attack “capitalist roaders in the party.” In the winter, after Mao’s agents denounced the original Red Guard groups, those groups collapsed and students flocked to join Jinggangshan, which was a very loose organization. Then in the spring, Jinggangshan split into radical and moderate factions.

The radicals, known as Jinggangshan *bingtuan* [Corps], opposed everything about the “Old Tsinghua.” They attacking the party leadership as a stratum of bureaucratic officials and they were also hostile to Tsinghua’s “revisionist education line.” The moderates, known as Jinggangshan *4-14*, defended the Old Tsinghua. They argued that the university party organization was basically good; it had made some mistakes, but its policies were basically sound. In my shorthand, the radicals embraced Mao’s entire agenda, attacking both political and cultural capital, while the moderates defended both.

Students on both sides were from the same social origins—they were intellectuals’ and peasants’ kids. The main distinction was whether or not they were close to the party establishment. The moderates were more closely associated with the party and youth league organizations and were actively supported by university cadres. The radicals were not as closely associated with the party and Youth League organizations and had almost no support among university cadres. There were, of course, lots of other individual reasons for joining one side or the other. Students were highly ideological and they all had to decide how to interpret Mao and how to best defend socialism. They were also motivated by personal grievances and personal friendships.

To sum up, I found that the social origins explanation of student factional alignment works well at Tsinghua’s Attached Middle School, where cadre kids and intellectual kids polarized along class origin lines. But based on my reading of the literature about other schools, I’d suggest that this type of alignment *only* happened at elite middle schools, where the student bodies were composed almost exclusively of cadre kids and intellectual kids. Things were different at Tsinghua University, where there were few cadre kids, but lots of intellectual and peasant kids. The factions did not split along class origin lines, but rather along political association lines, pitting those who were close to the party organization against those who were not. I think this type of factional alignment was much more common, not only at universities, but also at ordinary middle schools (and, as I’ll discuss in a moment, at workplaces as well).

On one question I completely agree with Andy—there were no clear ideological and political differences between the two citywide coalitions of university students that formed in Beijing in the spring of 1967. After Mao called on rebels to seize power, university rebels split into contending coalitions, *Tianpai* [Heaven Faction] and *Dipai* [Earth Faction], which competed for power, but were indistinguishable politically and ideologically. I don’t think this was true generally, however, and it was not even true among Beijing middle school students. They ultimately created two citywide coalitions—*4-3 pai* (April 3 faction) and *4-4 pai* (April 4 faction)—that were similar to the radical and moderate factions that emerged at Tsinghua University.

**Felix: Yiching, reading books on the Cultural Revolution by Andy or MacFaqhuar/Schoenhals (*Mao’s Last Revolution*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006), I have the impression that they all downplay the role of ideology. You wrote a whole book on debates on class (*The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*, Harvard University Press, 2014) . How were these debates related to factionalism? Is the case of Hunan and the *Shengwulian*-movement, a provincial rebel alliance, a good example that people with bad class background supported the rebellion?**

**Yiching**: Let me begin with one caveat. I think it’s unfair to say that either MacFarquhar or Walder completely ignores ideology, at least not in principle. MacFarquhar, for example, began the first volume of his seminal trilogy *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1974) with noting unambiguously that “the disruption of the Chinese leadership was caused by disagreement over the aims of the Chinese revolution, over how to rule China, over how to develop China” and that the Cultural Revolution was rooted in “both principled and personal disputes.” Walder, on the other hand, penned an article more than two decades ago on Cultural Revolution collective politics, which began with a scathing criticism of what he views as the sociologists’ long-standing neglect of large political movements that articulate a distinctive ideology. Remarking that their work “has been largely irrelevant to my efforts to understand the Chinese Cultural Revolution,” Walder laments that political sociologists “stopped asking why and how beliefs and ideologies arise, are transformed, and propel people into different kinds of political behavior.”

Now back to your question, it’s also my view that ideological phenomena have not received adequate attention from Cultural Revolution scholars as they should deserve. In my book *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* (2014) I discuss the complex relationships between ideology, social grievances, and the tumultuous mass politics. The Shengwulian movement in the province of Hunan, which drew from a dozen of local rebel groups, provides a good example. In late 1967 and early 1968, the Shengwulian (acronym for the Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Great Alliance Committee) rose to oppose the new center of local authority supported by the national leadership, in defiance of the Cultural Revolution’s shift toward demobilization of the mass movement and rebuilding of political order. This episode is particularly interesting for two reasons: first, it signaled the significant political divergences that were in the making during the Cultural Revolution—i.e., the appearance of a self-styled “ultra-left” movement which deviated from Mao’s official policy; and second, it became well known for the attempts by some of its activists to reinterpret and radicalize the Maoist ideology.

The development of mass factionalism as well as heterodox political ideas associated with the Shengwulian episode has usually been explained in sociological terms. The Red Guard factionalism which led to the rise of the Shengwulian typically have been traced to entrenched social and political cleavages in China’s state-socialist regime. The factional conflicts which resulted in the rise of the Shengwulian, for example according to Jonathan Unger, represented a division between the “red-class Red Guard organizations” on the one side, and “the have-not groups” on the other, which drew from disadvantaged workers and discriminated students. The Shengwulian, therefore in Unger’s words, was “a congeries of groups that held one element in common: they all had been persecuted or shortchanged by the state and Party apparatus before and during the Cultural Revolution.”

This long-standing view has much factual truth to it, but its underlying assumptions have been subject to critical scrutiny in recent years. The voluminous work produced by Walder and his collaborators, which emphasizes contextual contingency and path-dependent political processes, has radically challenged the once dominant sociological interpretation. While I must confess that my own understanding of Cultural Revolution mass politics was formatively rooted in and influenced by the sociological approach pioneered by Jonathan Unger, Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, Hong Yung Lee, as well as the young Walder, I feel equally—and perhaps even perversely—attracted to Walder’s revisionist attack, which boldly challenges his own earlier scholarship. I am inclined to believe that both early and later Walder are correct, and that the two apparently opposing approaches can be meaningfully reconciled with each other. I think Walder makes a great deal of sense in his sustained endeavor to refute the causal determination of the political by the social. However, it also seems to me that he may have gone a bit too far. Social factors may still be important to our understanding of Cultural Revolution mass politics, and they should be reintroduced back to supplement and strengthen Walder’s criticism.

Hunan’s Shengwulian case provides a good example for developing a complex and dynamic view that encompasses both the social and the political. In the Shengwulian case, the social, political, and ideological moments coalesced with one another in ways more complex than previous scholarship has portrayed. During the Cultural Revolution in Hunan, the factionalization of mass politics and the mobilization of social grievances had different dynamics and origins, and only under specific conditions and contexts did they become conjoined with one another. Factional political conflicts and ideological disputes originated, as Theda Skocpol once argued in her seminal book on the historical sociology of revolutions, from “conjunctural, unfolding interactions of originally separately determined processes” (to borrow a term from a different intellectual context, this is almost exactly what Louise Althusser means by “overdetermination,” an idea which has much inspired my understanding of Cultural Revolution politics). As I discussed in my book, Red Guard factionalism in Hunan was rooted in contingent political processes driven largely by organizational rivalry, personal power ambitions and local political accidents. The eruption of preexisting social antagonisms developed in separate trajectories not directly related to factional politics. Their insertion into the developing factional politics only occurred at specific conjunctures of local political contentions, as rival factions vied for power in an emerging political atmosphere dominated by the national political imperative of restoring order. The factional realignment through the incorporation of the disaffected elements then took on new social characteristics, and the organizational identity that resulted from this process became associated with new political agendas driven by preexisting social antagonisms. Indeed, as Walder argues, an adequate social interpretation of Red Guard politics must involve much more than simply enumerating the interests and grievances of different groups involved. It is all the more important to explore the political processes through which social identities and positions which, in being mobilized into factional battles, subsequently transformed these conflicts. Hunan’s Shengwulian case, in short, may contain the ingredients useful for developing a more robust analysis of Cultural Revolution mass factionalism, one that not only emphasizes political contingency and interactive processes, but also takes into account social interests, identities, and structural relationships as dynamically constituted.

The Shengwulian case also sheds light on the working of ideology in Cultural Revolution mass politics. In his review of Walder’s *Fractured Rebellion*, Joel Andreas criticizes the author for overlooking the role of ideology in contentious politics: “The individuals in his account are largely free from ideological and political concerns, except for instrumental calculations about winning and losing. … Walder seems intent on stripping away the ideological and substantive political content of the movement to reveal the underlying instrumental calculations of the participants.” While I remain sympathetic to Andreas’ criticism, I believe that to fully appreciate the importance of ideology is not merely to bring ideological phenomena back into the historical equation and juxtapose them to politically motivated actions. As importantly, it is also to develop a more robust understanding of ideology that is capable of recognizing its power of informing political and economic instrumentalities. In the Shengwulian case, heterodox political ideas gave new meanings to both factional conflicts and preexisting social grievances. “Ultra-leftist” ideas such as the “red bourgeoisie” and the “People Commune of China” established symbolic relationships among diverse concrete grievances and demands such that their meanings became crucially modified. In Hunan, through the Shengwulian activists’ creative reinterpretation and expansion of the Maoist ideas, individual social antagonisms involving specific groups making differential demands seemingly unrelated to one another, when emptied of their contextual specificities, cumulatively became more generalized and simplified bearers of new, wider struggles. The political dangers which might result from the unforeseen convergence of increasingly fragmented and unruly mass movements, widespread social antagonisms, and heterodox political ideas were well understood by the Maoist leadership. By swiftly suppressing the Shengwulian movement, a potentially explosive political situation was expediently averted.

**II.**

**Felix: Andy, in your book *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Harvard University Press, 2015), you have proofed based on data from county annals that most people were killed after the Revolutionary Committees (mostly) under the leadership of the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) were established. One of my interviewees, a former rebel, called this the period of “green terror” (*lüse kongbu*). What role did the PLA play in factional warfare, for example in Jiangsu? Many former rebels see the PLA as a conservative force.**

**Andy**: The PLA played a very complicated role in factional warfare during 1967. Factional conflicts and factional violence in fact escalated after the army’s intervention to “support the left” beginning late January 1967. Initially the PLA played a highly repressive role against rebel factions that claimed to have seized power, but whose power seizures had not received approval from Beijing. The factions who resisted them became unalterably opposed to the army; but there were other rebel factions who supported the army’s actions against their factional opponents. In this way the armed forces were drawn into factional conflicts among local rebels. We have found in Jiangsu that this was the case, and that the local armed forces were themselves divided; with some officers and some commands supporting opposite sides in local factional rivalries. Others have reported the same phenomenon in Zhejiang (Forster) and Shaanxi (Tanigawa). This seems to be a fairly ubiquitous phenomenon, though we are still in the early stages of trying to explain why exactly military commands became divided in their political allegiances.

Once a revolutionary committee was approved in a province, the era of factional rivalries quickly came to an end. This was true from the beginning in Shanghai, for example. After Zhang Chunqiao’s famous January 1967 power seizure was supported by Beijing, he freely used the armed forces to suppress student rebels and a large wing of the worker rebel movement that opposed his power seizure (he was, after all, a ranking member of the Shanghai Party Committee, and was supported by a number of his peers). This ensured that Shanghai did not suffer from the entrenched factionalism in other regions, and did not experience the street fighting common elsewhere (and its military command was not divided).

Later in 1968 in other regions, as the establishment of Revolutionary Committees approached, military commands were purged to ensure internal unity, and the armed forces acted decisively to bring factional mobilization to an end. Both published and unpublished sources make very clear that the number of people accused of political crimes, imprisoned, and killed during this period was several orders of magnitude larger than the numbers persecuted or killed by Red Guards or even by armed factional battles during the period of mass mobilization. In the end, the PLA was a conservative force; but in the 18 months or so between their first intervention in January 1967 and the final solution of mid-1968, their interventions only served to more deeply entrench factional animosities among civilian rebels and prolong their conflicts.

**Felix: Jon, what role do the different periods of the Cultural Revolution play? It seems to me that during the so-called “People’s Cultural Revolution” (late 1966 to early 1967) heated debates on inclusion and exclusion by the system of class status took place, but in late 1967 and 1968 rebel factions with quite similar agendas fought against each other. What role did social background play after the conservatives were defeated?**

**Jon**: To be able to properly handle this question, I think we ought to divide the grassroots urban Cultural Revolution into three phases. In the first phase in the latter part of 1966, small groups of friends and colleagues who shared similar statuses, interests, and grievances established their own factional bands within their own workplaces and schools. They sometimes came together over the issue of ‘class’, as in China’s high schools. Or sometimes these grassroots little groups formed due to a rift between political activists versus resentful non-activists. Or sometimes groups formed over grievances involving low-paying, low-status jobs, as occurred among young workers who were apprentices, among temporary workers, and among the poorly treated and poorly paid workers of small neighborhood factories.

When young Western academics like myself did research during the 1970s and early 1980s, we were most interested in this first phase of the Cultural Revolution, because this early period exposed lots of the tensions, frustrations and enmities of Mao-era Chinese society and of local political life, which had been shrouded to outsiders. We were far less interested in later phases of the Cultural Revolution conflict, when the contingencies of local events caused the factional groups to ally and split and re-coalesce. To us, the later periods involved a confusing mess of maneuverings that provided observers with far fewer new insights.

In short, in the second phase, once the small groups had formed and came into conflict with opposing groups within their own workplaces, they realized that they needed allies in order to avoid being crushed, or in order to seize power, and so they sought to ally themselves with other groups from outside their *danwei.* This led to large umbrella factional organizations that consisted of many, many localized little groups. In this second phase, the little groups often became aligned with lots of other little groupsthat shared their own political status and shared similar grievances. As I mentioned earlier, this is normally what occurred among high school students in cities across China. But in other types of constituencies, “odd couples” often emerged in these coalitions. For instance, in the late 1970s, I separately interviewed two former university students from Kunming, Yunnan’s capital city. They had attended different universities that were located close to each other. Each of the interviewees said that classmates who were non-activists had formed groups opposed to groups composed largely of activists. At one of these universities, the non-activist student group came together in an attack on the university’s Party leadership for having discriminated against them. At the other university, the opposite occurred: the politically activist students launched an attack on the university leaders for being insufficiently ‘red’ in outlook. Within a matter of a few months the students at both universities who had attacked their university leadership became allies--even though the group from the first university consisted of non-activist students who disliked activist students, and their new ally, from the neighboring university, consisted of politically activist students. In reaction, the students at each university who had initially defended their university’s leadership became allied in a higher-order coalition, so as to resist and defeat their immediate local enemies from within their own university. This type of confused higher-order alliance—with activist and non-activist students from different universities fighting side by side—was not uncommon.

In this second phase, as the small factional groups within *danwei*s sought to survive, strange bedfellows emerged in other ways, too. In January 1966, as Mao and his immediate entourage spoke out against Loyalist (also called Conservative) groups who had opposed the local January Power Seizures, some of these groups collapsed and their members, as a group, strategically switched to the successful Rebel alliance. There they tended to become closest to groups that, like themselves, had fewer grievances against the *status quo ante.* When the army and other forces of order intervened in what was called the February (1967) Adverse Current to crush obstreperous Rebel groups, erstwhile Rebel groups who thought they would gain from this happily supported this, and the Rebel umbrella alliance split in two. When Mao in March countermanded the Adverse Current and encouraged the resistant Rebels, conflict flared between the two grassroots camps. Before the Cultural Revolution conflict finally drew to a close in the latter part of 1968, in many provinces there was more than one round of this type of split, as the groups that were better placed to join and be favored by the new local political leadership split off from the resistant Rebel groups.

This is the period that Andy Walder was largely talking about today: this second phase and its splits. He argues that the confusing toings-and-froings and splits of this *second* period somehow contradict and invalidate our findings regarding the *first* phase of the Cultural Revolution, when in many types of workplaces and schools small groups formed on the basis of common grievances and interests. While Andy has done valuable research on other aspects of the Cultural Revolution, I don’t find Andy’s argument on this particular point at all persuasive.

**Felix: Joel, did your recent research on workers during the Cultural Revolution change your views on factionalism? Why did people in the factories divide into factions? What role did temporary workers play?**

**Joel:** In factories, factions split on lines similar to those in schools, but there were important differences. The first Red Guard groups in factories, which emerged in August 1966, were organized by the factory political authorities, either the factory party committee or a party work team sent in to lead the Four Cleans campaign. Like their student counterparts, they defended the party organization in general, while attacking specific leaders, especially those who could be associated with conventional targets of the party—technical elites and those with bad class backgrounds and historical political problems. As in schools, rebel groups only emerged later in the fall. They were self-organized and they attacked the factory party authorities. The main thing that united them was challenging the authority of the party organization.

Workers didn’t divide along class background lines. Most participants on both sides were from peasant or worker backgrounds; those from “bad” family origins generally stayed out of the line of fire. As at Tsinghua University, the main difference was whether you were close to the party organization or not. Conservative groups, which had their origins in the early Red Guard organizations, were led by and composed mainly of mid-level and basic level cadres, party members, and activists. The rebels, in contrast, were composed mainly of workers who had not been close to the factory party organization. Once again personality, personal beliefs, personal grievances, personal history, and friendships played a role.

It seems that in the fall of 1966 factories around the country generally divided along the basic lines I’ve described. There were clear battle political lines—rebels vs. conservatives. Things became more complicated in January after Mao called on rebels to seize power. First, many conservative factions—discredited as pawns of the local party organizations—disbanded at that point. Second, the rebels—who were just a loose coalition of small fighting groups—split. Originally they had never dreamed of seizing power, they simply wanted to challenge the factory authorities’ high-handed ways. Now the question became—who among them were going to be the new factory leaders? Moreover, they couldn’t run the factory without finding allies among the old factory leaders and among the military officers sent in to manage the formation of new revolutionary committees. These issues led them to fight among themselves.

In many cities, it was hard to distinguish between the competing coalitions that emerged in terms of ideological or political positions. This was the case in Nanjing, where Andy and Dong Guoqiang have done extensive research, and it was undoubtedly true elsewhere. But it was not true in the areas where I’ve done most of my research, principally in Henan and Hubei. In both provinces, the conservatives—with military support—regrouped in the spring of 1967, and the rebels, who were suppressed by the military, also regrouped. In Hubei, rebel factions that had split in February once again banded together to battle the resurgent conservatives, now calling themselves the Million Heroes. Similar rebel and conservatives factions battled in Henan. Workers I interviewed on both sides readily identified the two contending coalitions as rebels or conservatives, and embraced the labels themselves.

While the more ambiguous situation in Nanjing was surely not uncommon, my sense is that in many cities the basic political divisions that emerged in the fall of 1966—rebels vs. conservatives—remained salient throughout the period and continued to divide factories for the remainder of the Cultural Revolution decade and beyond.

**Felix: Yiching, it seems that in your book you express some sympathy for the agenda of those Shengwulian activists who saw the main contradiction in Chinese society between the people and the bureaucratic class. They called for smashing the party-state and replacing it with a radical egalitarian commune-style political organization. How realistic was this vision in China of 1967 or 1968? And, was it a call for an even more violent civil war?**

**Yiching**: In my book I try to document the alternative political currents that emerged from the Cultural Revolution’s mass politics, currents which deviated or departed from Mao and his official line, and the Shengwulian movement in Hunan was one of them. Without exception, these currents were all denounced as being “anti-Party,” “bourgeois-anarchic” or “counterrevolutionary,” and the political activities of their activists were suppressed ruthlessly. Having vanished in the purges of the “ultra-left” that began as early as in late 1967, they remain little known or understood in contemporary China. After decades of rampant bureaucratic abuse and corruption in post-Mao China, however, the radical anti-bureaucratic views of those young rebels seem to be more pertinent today than in 1968.

The Cultural Revolution is typically understood in Mao’s own terms. There is little doubt that late Maoism and the Cultural Revolution were an aberration in the history of world socialism. In Mao’s view, socialism is not simply something to be achieved through economic and technological development, as presupposed in the Soviet model. Powerful tendencies toward the “restoration of capitalism”—the political code word for the subversion of revolution and reemergence of an exploitative society—exist in the socialist society. The degeneration of socialism, for Mao, does not necessarily occur through the violent overthrow of the new socialist state, but more likely through “peaceful evolution” inside the ruling party. This process begins with the acceptance of bourgeois ideas by a degenerate leadership. The usurped leadership then sets about to dismantle the socialist collective economy and create a new dominant, exploiting class.

Despite its militant rhetoric, the Cultural Revolution was in the end mostly ineffectual in terms of its own stated goals. From the very outset of the movement, the Maoist leadership failed to clearly specify its primary objectives. The concepts of “proletarian” and “bourgeois” became twisted catch-all terms used to signify political loyalty, ideological correctness and moral purity. The spectacular vulgarization—and implosion—of class politics generated immense antagonisms in China’s social and political life, all in the name of revolution. Its vigilance against regressive tendencies notwithstanding, late Maoism failed to successfully address the problem of emerging class domination in the postrevolutionary society. The Cultural Revolution was indeed partly successful in briefly interrupting the closure and consolidation of the incipient ruling class, by attempting to revolutionize culture, to combat bourgeois selfishness, and to exhort cadre-bureaucrats to serve the people rather than themselves. However, by focusing on bureaucratism, revisionist line, and distributional privileges, the Cultural Revolution targeted individual bureaucrats, their ideological affiliations, and the remnant prerevolutionary elites more than the system and instruments of bureaucratic domination.

The more radical political possibilities of Mao’s “continuous revolution,” as I have argued in my book, were pressed further by a number of radical rebel activists, who considerably broadened the scope of the struggles unleashed and sanctioned by Mao. Challenging the Cultural Revolution’s inherent limits and contradictions, they questioned the discrepancy between the movement’s radical rhetoric and its proclivity for attacking the individual power-holders and remnant old elites, instead of searching for the roots of China’s social and political problems. In the views of these rebels, the major conflict was not between the proletariat and the former propertied classes, nor between Mao’s loyalists and his enemies. The Cultural Revolution was not about dragging out some “capitalist roaders” within the Party, but a revolution in which “the broad masses of the people” overthrows “the class of red capitalists.” Invoking the historical example of the Paris Commune, they proclaimed that the “new bureaucratic bourgeoisie” would have to be toppled in order to establish a genuinely egalitarian society.

The Shengwulian critics were not alone in seeing the Cultural Revolution’s main antagonism as the struggle between the emerging new elite and the Chinese working people. Similar ideas appeared elsewhere, in Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, among other places. However, in spite of its astuteness and the foresight, the political stance of the radical rebels was handicapped by significant intellectual and political limits, and it would be simplistic to oppose the “good, radical rebels” against the “bad Mao” who suppressed them, as the former shared many of the same political inspirations—as well as contradictions—with the latter.

Indeed, Mao’s reluctance to dismantle the Leninist party-state must be considered in its specific historical context. Mao clearly shared with many grassroots rebels an aversion to bureaucratic prerogatives and a fondness for direct political action. But in contrast to those who attempted to “continue the revolution to the end” by all means necessary or at all cost—including disrupting the national economy or even stirring up a civil war, Mao’s views and actions were constrained by his responsibility of maintaining public order and national security. Mao, as Richard Kraus noted, was both the “chief cadre” of the bureaucracy that he personally embodied, and its “leading rebel.” The difference between Mao and his unruly followers, as Joel Andreas aptly put it (personal communication), may be seen as the difference “between Maoism in power and Maoism in opposition”—or if I may rephrase, between revolutionaries in power and revolutionaries in opposition.

The young radical rebels—Mao’s disobedient (and swiftly disowned) children—ardently responded to the Supreme Leader’s call for rebellion. They sincerely believed that the world would be a better one, when enemies of the revolution were routed and noble transformations achieved. But in their political outlook much was rudimentary. The intellectual exposure of these young radicals, mostly high school or junior college students, were rather limited. Their theorization was unsophisticated and underdeveloped, as most of them were socialists more by upbringing and good faith than by sustained critical reasoning and intellectual reflection. They often found themselves in situations in which actions had to be improvised in response to rapidly changing circumstances, thereby allowing little time for ideas to systematize and mature. Their insurrectional aspirations were often foolhardy, as they impetuously called for “armed struggle” when violent clashes among battling Red Guard factions were bringing the country to the brink of a civil war. They developed no alternative economic ideas, nor did they form any plan of a comprehensive social program. They came to demand equality and “redistribution of power and property,” but rarely thought about specific institutional arrangements of political participation and governance, except for the exalted yet vague formula of the “People’s Commune of China.” And last if not the least, their radical anti-bureaucratic critique was seriously contradicted by their own attempt to uphold Mao as the supreme revolutionary leader. And, while they contested the idea of rebuilding the Leninist party-state, they nevertheless advocated the establishment of a new party of “Mao Zedong-ism.” The position of the radical rebels was without doubt ambiguous, fragmented, or even contradictory. Yet taken as a whole, their political ideas were powerfully expressive of the inherent limits of late Maoism as it was being pushed practically to the point of explosion, as well as provide a critical lens through which pivotal events and transformations in China’s tumultuous twentieth century may be understood.