In Marxist theory, social class was the ultimate source of exploitation, and the oppression of women was defined as a problem of social class. With the success of the Communist revolution and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, leaders assumed that the end of class oppression had also liberated women. Because the focus in this period was on class struggle, many urban Chinese now say that the Maoist period, and particularly the Cultural Revolution period (1966–76), was characterized by “gender erasure.” This period has also been described as a time of “socialist androgyne,” when both men and women wore short hair and “Mao suits.” Women who tried to look “feminine” were criticized for their improper attitude. However, feminist scholars in the Mainland and elsewhere have started to point out that this was not actually a time of “androgyne.” Rather, it is more accurately characterized as “masculinization,” because women were pressured to dress and act like men, but not vice versa. In her chapter on violence among female Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, Emily Honig notes that the girls invariably dressed like male soldiers. Both of the following chapters show that gender norms had not been overturned at all—in fact, far from it. Both chapters posit that restrictive gender norms go a long way toward explaining some of the successes and excesses of efforts to reshape Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution. In her analysis of the ruthless violence by students of elite girls middle schools, Honig suggests that reaction against repressive gender norms might have played a role. In their analysis of the leaders of the Shanghai worker rebels, Elizabeth Perry and Nara Dillon point out that most of the leaders were socially marginal males who used the imagery of the marginal band of outlaws to symbolize their solidarity and commitment to creating a classless society.
In analyses of the Cultural Revolution period, a commonly asked question is, “What explains the seemingly senseless violence that occurred?” These chapters are innovative in suggesting that gender is part of the explanation.

There are many fascinating memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, and gender and sexuality play prominent roles in many of them. This prominence in itself should alert scholars to the fact that gender must be taken into account when analyzing this period. Gao Yuan’s *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* describes, from the point of view of one male student, the violence at an elite middle school in Hebei province that was home to fifty boarding students, twenty-five boys and twenty-five girls. This book strikes the reader for the ways in which the students seem like typical adolescents while, at the same time, they are capable of brutal violence against fellow students and teachers. Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea* describes the love affair between a seventeen-year-old girl sentenced to work at a labor collective and her female team leader. They seem impelled toward each other by internal desires that they cannot understand and by outside repression that is nearly unbearable. In different kinds of incidents throughout the book, Min manages to communicate the distorted sexualities that emerged as the expression of femininity and sexual desire could result in ostracization, beating, rape, and worse. Rae Yang’s *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* contains a chapter titled “Red Guards Had No Sex,” which shows how adolescent sexuality could be channeled into violence.

Zhang Xianliang’s *Half of Man Is Woman* (first published in China in 1985) stimulated heated debate about the sexuality it depicted. The story follows the sexual history of Zhang Yonglin, a writer imprisoned during the anti-rightist campaign and again at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The plot leads from his frustrated erotic desires to his marriage to another labor camp inmate. After his years of frustration, he discovers on his wedding night that he is impotent. He recovers his potency after a heroic deed, but only to divorce his wife and leave her. This novel has been criticized from a feminist perspective because the woman essentially exists in order for the man to prove his manhood. Historically, it is important because it was one of the important early works of fiction in the reassessment of the Cultural Revolution through “Scar Literature” in the 1980s.

The movie *Hibiscus Town* (and the book upon which it was based) depicts forbidden love during the Cultural Revolution between a young widow classified as a rich peasant and a man classified as a rightist. Sentenced to sweep the streets every day, they fall in love and conduct a private marriage ceremony to sanction what the village and the Party refuse to recognize (even while the female Party secretary is carrying on her own illicit affair).
CHAPTER NINE

Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards

Emily Honig

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76), most Western and Chinese observers agree, represented a period when both feminism and femininity were rejected. Feminism, or any discussion of women’s specific problems, was declared bourgeois; femininity, or any assertion of a specifically female identity, was denounced. Instead, Mao’s slogan “The times have changed, men and women are the same” was propagated and the Iron Girls—strong, robust, muscular women who boldly performed physically demanding jobs traditionally done by men—were celebrated in newspapers, pamphlets, and posters. Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife, who rose to political prominence during the Cultural Revolution, appeared in military attire, symbolizing to her audiences a presumably gender-neutral style that was emulated by teenage girl Red Guards who cut their hair short (or more daringly, shaved their heads), donned army clothes, and marched barefoot through city streets. Almost all the art, literature, films, operas, and ballets produced during the Cultural Revolution featured women in leadership roles or as militant combatants in the revolutionary struggle before 1949.

Closer scrutiny, as well as historical materials about the Cultural Revolution, reveals that notions of femininity and discussions of gender were far more complex than state propaganda and Maoist slogans suggest. While the media valorized the examples of women who joined oil-drilling teams, assumed jobs as tractor, truck, and diesel locomotive drivers, or learned to repair high-voltage electric wires, managers of textile factories at least sometimes explained their continued preference for women workers by emphasizing their manual dexterity and patience. While the media glorified women’s public roles as proletarian fighters, their domestic roles and responsibilities were left unexamined. Although foreign observers applauded the plain-colored loose-fitting clothes worn by men and women
The first group of Red Guards to arrive at their house was led by a girl, Luo reports, who “slapped the table with her broad leather belt” and commanded her to produce a report of her “anti-revolutionary crimes.” Several days later, when Red Guards came to search her house, “two strong men yanked Father from the bed and dragged him from the house while two female Red Guards kicked my brothers and me from behind.”

If there is anything at all noteworthy about women’s participation in Red Guard violence in these accounts, it is that women invariably dressed as men, or more precisely, as male army combatants. A female middle-school student in Beijing, for instance, remembered her enthusiasm for “continuing the revolution” after the appearance of Nie Yuanzi’s poster at Beijing University. “We were all wearing army uniforms,” she recalls, “because it was considered very glorious then to wear army uniforms. All the girls put on caps, like the boys, and we tucked our hair up under our caps so we looked like boys. We rolled up our sleeves. And we took off our belts and wore them around our waists, on the outside of the uniform. The belts were our weapons. When we wanted to beat someone, all we had to do was to take off our belts.” Even when these accounts describe the quasi-male attire donned by young girl Red Guards, they do not represent it as unusual, curious, or even significant. Moreover, for some participants, wearing pants with leather belts, as well as cutting their hair short, seemed to be as much about rejecting a bourgeois lifestyle as about blurring gender distinctions. As a young woman, a student at a Beijing middle school in 1966, recalls, “I had been criticized by the ‘advanced elements’ in my school for dressing in a weird bourgeois way—wearing a frock. Next day, I wore trousers and joined a Red Guard organization—the first one in the school.”

Likewise, Rae Yang, in a recently written account of growing up in Beijing, emphasizes the class dimensions of Red Guard fashion: “When we went out, however, we always put on the complete outfit of a Red Guard: army uniforms with long sleeves and long pants, caps on our heads, belts around our waists, armbands, army sneakers, canvas bags, and little red books. . . . We would not wear skirts, blouses, and sandals. Anything that would make girls look like girls was bourgeois. We covered up our bodies so completely that I almost forgot I was a girl. I was a Red Guard. Others were Red Guards too. And that was it.”

Even as these accounts represent women’s dress as a statement about class rather than gender, and even as Rae Yang asserts the existence of an ungendered “Red Guard fashion,” the standard attire was not at all gender neutral but clearly marked male. Rejecting a bourgeois lifestyle and engaging in aggressive, violent attacks both mandated that girls dress like boys, cut their hair like boys, and borrow their fathers’ (not their mothers’) leather belts; in short, both required masculinity. Perhaps inadvertently, too, women’s Red Guard fashion recalled the dress of revolutionary hero-

PRIMITIVE PASSIONS

Although the violent behavior of young girls is not the focus of any Red Guard memoirs, almost every one relates incidents of female violence. Some of these accounts are entirely matter-of-fact, implying that there was nothing unusual or surprising about women’s behavior at this time. It is merely coincidental, if not obvious, that some violence was committed by women. Zi-ping Luo, for example, in her account of the early Red Guard movement in Shanghai, chronicles the attacks on her family by Red Guards.

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ines from the Nationalist and Communist movement of the first half of the twentieth century—women such as Qiu Jin and Xie Bingying, famed for donning Western male suits when not dressed in military uniform.

Although the above accounts of women's dress imply a partial explanation of their violence during the Cultural Revolution (they became like men), they do not explicitly question women's Red Guard behavior. A far more prominent theme in memoirs of the Cultural Revolution is an interrogation of women's behavior: the portrayal of female violence as a radical departure from women's conventional deportment, as something strange and demanding of explanation. Ken Ling was initially surprised and dismayed by this apparent change in female behavior. "Many of the girls," he reports at the beginning of the Red Guard movement, "were becoming barbarous. . . . They were hot-tempered and merciless; they banged on the table and glared at people with round eyes. Once I overheard the kind of language they were using in interrogating the black gang: 'son of a bitch,' 'you stinking whore' and much more obscene words. Later they learned to pinch and slap faces. Others even wanted to 'compete' with the boys, calling this 'equality of the sexes' and the "emancipation of women."' A number of women were themselves startled by the extent of female participation in violence. Zhai Zhenhua, an enthusiastic Beijing Red Guard during the early part of the Cultural Revolution (before she became its victim), recounts her participation in house raids and beatings of "class enemies." Describing herself as a previously timid person who was initially alarmed at the sight of fierce young girl Red Guards, she says, "When I first saw a Red Guard remove her canvas belt to beat her victim and saw her clothes tear and blood appear on his skin, I was afraid. I was not the most bloodthirsty person in the world; I was even afraid to watch wars or fighting in movies." However, she became sufficiently accustomed to the new code of behavior to instigate the beating of a "class enemy." After fifteen years old herself, she led a group of teenage girls to invade the home of a former landlord, where they beat to death the landlord's wife.

If there is one instance of violence by female Red Guards that has been singled out by observers, it is the beating of teachers and the principal at the prestigious Beijing Normal University's Affiliated Middle School for Girls (Beijing shifan daxue fushu nüzi zhongxue). That the attack is perplexing is perhaps due to the concentration of high-ranking officials' daughters (including the daughters of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping) among the ranks of students, or perhaps due simply to the fact that many former students (particularly those who had had the opportunity to live abroad) were proportionately better able than their peers to later produce memoirs of their adolescent experiences. Even if the school was unusual in a number of ways, reports on and retrospective analyses of the violent behavior of its students comprise one of the few cases in which any attempt has been made to reflect on the specific nature of female violence.

The most notorious episode at the Middle School for Girls was the beating to death of its vice-principal, Bian Zhongyun, in August 1966. She had already been attacked in late June: at a criticism meeting held by the school's work team, she was forced to wear a dunce cap and bow her head down. "They beat me with fists, kicked me, tied my hands behind my back, hit me with a wooden rifle used for militia training, filled my mouth with dirt, and spat on my face," she reported in a letter to government authorities, an act for which she was further punished. Then, on August 5 she was one of five teachers and administrators beaten by first-year students in the upper-middle school. Accounts vary as to precisely what took place. According to Wang Youqin, herself a student at that school, "The students splashed ink on the clothes of the administrators, forced them to wear 'high hats,' hung boards from their necks on which their names were crossed out with a red X, forced them to kneel on the ground, hit them with nail-spiked clubs, burned them with boiling water, etc. After three hours of torture, the first vice-principal Bian Zhongyun lost consciousness and was put on a garbage cart. Two hours later she was sent to the hospital across the street. There she was found to have been dead for some time." According to Yue Daiyun, who had a relative teaching at the school, the students, "filled with passion for the new movement and eager to conduct the struggle against their own enemies[,] . . . had forced the president of their school, famous as one of the first Chinese women to be educated, to climb through a narrow underground cement drainage pipe. When she finally emerged, they had brutally beaten her to death." Though many rumors have circulated, to this day the identities of the girls responsible for the violence have never been established.

Two weeks after these aggressive attacks, an unrelated event reinforced the school's reputation as a site of Cultural Revolution militancy. One of its students, Song Binbin, was among the many Red Guards who met Mao at a mass rally. When she appeared beside him on the rostrum at Tiananmen Square, she adorned him with a Red Guard armband. After learning her given name—"Binbin," meaning "refined," or "urbane"—he reportedly declared that it was suitable for a high-class lady, not a young revolutionary. "Is that the 'pin' [bin] in 'wen chih pin' (soft and gentle)?" she recalled Mao asking. "I said 'Yes.' Then he told me kindly: 'You want to be militant.'" He then conferred on her the now more fashionable name "Yaowu," or "seeking violence." She subsequently led a group of her classmates to shave their heads and march barefoot through the main streets of Beijing. And in the immediate aftermath of Song Binbin's moment of glory, the Middle School for Girls became the Red Seeking-Violence Middle School for Girls (Hingse yaowu zhongzue).
In the broader context of Red Guard violence, the beatings at this middle school were not particularly remarkable or extraordinary. Nor was this the only instance of female students physically abusing their teachers and administrators. Indeed, Wang Youqin has chronicled numerous such episodes: at the Shanghai Number Three Girls' Middle School, students attacked the principal by using thumbbacks to attach a character poster on her back and then forcing her to eat excrement while cleaning the bathrooms; at the Beijing Number Eight Girls' Middle School, female Red Guards used hammers to strike teachers' heads; at the Beijing Number Five Girls' Middle School, students bound the principal with a rope, hung her from a tree, then let her fall to the ground. Wang's list of schools where students attacked teachers (which is not meant to be complete) includes an additional seven girls' middle schools in Beijing as well as two girls' middle schools in Shanghai, and she makes it clear that girls at coed schools were among the ranks of Red Guards who attacked teachers.15

Yet it is the violence of the adolescent girls at the Beijing Normal University's Affiliated Middle School for Girls that observers felt required special explanation. "In those years, the school I attended was a girls' school," writes Wang Youqin in an essay titled "Female Savagery": "The students who beat and killed teachers were not petty hoodlums. Instead, they were girls who were fourteen to nineteen years old. . . . How can one explain the fact that it was in our famous girls' middle school that the first acts of violence in the Cultural Revolution in Beijing took place?"16 Ye Weili, also a student at the Middle School for Girls in 1966, highlights the girls' violent beating of the vice-principal as one of three episodes in the early Cultural Revolution that have perplexed her ever since.17 And the author of several articles about female sent-down youth, Jin Yihong, remains deeply disturbed and perplexed by the violence of her classmates and is continually absorbed by the question "Why was it that the girls at our girls' school could have been so violent?"18

**FORMULATING FEMININITIES**

The compulsion to explain the violence of such privileged girls is almost invariably linked to an assumption that it represented a dramatic deviation from their "ordinary" (pre-Cultural Revolution) behavior. Wang Youqin, for example, suggests that women are ordinarily gentle, implying that only under "special conditions [will] primitive savagery overwhelm women's gentleness."19 "These teenage girls, ordinarily shy, mild, and gentle," Yue Daiyun remarks about the beating of Bian Zhongyun, "had somehow become capable of unimaginable cruelty."20 "All of a sudden she was far from gentle, shy, or lovely," Jung Chang, the author of the popular memoir *Wild Swans*, writes of the female Red Guard who had once been the object of her brother's affections. "She was all hysterical ugliness."21 The Cultural Revolution, then, presumably represented a corruption of women's innately timid, gentle nature.

For some women, learning to swear was the first step away from these conventions. Jin Yihong, for example, describes being shocked, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, to hear her female classmates swear, and very vividly recalls the first time she herself swore. She surmises that if, with practice, women could adjust to cursing, so, too, could acts of violence become "natural." An almost identical emphasis on cursing as emblematic of a new type of behavior for young women appears in the memoir of a young middle-school student in Beijing. "It was early in the summer of that year (1966)," she recalls, "that I first learned to swear . . . . The first time I heard one of my girlfriends swear, I was astonished, it was so unlike her. The first time I swore, I felt a little faint, then I thought my friend must have felt that way too, although she didn't show it."22 For this woman, learning to swear seems to have represented a far more significant departure from convention than violence did, as she proceeds to describe in a rather casual manner how her Red Guard group, consisting entirely of girls, ransacked houses, and captured members of street gangs, whom they beat until "they begged us 'Red Guard ladies' for mercy."

However, even if it had been previously unimaginable for women to curse (at least, young, highly educated urban women), it is not entirely clear that the students at the Middle School for Girls had always been so stereotypically mild and gentle as the above accounts imply. In reflecting on her pre-Cultural Revolution years at the school (and not in the context of establishing a pre- and post-Cultural Revolution comparison), Jin Yihong emphasizes how unconventional she and her classmates had been. They refused to wear feminine clothing and declared total disinterest in their physical appearance by refusing to own mirrors. "Girls at our school dressed like boys before the Cultural Revolution," she recalls. "We were extremely self-confident and believed we could do anything. We never felt limited because we were girls. And insisted that we could do everything boys could do. We were wild [yet]." Moreover, in the context of analyzing homoerotic relationships among girls at the school, she describes the explicitly masculine or feminine roles each member of a couple would assume.24 If this portrait of the student body is at all true, then the notion of demure feminine girls who suddenly turned bold and violent is far too simplistic.

In spite of these characterizations, Jin Yihong herself has joined other former students in the quest for an explanation of female violence. At a recent informal gathering of both women and men who attended elite middle schools in Beijing when the Cultural Revolution began, several theories emerged. First, the attendees of the gathering concluded, women's violence could be attributed to the particularly severe forms of "sexual repression" to
which young girls had been subjected. Whether sexual repression referred to control of women’s sexuality per se, or to a more general social control of female behavior, remains unclear. The latter is not dissimilar to Marilyn Young’s analysis of female violence. “Perhaps one way to understand the reports of the quite stunning ferocity of female middle-school students,” she suggests, “against figures of authority (up to and including beating people to death) is as a rebellion against the weight of prior social repression, as well as a means to extirpate old stereotypes of feminine behavior.” A second theory was that “women were more susceptible than men to external pressures.” Young girls were therefore more likely to respond to admonitions by Chinese leadership to attack “class enemies.” Mao’s famed statement that “a revolution is not a dinner party,” for instance, is presumed to have had a particular influence on women. Implicit in this theory, however, is the conviction that female students were more violent than men—a conviction that says more about popular belief (or at least some segment of popular belief) than actual experience.

Another category of explanation, not considered in these former students’ discussions, might be relevant, and that concerns popular culture, particularly in the early and mid-1960s. In several different contexts, it seems, female militancy (meant literally), if not ferocity, was valorized. First, young schoolgirls, like their male counterparts, participated in militia training. This was part of the broader militarization of civilian life noted by Lynn White in his study of the origins of violence during the Cultural Revolution. He describes the military camps established in 1964, where in one summer more than fifty thousand middle-school students and ten thousand university students in Shanghai were drilled in the use of military weapons. In the countryside, young peasant women, organized into “red women’s shock brigades,” received basic military training: practicing for combat, they marched through fields carrying crude rifles (or sometimes hoes, as a substitute) on their shoulders. Even in nursery schools, young children were trained for armed battle in defense of their motherland: instead of simply being taught “body movement” during physical education, they were issued wood sticks to use as rifles and taught games such as “little people’s militia,” “small air force pilots,” and “learning to be the People’s Liberation Army.”

The state-sponsored emphasis on military training that reached its height in 1964 was reflected in, and further propagated by, the popular women’s magazine Zhongguo funü (Women of China). In the early 1960s its cover design had usually featured colorful images such as two “minority” women wearing festive dress and weaving, a young rosy-cheeked girl playing with a puppet, or two women happily browsing through a photo album. In mid-1964, however, cover designs began to honor the achievements of women combatants. One, featuring a drawing of a young woman holding a rifle at her side, included on its inside flap the lyrics and musical score for Mao’s already famous 1961 poem “Militia Women,” one he had initially inscribed on a photograph of himself standing with a group of women army combatants, each holding a rifle:

Early rays of sun illumine the parade grounds
and these handsome girls heroic in the wind,
with rifles five feet long.
Daughters of China with a marvelous will,
you prefer hardy uniforms to colorful silk.

Articles in subsequent issues reported on the accomplishments of women sharpshooters and crack shots, particularly those whose passion for the militia had replaced their previous interest in pretty clothes, and those who had overcome their initial “girlish” fear of gunshots.

One can only speculate about the impact of this training on young women. Gao Xiaoxian, a student at an all-girl middle school in X’ian in the early 1960s, vividly recalls how she and her classmates routinely “practiced” for an anticipated war with the Soviet Union. Wearing plain blue shirts and pants and black cloth shoes, they learned to march in formation, to use rifles with live bullets, and to aim hand grenades. Among the songs they sang during their weekly military practice was the one based on Mao’s poem “Militia Women.” For Gao, the valorization of female ferocity expressed by Mao in 1966 when he changed Song Binbin’s name to Song Yaowu, did not represent something new but rather had its precedents in the popularization of his poem throughout the early 1960s. (Furthermore, she believes that the preference for young girls to wear clothes made of plain-colored cloth rather than colorful, flowery prints first emerged in response to this poem in the early 1960s.)

The emphasis on female military vigilance articulated in this song, as well as in actual militia training, may have been reinforced by other forms of popular culture. Although the famed eight model operas did not yet dominate the performing arts in the years prior to the Cultural Revolution, some were already circulating widely. Most relevant here is the Red Detachment of Women, which made its film debut in the early 1960s and then premiered as an opera in 1964. Based on real historical events, the Red Detachment takes place on Hainandao and centers on the heroic efforts of a young slave girl, Wu Qinghua, to resist a wicked and evil landlord. She does break free, “wreaking violence upon male guards along her escape route.” Eventually, she joins the Chinese Communist Party’s Women’s Detachment, a group of heroic female guerrillas that successfully destroys the power of the local landlords. The story concludes with Wu’s vow to abide by Mao’s motto “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”
Although the *Red Detachment of Women* was primarily a tale that glorified female militancy, its performance sometimes revealed more ambivalence about women's combat roles. Historical records show that in the actual events on Hainandao in the 1920s, women taught themselves to use rifles and were organized by a particularly militant female commissar. In the ballet version, however, women are taught by men to use rifles, they are led by a dashing male commissar, and when they are not fighting, they busy themselves mending soldiers' uniforms. When an American visitor to China in 1972 asked about the change, "the ballet troupe explained that the commissar was changed to a male for 'artistic reasons,' because there weren't enough male leads." It is not entirely clear whether the change was made during the Cultural Revolution or during the versions produced in the pre-Cultural Revolution years. Nevertheless, this shift in male/female roles in the story that was so grating to a foreign feminist was probably unnoticed by Chinese audiences, for whom the *Red Detachment* remained a story that celebrated female militancy. Indeed, at least one woman's account of her success in the militia prior to the Cultural Revolution cites the influence of stories such as the *Red Detachment of Women*.

The point is not that this particular story was a direct cause or explanation of female violence during the Cultural Revolution. After all, a celebration of the ferocity, confidence, and bold determination of women fighting Japanese, Guomindang, or landlord "enemies" is not equivalent to licensing the beating and whipping of teachers. But it may have represented and extolled a model of female militancy to which young girls aspired, so that it was this *style* (rather than content) of fierce militant behavior that women sought to emulate. In the context of the popularization of stories such as the *Red Detachment of Women*, and the militia training of young women during the years preceding the Cultural Revolution, the appearance in 1966 of female Red Guards clothed in armylike attire, wearing (and wielding as weapons) broad leather belts, and displaying a capacity for attacks on figures of authority no longer seems so unprecedented, inexplicable, or deviant from prevailing codes of femininity.

Even if these forms of popular culture may have contributed to the authorization of female violence in a very general way, they do not explain its specific content. Indeed, any further exploration of the violence of female Red Guards would require more specific data about the women themselves. Aside from being female, what else might be said about them? Even if the prestigious Beijing Normal University's Affiliated Middle School for Girls has been singled out in many retrospective accounts, it was not a unique source of female violence. Some Chinese observers believe that students at all-girl schools were more prone to engaging in house searches and beatings during the early Red Guard Movement than students at coed schools, presumably because at coed schools they were more likely to defer to their male classmates. (And one critic of gender roles in contemporary China, reflecting on her Cultural Revolution experience, complained that, once students from all-girl schools joined coed Red Guard units, they suddenly—almost automatically—assumed roles subservient to the male leaders.) They add that the girls most likely to be violent were daughters of high-ranking officials and, furthermore, ones who had not enjoyed academic success at school. It is impossible to determine the veracity of these observations, but they do suggest the importance of probing beyond the simple fact of a female identity to analyze female violence. Finally, it is important to establish the actual extent of violence perpetrated by female Red Guards. Although many contemporary and retrospective accounts convey a picture of massive numbers of young women engaging in reckless attacks on authorities and class enemies, it is not entirely clear that such a large number of women or young girls were involved. Gao Xiaoxian, for example, stresses that of the roughly fifty students in her class at a middle school for girls in Xi'an, no more than five engaged in house searches and beatings.
Even if women Red Guards who engaged in early violence represented a small minority (both of women students and of Red Guards), an analysis of who they were, their activities, and the portrayals of those activities is crucial for understanding the gendered dimensions of violence during the early Cultural Revolution. Even if their superficial behavior was identical to that of their male counterparts, it had different meanings and implications. In other words, although young women and men alike donned leather belts that they used to whip "class enemies," popular interpretations of those actions invoked beliefs about appropriate gender behavior.

Gender was not an explicit issue in early violence by the Red Guard. The violence, even when women were its perpetrators, was not necessarily about "gender trouble," disorder, or discontent. Indeed, the seemingly obvious point that female violence reflected, at least in part, a rebellion against conventions of female behavior assumes that such conventions prevailed as a kind of static entity prior to the Cultural Revolution. Women themselves may have understood and described female violence as a radical departure from the past, but closer scrutiny may well reveal that the very articulation of those conventions—during and after the Cultural Revolution—was a means of explaining seemingly inexplicable behavior. Particularly in the context of memoirs crafted in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (when most were produced), it must have seemed more comforting to describe female violence as a radical aberration from the recent past rather than as continuous with the pre—Cultural Revolution socialist era.

Feminist critics of the Cultural Revolution have often pointed out that the Maoist slogan "The times have changed, men and women are the same," was not the plea for gender neutrality that it seems, at first glance, to be. Instead, it required women to behave like men, or at least implied that they would be measured by a male standard of success. (Men, it is often pointed out, were not encouraged to behave like women or to take on traditionally female roles and responsibilities.) To be revolutionary, critics suggest, one had to act like a man; to behave as a woman risked being labeled a "backward element."

Looking at one specific aspect of women's Cultural Revolution experience—violence by female Red Guards—reveals how much more complex an analysis is necessary. The ways in which that violence has been represented and analyzed by Chinese participants is embedded in beliefs about masculinity and femininity, beliefs that were themselves constantly being challenged and renegotiated. The very categories female and male, although invoked as if they had clearly fixed meanings, were far from static. Even while official policy declared gender, as a category of analysis, irrelevant, the Cultural Revolution involved a profound contestation and reconfiguration of gender identities.

NOTES

8. Ibid., 97.
10. Ibid., 34.
12. For accounts of this incident, see Wang You Qin, "1966: Xuesheng da laoshi de geming," 42; Tai Xiaoying and Ma Li, "Mengyu hong bayue" [August of a dream], in Hongwubing mibu, ed. Yu Hui (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1993), 93; Yue Daijun and Wakeman, To the Storm, 183 (in this account, it was Jiang Qing who changed Song's name). Also see Sung Yao-wu, "I Put a Red Arm Band on Chairman Mao," Chinese Literature 11 (1966): 23–26.
20. Yue Daijun and Wakeman, To the Storm, 183.

26. There is some indication that popular belief held women accountable for the worst forms of violence. See, for example, Ken Ling, The Revenge of Heaven, 80, 91; Wang Youjin, "Xuesheng da laoshi," 40. The depiction of women as especially brutal in post-Cultural Revolution accounts of the Cultural Revolution is noted by Marilyn Young, who cites as examples the "antiheroine" of Liu Binyan's piece of reportage fiction. "People or Monsters," as well as a play popular in Beijing in 1985 that featured a "truly loathsome girl Red Guard leader who seemed to be the only Red Guard in her neighborhood." See Young, "Chicken Little in China," 240.


32. Gao Xiaoxian, interview by author, Santa Cruz, Calif., May 1996. Gao is head of the research office of the Women's Federation in Xi'an and the author of several articles about contemporary rural women.


36. The celebration of female militancy was more explicitly propagated in early 1967, when the Chinese media publicized the historical experience of the Red Lanterns—the female counterparts of the Boxers, who dressed entirely in red, armed themselves with red-tasseled spears, and carried red scarves and red lanterns in their hands. This is discussed in Paul Cohen, History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

37. Gao Xiaoxian and Jin Yihong, interview by author, Santa Cruz, Calif., May 1996. Gao Xiaoxian believes that it was not only all-girl schools that produced disproportionate violence but all-female work units as well. In Xi'an, at least, the Women's Federation apparently was reputed to be the site of unusual violence.

CHAPTER TEN

"Little Brothers" in the Cultural Revolution: The Worker Rebels of Shanghai

Elizabeth J. Perry and Nara Dillon

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was a period of extraordinary social turmoil, the full dimensions of which are only just coming into focus. When Chairman Mao called upon the masses to "bombard the headquarters," they often did so with a remarkable vengeance. Murders of teachers by their students at some of the most prestigious girls' schools in the country (see the preceding chapter by Emily Honig), tragic suicides by many of China's most gifted intellectuals, and even cannibalism figured among the atrocities of the day. But alongside (and often interconnected with) these terrifying personal events went serious efforts at political change.

Dubbed a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Mao's campaign to continue the revolution under socialism pinned high hopes on the participation of the working class. More than a few workers—spurred by the promise that their country was ostensibly a "dictatorship of the proletariat"—took advantage of the Cultural Revolution to press for greater political authority. Nowhere was this effort to empower workers more sustained, or more successful, than in the industrial capital of Shanghai. There, a "rebel" organization called the Workers' General Headquarters (WGH) prevailed over "conservative" rivals to seize power from the Municipal Party Committee in the January Revolution of 1967 and gain effective control of the city government.1

The Cultural Revolution was officially a "class struggle," and gender issues never figured centrally in its agenda.2 As Marilyn Young has noted, "In launching ... the Cultural Revolution, the state put into high relief the inherently contradictory position of women ... Yet, finally, since class was the primary analytic category for understanding all social problems, the ideological attack on inequality left structural issues untouched."3 Attuned to the official discourse of the day, neither "rebel" workers (who attacked fac-
tory leaders) nor "conservatives" (who defended their supervisors) articulated explicit concerns about gender inequity.

Moreover, both wings of the workers' movement were overwhelmingly dominated by men. (This was in stark contrast to the student Red Guards, where, as Honig shows, female activism was pronounced.) At the time of the January Revolution, men accounted for nearly 90 percent of Shanghai's worker-rebel leadership at all levels (1,386 out of 1,784), although they made up only about two-thirds of the city's permanent workforce.4 Male dominance hardly comes as a surprise, but we think something can be gained by interrogating the expected. Asking how and why men came to dominate leadership roles during a time of crisis and institutional flux may provide further insight into the dynamics of gender relations in Communist China.5

The worker rebels in Shanghai, known colloquially as "little brothers" (xiao xiongdi), were a motley crew. Their leaders, as we will see, came from disparate backgrounds and were motivated by divergent concerns. Despite (or perhaps because of) such diversity, however, they turned to masculine metaphors of brotherhood to construct their new rebel community. The adoption of such metaphors reflected the dominant paradigm for rebel organization to be found in popular Chinese culture.

For centuries, the trope of brotherhood had been a building block of rebel gangs in China, popularized in vernacular novels such as Shui Hu Zhuan (Pearl Buck's English translation of which is titled All Men Are Brothers) and kept alive through stories, movies, and model operas about the Communists' own revolutionary struggle. Mao Zedong himself had celebrated the tales of ancient rebels, revealing in his interview with the American journalist Edgar Snow that as a schoolboy he had shunned the Confucian classics in favor of "the romances of Old China, and especially stories of rebellion." Snow shows how Mao's fascination with rebel gangs—in particular the Elder Brother Society (gelao hui)—exerted an important influence on the evolution of the Communist movement.7 In his famous appeal to the Elder Brothers, written in the summer of 1936, Mao called upon members of the secret society "to unite under the slogan of resisting Japan and saving the country, and constitute a close and intimate alliance of brothers!"8

Although the Elder Brother Society had been centered in Sichuan, Hunan, and other parts of central China, the city of Shanghai was not without its own traditions of fraternal organization. Shanghai's notorious Green Gang, which by some accounts was an offshoot of the Elder Brother Society, also relied on male fictive kinship nomenclature to consolidate its disparate constituency.9 These clandestine organizations were banned during the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, launched shortly after the Communists' ascension to power, but they were not thereby obliterated from the popular imagination. We find evidence of the lingering influence of such rebel traditions in the urban youth gangs that predated—and refigured—the activities of worker rebels during the Cultural Revolution.

THE BACKGROUNDS OF WORKER-REBEL LEADERS

For the most part, the leaders of Shanghai's worker rebels were young men on the lookout for excitement and self-esteem in the heady new environment created by the Cultural Revolution. As we might expect from recent scholarship emphasizing the numerous possibilities inherent in constructions of masculinity, these young men traveled very different roads in their common quest for identity.10 Rebel leaders of rival factions came to embrace a shared fraternal identity once the umbrella organization of the Workers' General Headquarters was established in November 1966, but their earlier paths to rebellion were as complex and variegated as the meanings of masculinity in contemporary China. Although we tend to think of the 1950s as a time of general social conformity in China, the biographies of the worker-rebel leaders suggest that the initial years of the People's Republic of China also afforded considerable space for diversity and even dissidence.

Take the case of Chen Ada, a rebel leader from the Shanghai Valve Factory who assumed the directorship of the municipal Bureau of Industry for much of the Cultural Revolution decade. Known in Shanghai dialect as auw (a good-for-nothing), Chen was widely regarded as a petty gangster, prone to profanity and coarse behavior. A common saying during the Cultural Revolution went, "Wherever there's an armed battle, you'll find Chen Ada." As a youth, Chen had lived with his father and younger brother in the "poor folks' district" (pinmin qu) in the western part of Shanghai. During the day, Chen's father and the dozen or so other peddlers who shared their room ventured forth to sell their wares. At night, once the vendors had gathered up their stands, they had nothing but time on their hands. Their chief recreation was to play cards for money and tell crude jokes. Growing up in this rough-and-ready all-male society, Chen Ada himself began to follow the older boys in the neighborhood to local disreputable places of recreation (dance halls, ice-skating rinks, and the like), where he learned to speak with bravado and harsh girls.

In 1958, as part of the Great Leap Forward, an urban commune was briefly established in Shanghai. To rid the city of its unproductive residents, petty gangsters were rounded up and packed off to Chongming Island for labor reform. Most of Chen Ada's friends were seized in this initiative, but in view of his youth Chen himself was released after a warning. A few years later, Chen enlisted in the army. His experiences in the military seem only to have exacerbated his earlier wayward tendencies, however. After his dis-
charge and assignment to the Shanghai Valve Factory, Chen spent much of his time gambling—an activity that was strictly prohibited.11

Chen demonstrated his belligerent style shortly after the onset of the Cultural Revolution, when a neighbor exposed the fact that Chen’s father had been hiding a cache of gold on behalf of a former capitalist. Chen Ada’s younger brother, Chen Aer, delivered a sound thrashing to the accuser, for which Aer was packed off to the police station. Chen Ada himself then gathered a crowd of boisterous followers that surrounded the police station until the frightened authorities agreed to release his brother and post a special notice exonerating his father.12 By his own account, Chen’s motives for joining the Cultural Revolution did not evidence much political sophistication: “As for the bunch of jerks in the factory, I wanted to settle accounts with all of them.”13 The “jerks” (chilao in Shanghai dialect) were the factory cadres.

Chen Ada maintained his feisty demeanor to the end. Even after the arrest of his radical patrons—the so-called “Gang of Four”—in October 1976, Chen advocated a militant response. At a meeting of rebel leaders in Shanghai to discuss military action, Chen exploded: “If Party Central goes revisionist, never fear. We’ll counter it. I didn’t die during the Cultural Revolution. Now I’m ready to die, but I’m not afraid. . . . Give me revolution or give me death! Everyone should swear an oath. Who wants to be a traitor, damn it?! Even in death, I’d take three bites out of such a person!”14

Before he could take action, however, Chen was arrested and sentenced to a sixteen-year prison term.

Chen Ada’s youthful exploits on the margins of orthodox Maoist society were not atypical of workers who became rebel leaders during the Cultural Revolution. Previous affiliation with all-male youth gangs seems to have been a formative experience for a number of activists. Shortly before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, for example, an alleged “KO counterrevolutionary clique” was uncovered at the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory when some workshop cadres noticed that many of the younger workers had scratched the English initials “KO” onto their leather belts. Some of these same young men had posted inflammatory slogans on the factory walls, designed to incense their elders: “We can’t but feel ashamed that half a month’s wage is barely enough to buy a pair of leather shoes!” “Our spring has already lost its radiance!” “Let’s hold dance parties at once!” “Long live women!”

Most of the young male workers at the diesel engine plant lived in the factory dormitory or in the workers’ residential district adjoining the factory. Far removed from the city center, they had few recreational options to fill their leisure time. Moreover, the economy had barely recovered from the disastrous period of 1959–62, and material pleasures were in short supply. The “KO” adherents were undoubtedly searching for some means of self-expression in the highly constrained environment of Maoist China. But after openly airing their frustrations, these young people were branded as dangerous elements. Although the selection of the “KO” insignia had been intended playfully (perhaps as a pun on the English word “okay,” perhaps as an abbreviation for “knockout”), it was misconstrued as the secret password of some clandestine organization. Thus a “KO counterrevolutionary clique” was conjured up, which some thirty to forty workers were accused of joining. During the Cultural Revolution, the young men who had been charged with participation in the “KO clique” became backbone elements in one of the rebellious factions at the diesel engine plant.15

If young male workers were casting about for meaningful identities in the stifling atmosphere of the day, their methods of doing so were certainly not all of a piece. While some, like Chen Ada, seemed drawn to a kind of gangster machismo, others sought fulfillment in more aesthetic pursuits. This duality matches that which Kam Louie and Louise Edwards have highlighted within earlier periods of Chinese history. Although there was, they note, certainly a macho tradition in China, it was counterbalanced by “a softer, cerebral male tradition that is not found to the same degree in the secular West.”16 Although the ideal Chinese male was supposed to embody both attributes, aesthetic accomplishments (or wen) were often more highly prized than martial abilities (or wu).

The most famous worker-rebel leaders did indeed evidence both wen and wu qualities. Wang Hongwen, commander of the Workers’ General Headquarters, had served in the army during the Korean War—but as a horn player rather than a soldier.17 Pan Guoping, second in the leadership lineup during the early months of the Workers’ General Headquarters, also combined military experience with more aesthetic inclinations. Pan Guoping’s accomplishments were wide-ranging. In middle school he had been active in athletics. While a soldier, he had received second prize in an art contest. As a worker, he directed choral and theatrical troupes at the Workers’ Cultural Palace. Pan’s artistic flair left him dissatisfied with mundane factory labor, and he asked his superiors at the factory for permission to take the entrance exam for drama school. When the authorities refused to issue the letter of introduction that would have allowed him to sit for the examination, Pan developed a smoldering grudge—one that would burst into flames during the Cultural Revolution.

Pan Guoping’s extraordinary gift for oratory (enhanced by a clear Mandarin accent cultivated for his thespian aspirations) propelled him to the forefront of the early rebel movement.18 Despite his glib tongue, however, Pan came to be known as an unreliable loafer. He was widely referred to as a xiao doulou, Shanghai dialect for “hoodlum.” Before long, Pan was expelled from the policy-making center of the Workers’ General Headquarters, his title of vice-commander remaining only an empty appellation.
Another important figure in the Workers’ General Headquarters, Huang Jinhai, was known colloquially as a “dandy” (aifei fenzi) because of his penchant for fancy attire. Huang’s attraction to fashionable clothing rendered him a conspicuous figure in the drab atmosphere of Maoist China, where simplicity of dress was the near-universal norm.

As in the case of so many of the rebel leaders, Huang’s childhood had been less than idyllic. Within a month after his birth, Huang’s mother died of illness. His father was an opium addict who put his children up for adoption. When his foster mother could no longer afford to keep him, Huang was packed off to Shanghai to rejoin his natural father. Living with his still addicted and abusive father, he completed his elementary school education.21

In October 1950, at age sixteen, Huang Jinhai entered a private clothing shop as an apprentice. When the Three Antis and Five Antis campaign was launched two years later, Huang reported—to the “tiger-beating team” investigating capitalist abuses—that his boss had been withholding taxes. The shop was fined, and in May of that year it was closed down altogether. After an eight-month stint at an unemployed workers’ training program, Huang attained a middle school certificate and was assigned to a cotton mill.22

At the mill, Huang Jinhai was known to be a diligent worker and energetic in extrawork pursuits. In spite of his dedication on the job, however, his opium-addicted father continued to present a problem. To support his drug dependence, Huang’s father embezzled public funds—a crime for which he was sentenced to five years in prison. Huang Jinhai recalled, “When I heard this news I was devastated; I felt that I would never be able to cast off this terrible burden.”23

Indeed, his father’s impropriety became Huang Jinhai’s Achilles’ heel in the years ahead, blocking the recognition he felt he deserved:

I knew that my application to enter the Youth League had been in limbo for many years, and now the prospects looked even dimmer. So I became depressed and no longer participated in extracurricular activities.24

The more I shoudered my political burden, the more despondent I became. For a time I grew a beard and spent most of my nonworking hours playing cards in the club. On Sundays, I went to the suburbs to fish instead of engaging in proper duties. I even bought a necktie and then went to a shop that sold exotic to buy a used Western sui. Sometimes I ventured to the city center in coat and tie. When I saw people wearing leather jackets, I spent more than forty yuan to buy one. I was totally preoccupied with my playboy lifestyle. My frivolous habits gave the older workers a very bad impression. I organized dances and the like, which the older workers didn’t appreciate.

Although we now know that Chairman Mao himself was enjoying dance parties—and more—with the protective walls of Zhongnanhai at this very time, such frivolity was not sanctioned for the populace at large.25 As the political scientist Wang Shaoguang points out, the bleak economic situation following the Great Leap Forward had generated a strong ascetic tendency: “Now one might be considered backward if any aspect of one’s life-style was out of the ordinary, such as wearing brightly colored clothes, applying hair oil, going to a restaurant, cultivating flowers, raising goldfish or playing chess.”26 Personal hobbies and eccentricities became grounds for designation as a “backward element” (luohou fenzi), even if one worked assiduously at one’s job. Huang Jinhai, having been saddled with the label of “backward element” by his factory superiors, plunged into the Cultural Revolution with gusto.

The routes by which these leaders of the Workers’ General Headquarters reached the point of rebellion were various, yet they shared in common the experience in their adolescence of having trodden paths that lay outside the officially approved channels for upward mobility in Communist China. The one notable exception to this pattern was Wang Xuizhen—the lone woman among the nine top worker-rebel leaders. After 1957, Wang Xuizhen ranked second in importance only to Commander Wang Hongwen. Thanks to Wang Hongwen’s growing confidence in her, Wang Xuizhen enjoyed a meteoric rise—becoming vice-chair of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, deputy-secretary of the Shanghai Party Committee, and vice-chair of the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions. Wang Hongwen’s favoritism toward Wang Xuizhen probably stemmed in part from their shared native-place origins in Manchuria; it may also (as was widely rumored at the time) have grown out of a love affair between the two. In any case, it is clear that, whereas Wang Hongwen was suspicious of the motives of his fellow male rebels (who challenged his leadership on more than one occasion), he put full trust in the loyalty of Wang Xuizhen. When Wang Hongwen “helicopter’d” up to Beijing to become vice-chair of the Communist Party in 1973, it was Wang Xuizhen whom he left in charge of the Shanghai scene.

In contrast to the male leaders of the Workers’ General Headquarters, Wang Xuizhen had enjoyed a relatively smooth work history. She had entered factory life in 1950, at the age of fifteen, as a weaver at the Liaoyang textile mill. Just at this time her father died of high blood pressure. Saddled with the entire financial burden of her struggling family, Wang labored diligently at her job. After two years, she entered the Communist Youth League and at the age of eighteen joined the Communist Party. Selected as an activist in her workshop, Wang was later celebrated as an “advanced producer” and a “labor model” at city, provincial, and northeast district levels. These were high honors, indeed the highest to which an industrious worker might normally aspire, and Wang had achieved them when she was only twenty years of age. But her accomplishments did not end there. Soon Wang Xuizhen was named a people’s representative to the city of Liaoyang and then to Liaoning province.
In August 1956, Wang Xiuwen was sent to the Shanghai Textile Institute to develop her talents further. A few years later she was assigned to the number thirty cotton mill as a technician. Soon Wang was promoted to supervisor of the weaving workshop. This promising career was threatened, however, after the birth of her two children, when Wang was publicly criticized by the factory director for a deterioration in her work. Humiliated by this setback, she requested a transfer. Although temporarily loaned to the Textile Bureau to handle personnel dossiers, Wang was returned to her factory shortly before the Cultural Revolution began. After her reinstatement at the number thirty cotton mill, she managed dossiers in the factory director's office.27

Wang Xiuwen had always been an activist, a target of cultivation by the Party. This made her unusual among the rebel leaders. At the start of the Cultural Revolution, thirty-two-year-old Wang Xiuwen was even chosen as director of her factory's Cultural Revolution committee. Most workers with this sort of background became conservatives, but Wang was a notable exception. In explaining this anomaly, her fellow workers later pointed to Wang's ambition and avarice, charging that she had been afflicted with the "three clamos" (sanchao)—for wages, housing, and position.28

Wang Xiuwen herself always insisted that her rebellion was a response to the call of Chairman Mao. However, she also emphasized that it was Wang Hongwen who had given her the personal courage to rebel. She later recalled, "Wang Hongwen told me how they had gone to Beijing to file a complaint against the work team at the number seventeen cotton mill and how the Cultural Revolution Small Group [composed of Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and other radicals] had received support and asked them to return to wage battle against the capitalist line of the work team and the Shanghai Party Committee. . . . I felt emboldened and I went back and wrote a big-character-poster against the work team."29

The close relationship between the two Wangs was key both to Wang Xiuwen's participation on the rebel side and to her rapid ascent up the leadership ladder of the Workers' General Headquarters. Unlike many of the other early rebel leaders, Wang Xiuwen never questioned the supremacy of Wang Hongwen. As repayment for this allegiance, in early 1967 she was personally assigned by Wang Hongwen to the leadership of the Workers' General Headquarters to direct its propaganda and organization departments. From this point on, she became Wang Hongwen's most capable and most trusted lieutenant—second only to Wang Hongwen himself in the lineup of influential leaders of the Shanghai worker-rebel movement.

Wang Xiuwen's enlistment under the rebel banner may have stemmed in part from embellishment over her reprimand following the birth of her two children. Forced into the double burden of child care and factory work, the lone woman among the top worker rebels was put at a disadvantage vis-

à-vis her male coworkers. Even so, Wang does not seem to have translated her personal experience as a mother into a wider sympathy for the plight of women workers. There is no evidence to suggest that she used her substantial influence during the Cultural Revolution to articulate the special concerns of women workers.

Rather than serving as a champion for women's rights, Wang Xiuwen focused her energies on ensuring that the "little brothers" remained obedient to Wang Hongwen's commands. Not having traversed the countercultural paths taken by so many of the male rebel leaders, she showed little patience for their sometimes freewheeling tendencies. It was not feisty independence, but rather her strict adherence to Wang Hongwen's orders, that secured Wang Xiuwen's place in the leadership hierarchy.

**THE BAND OF BROTHERS**

The emphasis on fraternal bonds helped to harmonize the divergent, and potentially discordant, strains with the rebel ranks. The resulting organizational synthesis drew upon both ancient and contemporary sources of inspiration.

In the tradition of the legendary bandit heroes of *All Men Are Brothers*, the worker rebels understood their rebellion as an act of loyalty to their king (Chairman Mao), whose will was being subverted by corrupt officials. Worker-rebel leader Dai Liqing later explained in his confession to the Public Security Bureau, "My constant thought was: 'People must follow the king's law like the grass must move with the wind.' . . . I had one desire: to obey Chairman Mao."30 The ambition of the worker rebels, as with the heroes of Liangshangpo (home base of the bandits in *All Men Are Brothers*), was to wrest power from venal ("capitalist-roader") bureaucrats and assume such positions themselves. As Wang Hongwen stated in order to encourage his fellow rebels at the outset of the movement, "The Cultural Revolution is a great upheaval; upheavals give birth to heroes. As the saying goes, 'Victors become kings while the vanquished become outlaws.' Right now the situation is very favorable. Rebellion at the municipal level can gain us the mayoralship; at the department level, directorships; and at lower levels, factory headships."31 Or, as Dai Liqing confided to his roommates in the factory dormitory, "Last night I had a big dream. I was the emperor's son-in-law, a big official. Ha, ha! If I can be a big official, you can all become officials."32

At times, the similarities between the activities of the worker rebels and those of rebels of yore were quite striking. Once they had decided to form their new Workers' General Headquarters, for example, the founders agreed that they must immediately issue distinctive armbands. Like peasant rebels of imperial days, the worker rebels now faced the daunting task of procuring enough fabric to produce their identifying cloth badges.33 Wang
Hongwen, having just been named “commander” of the WGH, announced that he would assume personal responsibility for securing the requisite red cloth to make armbands for his followers. Accordingly, he gathered a dozen or so fellow workers and Red Guards for a midnight raid on a fabric store. When the store clerk demanded that the rebels pay for their bolts of cloth, Wang retorted, “Tell old man Cao [i.e., Shanghai’s mayor, Cao Diqiu] to foot the bill!” The first “rebel action” of the newly constituted Workers’ General Headquarters was thus a plundering expedition.

As had been the case in secret societies in the past, the worker rebels turned to religious terminology—drawn especially from the Buddhist tradition—to empower their community. For example, Wang Hongwen referred to his top lieutenants as the “eight guardian gods” (buda jingang) in a boastful allusion to the four guardian gods (sida jingang) stationed at the entrance way to Buddhist temples. Other terms of Buddhist derivation were adapted by the worker rebels to symbolize their own virility. The phrase “horns on the head and thorns on the body”—originally a derogatory idiom referring to the denizens of Buddhist hell—was embraced by the worker rebels as expressive of their own fighting spirit. When Zhang Chunqiao advocated replacing toppled cadres with worker rebels, he alluded to the devilish imagery espoused by the workers themselves: “Those with long horns on their heads and long thorns on their backs should be sent to the center to raise a ruckus.”

Similarly, terms that had once connoted impudence (such as pola) were now used to characterize a proper revolutionary style. In recommending “little brothers” for admission to the Party or for promotion to cadre positions, the designation “impudent work style” (zuo feng pola) in their dossiers served as a ringing endorsement of a bold and vigorous manner. Ye Changming, the worker rebel who headed the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions, described his method for choosing union cadres: “I considered whether or not they had been rebels, whether or not they had rebel spirit and fighting spirit as well as guts and impudence—[a willingness to] speak out and make suggestions. I then considered whether or not they had feelings for the ‘Gang of Four’; whether they would stick by us was a most important question. . . . After using these ‘gang’ [bang] criteria to make the initial cut, direct meetings and discussions were held to choose the people we needed.”

Through means such as these, Wang Hongwen’s faithful followers were rewarded first with union positions and then with Party and government offices. Worker rebels in the trade union convened regular brainstorming sessions that were, in effect, planning meetings to increase their leverage over Party and government affairs. Wang Xiuzhen noted that “after a brainstorming session, the ‘little brothers’ took the contents of the session to all departments of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee and concerned bureaus.” Thanks to such stratagems, the rebels gained an impressive foothold in city politics. As Ye Changming recalled, “The ‘little brothers’ formed a ‘gang’ [bang] in both the municipal party committee and the municipal revolutionary committee.”

Reliance on a fraternal-gang model of organization had important implications for the collective identity of the worker rebels. As Elisabeth Clemens argues in her study of American labor, “Strategic choices between organizational models reveal themselves to be also choices between goals and collective identities.” The turn-of-the-century U.S. labor movement, Clemens shows, drew alternatively upon a fraternal model provided by the Masons (whose similarities to the Chinese Triads have often been noted) and a military model (borrowed from the American Civil War experience). Although Clemens does not explore the gendered dimensions of these traditionally all-male institutional prototypes, it seems clear that they emphasized somewhat different dimensions of masculinity. Whereas Masonic lodges valued sentimental bonds of brotherly obligation, the army stressed impersonal obedience to higher orders.

Shanghai’s worker rebels, like other Cultural Revolution activists, were influenced to some extent by military models of organization. The attraction of military exemplars was heightened by Mao’s famous slogan, raised on the eve of the Cultural Revolution campaign, “Let the whole nation learn from the People’s Liberation Army.” Four of the top leaders of the Workers’ General Headquarters—Wang Hongwen, Geng Jizhang, Pan Guoping, and Chen Ada—had served in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) before the start of the Cultural Revolution. Not surprisingly, the groups they founded were given martial names: “Warriors Sworn to the Death to Carry Through with the Cultural Revolution to the End,” “Mao Zedong Thought Warriors,” “First Regiment,” “Frontline Command Post to Grasp Revolution and Promote Production,” and so forth. Military terminology was also drawn from China’s prerevolutionary history: Wang Hongwen referred to five of his top advisors as his “five tiger generals” (wu hujiang), for example.

Although the military was not insignificant as a source of inspiration for the worker rebels, the outlaw gang seems to have provided a much more compelling organizational paradigm. (The two were not entirely separate, of course, inasmuch as many bandit outfits and secret societies had also imitated certain military arrangements.) As was true of gangs, the worker rebels were structured by personalistic patron-client bonds rather than by impersonal ranks. For example, the induction of new members into Shanghai’s Green Gang, which required swearing fealty to a gang master, had been known colloquially as “honor an old man” (hai laotouzi). During the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Chunqiao often boasted that the worker rebels in Shanghai “all regard me as their ‘old man’ [ba wo dang laotouzi].”

Pledging brotherhood was another secret-society practice reuscituated by
the worker rebels. Though “revolutionary comrade” was the politically correct address of the day, the worker rebels preferred the fraternal nomenclature of the gangs of old. The phenomenon was not unique to Shanghai. A participant in the Cultural Revolution in Wuhan recalls, “I once attended a meeting of the worker rebels. They referred to one another as ‘brothers,’ patted each other on the shoulder, clasped hands, uttered gangster language, went shoeless and with unbuttoned shirts—the spit image of the old-style Green and Red Gangs.”44 The designation “brother” implied intimate obligations of mutual aid and loyalty that superseded officially sanctioned relationships. Among the worker rebels of Shanghai, the phrase youshu, meaning “it’s under control,” served as a kind of watchword—taking precedence over Party directives or national regulations. A rebel who found himself in trouble with the law (e.g., Dai Lijing killed a peasant while driving without a license, Chen Ada habitually harassed women sexually, and so forth) could be spared a jail sentence by a simple youshu from his “little brothers.”45

What this camaraderie suggests about the sexuality of the rebel leaders is impossible to say with confidence. We do know that, when the WGH Standing Committee ordered an investigation into the behavior of several hundred of its top leaders, illicit sexual relationships—both homosexual and heterosexual—figured prominently among the alleged transgressions.46 Of course, homosexuality was not unknown in the Chinese secret-society tradition, particularly among pirate gangs.47

As David Ownby has shown, brotherhood associations in China since the late imperial period were “created by marginalized men seeking mutual protection and mutual aid in a dangerous and competitive society.”48 The chief function of the brotherhood was to provide security and assistance in times of trouble. Like their imperial forebears, the worker rebels of the Cultural Revolution were, for the most part, marginal young men in search of solace and safety. And although members of the Workers’ General Headquarters did not swear a formal blood oath of fictive kinship, they took their mutual obligations seriously.49

At first glance, it may seem curious that a woman—Wang Xiuzhen—ruled over the band of brothers after Wang Hongwen left for higher political office in Beijing. Though the rank-and-file worker rebels derisively dubbed her the “housekeeping mother-in-law” (guanjiaopo) behind her back, Wang wielded enormous power in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. Interestingly, the practice of female leadership, too, has precedents among the outlaw gangs of old. Women bandit chiefs were well-known figures in the late imperial and Republican periods.50

Sworn brotherhood was thus not an insuperable barrier to female leadership. Within the Triad secret-society tradition in particular, it was not uncommon for women—especially widows or paramours of powerful male chieftains—to assume leadership roles.51 The famous woman pirate Zheng Yi Sao fit squarely within this mode.52 Wang Xiuzhen’s close relationship to Wang Hongwen was reminiscent of this familiar pattern. While a single, powerful female leader—deriving her legitimacy from intimate association with a slain or absent male commander—may have long been a part of the gang model of organization, broader participation by women was less easily accommodated within this fraternal framework. Women might serve as domineering stepmothers or mothers-in-law, but not as ordinary sisters.

The prevalence of brotherly imagery in rebel and revolutionary movements is, of course, hardly unique to China. Lynn Hunt notes in her provocative study of the French Revolution that “in their own self-image, then, the French revolutionaries remained brothers. They were romantic heroes…prepared to become martyrs to their cause, either on the battlefield or in the line of official duties. They expected the gratitude of the nation, but their chief reward was their sense of solidarity with their brothers.”53 Hunt is describing a situation in which the political father (Louis XVI) had been executed and a quest for a new political family was under way. By contrast, in Cultural Revolution China the political father (Chairman Mao) remained very much alive. As a consequence, the initiatives of the worker rebels—important as they were in placing workers in political posts and in raising the status of the proletariat in Chinese society—remained dependent upon the approval of higher authority. Thus, although the worker rebels had harbored ambitions of implementing a new Shanghai People’s Commune, modeled on the Paris Commune of 1871, Chairman Mao quickly called a halt to the experiment.54 The band of brothers was in the end subservient to the imperial will of Beijing—more in the tradition of the Liangshanpo outlaws than of the Paris revolutionaries.

Whereas the French fraternalism described by Hunt implied egalitarian relations among men (albeit not women), the Chinese vision of brotherhood was inherently hierarchical. The very term for “brothers” in Chinese (xiongdi) combines the unequal duo of “elder brother” (xiong) and “younger brother” (di). According to Confucian norms, elder brothers were expected to offer moral guidance, while younger brothers were enjoined to display proper deference. Ruling these unequal siblings (or fictive brethren in the case of secret-society gangs) were stern fathers (or gang masters). In China, the principal distinction between fraternal and military models was thus not one of egalitarianism versus hierarchy but rather one of personal, family-style obligations versus impersonal, rank-based obedience.

CONCLUSION

That the worker rebels were so influenced by secret-society precedents may help to shed light on several anomalous features of their movement, espe-
cially when compared to the student movement—whose chief inspiration (as Emily Honig explains) derived from military models. Whereas the workers were content to adopt the fraternal appellation of “little brother,” the Red Guards proudly referred to themselves as “little generals.” This fundamental difference in identity—bandit brother versus military commander—was reflected in the distinctive organization and activities of the two mass movements during the Cultural Revolution.

Although the student Red Guards seem to have preferred sexually segregated outfits, reflecting the situation in the Chinese army (as well as in some elite schools), the worker rebels operated in a somewhat more integrated fashion. Despite the overwhelmingly male composition of their leadership ranks, the workers did permit women to take charge of male subordinates. By contrast, the student Red Guards—mimicking PLA practices—seem to have tolerated female leadership only in all-female units. Moreover, unlike the women workers (who continued to wear their regular work clothes), female Red Guards donned male military uniforms. The latter practice evoked the legend of Hua Mulan, the mythical woman warrior who—disguised as a man—served for years in the army in her father’s stead.

The all-female Red Guard units, as Honig notes, were often prone to extraordinary brutality. Rebel workers, on the other hand, proved far less violent than their student counterparts. In testimony, one worker rebel expressed shock at the cruel tactics of the students: “Red Guards came to our factory and captured sixteen of our rebels, using leather whips to torture them. They also made us kneel on little stools for as long as four hours. They shaved the heads of these sixteen comrades and wrote the characters “o.x.-devils and snake-spirits” on their bodies. Fourteen workers were injured and all sixteen were tortured in a torture chamber that the Red Guards set up. More than forty struggle sessions were convened, and some of our comrades were locked up for one to two weeks.”

Shanghai’s worker rebels were certainly involved in several major bloody confrontations, most notably the Kangping Road incident of December 1966 (in which 91 conservative workers were wounded so seriously that they required hospitalization) and the assault on the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory in August 1967 (in which 121 workers were permanently disabled from their injuries). However, even these large-scale armed struggles did not result in fatalities among the combatants. Again the contrast with the Red Guards is telling: in the single month of September 1966 Shanghai suffered 704 suicides and 354 murders linked to student-instigated violence.

Although it is impossible to determine exactly how much of the difference between student and worker initiatives was attributable to their distinctive organizational paradigms, it seems clear that the personal leadership of “gang masters” Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen was a critical factor in moderating the struggles of the worker rebels. In the tradition of gang chieftains, Zhang and Wang wielded enormous authority over the “little brothers” of the Workers’ General Headquarters. Their decision to confiscate factory weaponry and to welcome erstwhile conservatives and renegade rebels to the ranks of the WGH helped to prevent an unrestrained reign of terror of the sort that Red Guards were then visiting upon much of the country.

The most notable aspect of Shanghai’s worker-rebel activism was not their violence—which pales in comparison to that of the students—but their pursuit of political power. After the January Revolution of 1967, worker rebels at the instigation of Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen augmented their political influence through a variety of programs: worker representatives, workers’ Mao Zedong thought-propaganda teams, workers’ theory courses, workers’ new cadres, worker ambassadors, and the like. When the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions was reestablished in 1973 as a metamorphosed Workers’ General Headquarters, it was a remarkably powerful organization that often usurped Party prerogatives—especially in the area of personnel matters. Although worker initiatives were limited by the ultimate authority of Chairman Mao, the “band of brothers” did make serious efforts to enhance the status of the proletariat in Chinese political life. Having operated on the fringes of orthodox society for many years, Shanghai’s worker rebels—in the venerable tradition of Chinese rebel movements—seized the opportunity presented by the Cultural Revolution to forge a new brotherhood based on a common quest for political inclusion.

NOTES

1. A fuller discussion of the Workers’ General Headquarters can be found in Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

2. Kay Ann Johnson, Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). During the Criticize Lin Biao—Criticize Confucius Campaign of the mid-1970s, condemnation of “patriarchy” was officially encouraged. This occurred well after the demobilization of the mass movement, however.


5. Judith M. Bennett, “Feminism and History,” *Gender and History* 1, no. 3 (autumn 1989): 263–64 points out the usefulness of examining gender relations in times of crisis. See also Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 40–41, on the need to historicize “the terms of sexual difference.”


7. Ibid., 78–79, 135, 210, 221, 332.


16. For more on the fictional struggle at the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory, see Perry and Li, *Proletarian Power*, 132–41.


20. Liu Guande, interview by Li Xun, Shanghai, 1987. Liu was a writer who also undertook a lengthy interview with Pan Guoping after the latter’s release from prison in 1987. See also Pan Guoping, April 24 and 29, 1977, testimony in the Shanghai Municipal Archives.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


30. Dai Liqiong, October 18, 1979, testimony in the Shanghai Municipal Archives.


32. Ibid., 137.


34. Shanghai Party Committee Cultural Revolution Materials Small Group, ed., *Shanghai “wenhua dageming” shihua*, 141.


38. Ye Changming, April 5, 1977, testimony in the Shanghai Municipal Archives.


41. Liu Guande, interview by Li Xun, Shanghai, 1987, 405.


45. Liu Guande, interview by Li Xun, Shanghai, 1987, 405, 446.

46. Workers’ General Headquarters, “Guanyu yuanzai xian, yuan, ju, lianhuo zhe yishang changwei bei jiuju, daibu de qingkuang baogao” [Situation report on detentions and arrests of standing committees at district, county, bureau liaison posts and above], manuscript, April 19, 1969, Shanghai Municipal Archives.


51. The ranks of the nineteenth-century Taiping rebellion were swelled when two female Triad chiefs from Guangxi joined the movement, each bringing several thousand followers with her. Theodore Hamberg, *The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen and Origin of the Kwang-si Insurrection* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 54–55.

52. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast*, 152–53.


56. The official history of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai, published by the Shanghai Party Committee, does list one death in conjunction with the attack on the diesel engine factory, but other sources do not mention any deaths.

57. Shanghai Party Committee Cultural Revolution Materials Small Group, ed., *Shanghai “wenhua dageming” shihua*.


59. Ibid., chap. 6.

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**PART SIX**

**Blood, Qi, and the Gendered Body**

Both Charlotte Furth’s and Nancy Chen’s chapters illustrate that, in China, notions of manliness, womanliness, and sexuality could be quite different from the European and American versions grounded in Western biology and medical science. The classical Chinese medical tradition presents an alternative understanding of the sexed body—its reproductive physiology, sexuality, and associated gender traits. In this tradition, *qi* and “blood” were the two most important life substances, and health and illness were defined as problems of vitality or depletion. Although male and female bodies contained both substances, blood tended to have associations of femaleness and *qi* of maleness. Women’s blood was considered to be constantly depleted by childbirth and menstruation; moreover, to be ruled by one’s blood meant that one was controlled by one’s emotions. Thus, physiology was used to justify women’s submission to the superior vitality of men.


Two centuries after that period, Nancy Chen finds that physiology is associated with gender in subtle ways that seem to reinforce male superiority. *Qigong* masters are quintessential examples of people who possess powerful vitality and are able to tightly control it. Almost invariably these masters are men, and one of the few women masters aroused suspicion and was ultimately jailed. More than half of the followers of the masters, however, are women.

There are very few books that discuss both concepts of the body and gender in China. It is hard to identify a common theme in these works other