

# Whither China? Yang Xiguang, Red Capitalists, and the Social Turmoil of the Cultural Revolution

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In early 1968, an 18-year-old high school student in Hunan province composed a short essay that made him famous across China—and led to his imprisonment for the next ten years. His name was Yang Xiguang, and what gave rise to his notoriety was his proclamation that the major conflict in China was not between Mao’s supporters and enemies, nor between China’s proletariat and the former wealthy, but rather between a “red capitalist class”, akin in many respects to Djilas’ “new class”, and the masses of the Chinese people:

At present over 90 per cent of our high-ranking officials have formed into a unique class—the red capitalist class ... It is a decadent class impeding historical progress. Its relationship with the people has changed from that of leaders and followers to rulers and ruled, to exploiters and exploited, from equal, revolutionary camaraderie to oppressors and oppressed. The class interests, prerogatives, and high income of the red capitalist class is built upon repression and exploitation of the masses of the population [Yang, 1968].<sup>1</sup>

It was by no means a profound statement beyond the ken of ordinary souls; a similar view of the polity, though devoid of radical rhetoric, brought a million people into Tiananmen in 1989. Yet two decades earlier, in the 1960s, much as in the tale of the little boy and the emperor’s clothes, Yang Xiguang’s observations had stepped outside the ideological paradigm that people had permitted themselves to hold. He was not just expounding heresy—it was heresy of a sort the students of Yang Xiguang’s generation had never even imagined could exist.

The times were ripe for heresy, though. The Cultural Revolution’s turmoil was beginning to stir questions in the minds of many young people by the time “Whither China?” was penned in early 1968. Passed hand-to-hand by Rebel Red Guards, and further spread by the national leadership as “material to be criticized,” Yang Xiguang’s essay reached a readership of many hundreds of thousands—and it was with a rush of sudden recognition that young people across the breadth of China read it. The former leader of Guangzhou’s high-school Rebel Red Guards has recalled, for example, that “The moment I picked up that article it affected me, very deeply. I began to *question* the system. I realized there definitely was such an elite class” (quoted in Chan, 1985: 256).

It was a moment of enlightenment that was to be remembered in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the leaders of China’s Democracy Movement, who looked back to Yang Xiguang’s essay as a key element in the development of their own views. Wang Xizhe observed in 1980 that “The Yang Xiguang group was the forerunner of the Thinking Generation” (Wang, 1980: 252). Liu Guokai, another leading figure of the Democracy Movement, quoted at length from “Whither China?” in 1980, and wrote that rereading it “even today can set our hearts racing” (Liu, 1980: 117).

To comprehend the genesis of the new parameters of thought that developed during the Cultural Revolution, and to come more fully to grips with the impact of the Cultural Revolution on more recent events, it thus becomes worthwhile to focus on the circumstances in which Yang Xiguang arrived at his new conceptualization of the Chinese polity. It is a chronicle, moreover, which helps to elucidate the complex social tensions that undergird the

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly abridged English translation of “Whither China?” (using different wording than I use here) is contained in Mehnert (1969: 82.100). Mehnert’s book focuses largely on Yang Xiguang’s essay and the response that it and a couple of other related essays elicited from the Party leadership.

violent conflicts of the Cultural Revolution. It does so through the narrow prism of one teenager's experience—in some respects a unique experience—for it is not every Red Guard who authored influential writings and not every Red Guard who was declared a counterrevolutionary by Chairman Mao himself. And yet Yang Xiguang's life experience and intellectual odyssey were, in many respects, little different from that of hundreds of thousands of other teenagers. His essay struck a chord among others of his generation because he had reached a point in his cognitive development that was parallel to their own, and consequently articulated thoughts that others were ready to grasp.

What follows is drawn from extensive interviews with Yang Xiguang in Australia, where he now teaches economics at a university.<sup>2</sup> In our discussions, we focused on the elements in his personal development and social milieu that influenced his political stance during the Cultural Revolution.

### Yang Xiguang's Family Background

Yang Xiguang was born into the stratum that he later was to condemn. His parents were among the leading members of Hunan's political elite. Father sat on the Hunan provincial Party committee and headed the committee's Secretariat (*mishuzhang*). Mother served as deputy head of the provincial trade union organization.

Very few of the young people of Yang Xiguang's generation who were born into politically elite families would later, in the Cultural Revolution, betray their "class origins." But, like Yang, such young people did tend to become especially active in the Cultural Revolution. As children, they had usually felt, more so than children from most other backgrounds, that they were entitled to succeed in life, and entitled to take the lead among their classmates at school. In contrast, the children of "bad class" birth—children of the former landlords and capitalists—had learned young to toe the line, and to be cautious in what they said or did. Even young children from the working classes had learned the limitations of their station in life. To a degree quite out of proportion to their numbers in the population, the most daring during the Cultural Revolution, on both the Conservative and Rebel sides of the battlelines, arose from among those youngsters who had never learned to dampen their ambitions, and who saw leadership as a right—the children of the political elite and, in addition, the children of the intelligentsia (Rosen, 1982: Chs. 2 & 4; Unger, 1982: Chs. 5 & 6).

Yang Xiguang belonged to both of these groups. His father was at once a Communist official and a scion of the literati, and he endeavored to pass on to his children the aspirations and the ideals of both. Grandfather had been a *xiucai*, an imperial degree holder, and Father had, in turn, been indelibly schooled in the Confucian morality. Like other wealthy young men of the period, he had been sent on to a Western-style secondary school. From there, he had graduated into the Communist underground in Hunan and then Yan'an, but true to his own upbringing he had young Xiguang learn the Confucian analects before he entered primary school. Father wrote poetry (indeed, published a volume of traditional *shi* and *ci*), was a devotee of fine painting, and enthusiastically collected antiques. He put great store in education, had high expectations for his sons, and let them know early in life that he planned for them to win diplomas from prestigious universities. In these several respects, he had much in common with the fathers of a good number of Red Guards from intellectual homes—fathers who, despite modern educations and sympathy for the revolution, similarly taught

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<sup>2</sup> In the virulently anti-intellectual atmosphere of the late 1960s to mid-1970s, some of China's best minds had landed behind bars. Yang's ten years of imprisonment provided him an opportunity to study privately with a series of knowledgeable academics, especially in mathematics. After his release from prison, Yang won a Ph.D. scholarship to Princeton University in mathematical economics. He now teaches at Monash University in Melbourne.

their children the value of tradition and had them memorize T'ang poetry, who similarly inculcated in their children the great importance of educational achievement, and who let their young children know that university diplomas lay in the family's plans for them.

Yang Xiguang's mother was intellectually more modern than his father. A child of the May Fourth generation, she was inclined toward progressive Western literature and, as the mark of a liberated woman, had even published an article in 1942 on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. She made it a point to hold political and intellectual discussions with her children, and in these to impart to them her own liberal notions on the value of the individual and empathy for the less fortunate.

Mother, like Father, had worked in the underground Party in Hunan before fleeing to Yan'an. They both enjoyed long-time connections, therefore, with both red- and white-area veteran Party officials. However, in terms of the political networks and cliques that developed after the Party assumed power, they were identified with the underground Party and as being Hunanese within the Hunan Party administration. Through these connections, Father became associated with the inner circle of Hunan's Party Secretary, Zhou Xiaozhou, and fell in 1959 along with his patron. Zhou Xiaozhou and those close to him, including Father, had been well aware of the tragedy that was developing in the Hunan countryside under the radical policies of the Great Leap Forward, and they had joined with Peng Dehuai in trying to rein in the Leap. Indeed, Zhou Xiaozhou was targeted in 1959 as one of the four key members of the Lushan opposition.<sup>3</sup> Within months, Father was declared a Right Inclinationist and sent off in disgrace to the countryside.

Yang Xiguang's mother had a political standing in her own right, and the political network with which she was associated was not intimately involved with Zhou Xiaozhou. Rather, it had emerged from a part of the indigenous underground Party that had cemented close links with Liu Shaoqi's white-area headquarters, and those linkages had been maintained. As part of a political "stream" that reached up to Liu Shaoqi in Beijing, Mother had not been involved in any opposition to Great Leap policies; indeed, influenced by her loyalty network or "stream", in 1959 she had disagreed, both publicly and privately, with her husband's stand.

When Zhou Xiaozhou fell in 1959, Zhang Pinghua, a fellow Hunanese, but one who had had no connections with the Hunanese underground Party, was brought in to replace him. Zhang Pinghua had been serving at the time on the Party Committee of neighboring Hubei Province; on his arrival in Hunan, he immediately took responsibility for rooting out Father and others who had been tarred through association with Zhou Xiaozhou's indigenous Hunanese Party grouping (*banzi*). Zhang Pinghua strategically replaced many of them with his own band of followers from the Hubei Party, building what became known as the Hubei *banzi*.

Complicating political relationships, a further powerful *banzi* within the provincial administration consisted of officials who had entered Hunan in 1949 with the PLA's Shanxi regiments. Hua Guofeng, who had risen to the position of deputy governor in 1958, was one of the leaders of that *banzi*. The Shanxi-bred cadres were mostly from villages, and they tended to be less educated than their Hunanese counterparts and maintained far fewer contacts with intellectuals. The indigenous Hunanese Party leaders had little regard for the administrative quality of the Shanxi interlopers, feeling among other things that they had scant understanding of how to manage the economy, especially in the cities. But this disparagement did not damage the Shanxi *banzi*'s political standing. Yang Xiguang asserts that in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong, even though himself a Hunanese, looked favorably on the Shanxi *banzi*, since the Shanxi-born officials had

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<sup>3</sup> The four were Peng Dehuai, Zhang Wentian, Huang Kecheng, and Zhou Xiaozhou.

vigorously supported the Leap in Hunan. The Hunanese-bred officialdom as a whole, including those in Liu Shaoqi's "stream," had maintained stronger networks of contacts reaching into the localities than had the Shanxi outsiders, and thus had been more concerned with the local hardships that had emerged.

Father's opposition to the Great Leap Forward's excesses was vindicated by the collapse of the Leap into economic depression and starvation. He was politically rehabilitated in the aftermath of Mao's self-critical speech at the 7000-cadre conference of 1962, and officials connected to the Liu Shaoqi "stream" undertook to have him reinstated on the provincial Party committee. But he continued to be in conflict with the new Party Secretary Zhang Pinghua and the new circle of powerholders in the province. He found himself occupying a high formal position that had little influence attached to it.

By 1962, Mother had come round to seeing that Father had been right all along. Thereafter, she was a staunch supporter of his position. They both would end up paying dearly for it in the Cultural Revolution.

### School Days

Until his parents' public fall from grace in the Cultural Revolution, Yang Xiguang had been unaware that his father's high position did not bring with it a high measure of power. Throughout his school years, classmates looked up to him as the son of a top leader, and he took the deference for granted: "I had been raised to feel superior as a high-level cadre's kid".

He entered junior high school in 1962, the year his father was rehabilitated, and discovered there that the same political trend that had aided his father had also dramatically altered the composition of the incoming student body at his new school. He had been admitted to the No. 1 Middle School of Changsha, a special, nationally funded school, which drew its students from among those whom Party policy prescribed as the finest. In previous years, almost all of those admitted had been of "red" class background, with a particularly high intake of leaders' children, since the Party during the Great Leap Forward had been emphasizing class background and inherited redness over personal academic talent. But in 1961, Liu Shaoqi had invited Changsha's educators to a large meeting at which he had announced that academic excellence was now to be pushed, and that admissions should be geared toward achieving that goal. As a consequence, in 1962, Yang discovered that only two other high-level cadre's children were in his new class, and both of them had been left back from an older grade.

Other secondary schools in China were following the same trends as Changsha's No. 1, and they would all continue to veer in the same new directions each year as Party policy swerved and swerved again in the several years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. But as a politically sensitive national keypoint school, No. 1 reacted to all directives from the national Party with exaggerated enthusiasm. The ever-shifting pressures that schools and students throughout China felt during those years were felt with particular intensity at the school.

Most of Yang Xiguang's new classmates, he himself recalls today, were of "bad" class background. But his use of that label "bad" inadvertently signifies his own vantage point as a child raised among the political elite—and not the actual status of his classmates. When schools looked for academic excellence, they were careful not to turn to the children of capitalists and landlords—the "bad" classes—but selected new entrants from among the brightest of the children of the untainted professionals and intellectuals. Most of his schoolmates were from the families of doctors, teachers, and engineers, holding a class designation that the vast majority of Chinese, if not someone of Yang's elite pedigree, referred to as "middling class" (*yibande chengfen*).

Most of the offspring of Party officials who found themselves at schools similar to Yang Xiguang's ended up proudly stressing their own sterling class background whilst disdainfully dismissing their non-red-class schoolmates as white bookworms (Rosen, 1982: Ch. 2; Unger, 1982:101-102). They reacted in this manner because, even in years like 1962, *some* preference in admissions had been shown to them, and most young people of high-level cadre parentage thus ironically found themselves placed in classrooms with students somewhat academically better than themselves. Refusing to resign themselves to a standing in the bottom half of their class, they disparaged their peers' academic success and, when the Cultural Revolution erupted, formed Red Guard groups based entirely on red-class pedigree.

Yang Xiguang, however, was an exception. He had no need to feel defensive about his academic work. Even in a classroom containing the brightest of the bright, he stood near the top of his class. The animosity that others of his station felt toward their middling-class schoolmates never applied to him. In fact, he reveled in his new environment. In particular, he found his mathematics teacher inspiring, and turned with enthusiasm toward math.

This mathematics teacher had been branded a Rightist in 1957, and dismissed; now, under the new policies of 1962, he had been brought back to the school. So, too, his biology teacher was brought out of a labor camp to teach. Yang was a beneficiary:

I didn't understand the politics of it then; I just loved those teachers' sophisticated minds ... The mathematics teachers' policy was to pay the most attention to the best students, which was to my own advantage. I and the son of a Rightist were sent to join a special group to do more advanced math.

Then, suddenly, in 1964, national Party policies changed again, and the climate in the classroom swung in concert. The homeroom teacher (*banzhuren*), a "wonderful geography teacher," was replaced by a more politically trustworthy politics teacher. Concurrently, it was obvious to the students that the "class line" in the senior high schools' admissions policies was intensifying, and most of Yang's classmates became desperately worried. "Some of the girls," he recalls,

seemed depressed, almost suicidal, and I sympathized. At the same time, the boy and girl of cadre background, who'd lacked confidence and had been quiet in class, now saw bright futures ahead of them. I remember that the boy, who was the worst student, became proud of himself and talked a lot about politics.

Due to their sterling family backgrounds, Yang and they were elevated into the Communist Youth League very soon after they reached the eligible age. Yang recalls,

Altogether, I felt confused, since in terms of my own interests my future was even better under the new policies. And I did feel that I now had a greater duty and obligation to the country, because the country depended upon people of my type of family background. This type of belief was the genesis of the feelings held by the Red Guards of the early Cultural Revolution [who supported the idea that a young person's blood-line was of absolute importance]. But in 1964, while sharing in this feeling, all around me I could also see the resentment of the kids of the bad-class [middling-class] families.

When the campaigns to study Lei Feng and to "cultivate revolutionary successors" were promoted among students in 1964, Yang threw himself into them wholeheartedly. To "revolutionize" themselves, the girls cut their hair short, and the boys volunteered to go off to help workers every weekend. At home, Yang also began helping the housekeeper with the dishes and with housework. He kept a diary, in which he wrote about his activist feelings and red-class pride, and regularly let his mother read it. Mother criticized him for his attitudes:

She said that the campaign at school to put politics first wasn't quite correct, that I should pay more attention to my education. Mother told me, "You never saw the consequences of ultra-leftism in 1959." She was happy to see me wash dishes and such stuff, but not to follow the class line. She found it inhumane and vulgar.

Even so, Xiguang put as much store in what he was taught at school as in what his mother taught him. He was not particularly perturbed when, later that year, four-fifths of his classmates were rejected on class-line grounds for admission to the senior high school portion of No. 1.<sup>4</sup> In Yang's new classroom, a quarter of the students could claim descent from red-class peasant families, a third were from worker families or the families of cadres who had risen from the shopfloor, and another third were from the households of Party officials. Only three students, less than 10 percent, did not possess "red" family credentials. As an elite school, No. 1 once again had responded in an exaggerated form to the Party's shift in line.

This shift to the left was pronounced, too, in the new contents of what Yang was taught. The children were told to criticize "white and expert"—"Everyone had to do so, and I saw nothing wrong in it"—and to criticize Rightist teachers. As part of the Socialist Education Campaign, a work team of officials came to the school to identify the former Rightist teachers for the students. "In those days we felt that Rightists were like monsters," recalls Yang, "and I felt, how could my math teacher, whom I was so fond of, be a Rightist? When the names were made public some of the students threw rocks at them, shouting 'Cow ghosts and snake demons'! I stood back, confused." His biology and math teachers were banned from teaching and forced thereafter to engage in humiliating menial labor on the school grounds.

In 1965, the Party's political line swung once more, in the realization that the millions of students of non-red family background were becoming discouraged at their chances of ever proving their activist political devotion. The new line of the Communist Youth League was to "emphasize performance" (*zhongzai biao*xian). The red-class students in Yang's classroom were not unduly perturbed by this new swing of the pendulum, since there were far too few non-red background students in the class for it to influence their own competitive chances of winning admission to the classroom's League branch. But in the third-year classes of both the junior and senior high school sections, which had been admitted in 1963, there were large numbers of children of professionals, and in *those* classrooms the tensions between students of different family backgrounds were palpable.

Yang Xiguang has recounted to me at great length these various shifts in school policy, because he believes—correctly, I think—that the repeated shifts in line, and the insecurities and animosities they aroused among most students, contributed significantly to the emergence of Red Guard factions and the outbreak of violence among students in the ensuing months of Cultural Revolution. Yang's story of his school days provides confirmation for what foreign scholars had already postulated based largely on research on Guangdong.<sup>5</sup> Here, in an elite school in Hunan, Yang could, in retrospect, see similar antagonisms over the Party's "class line" leading toward the Red Guard factionalism of the Cultural Revolution. And his own confused feelings during these earlier years, unsure as to what ground to stand on, would subsequently help push Yang Xiguang toward new paths of thought.

## Entering The Cultural Revolution

Ironically, the events of the earliest months of the Cultural Revolution encouraged the exclusivist red-class feelings of pride that Yang Xiguang had long nurtured. Throughout China, red-class youngsters were, with encouragement from the national Party leadership,

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<sup>4</sup> In the senior high school's graduating classes, some students who similarly could not get into any universities because of their parentage organized several underground groups to vent their complaints. Three such groups were denounced by the school leaders in 1965 as "counterrevolutionary cliques," a jailable offense, though in the event none of the participants was arrested.

<sup>5</sup> On this see, for example, Chan, Rosen, and Unger (1980); Chan (1985); Rosen (1982); Shirk (1981); and Unger (1982).

reasserting their own superiority. At Changsha's No. 1 Middle School, a self-selected group of a dozen students of sterling red parentage, Yang Xiguang included, excitedly formed a secretive group in early June in response to the national lead. They wanted to prove how politically activist they could be, and "the very notion of a secret group seemed romantic to us, like in a movie of pre-Liberation events." Earlier that year, No. 1 had been designated a trial point for a new policy of recruiting young Party members directly out of senior high schools, and the two probationary Party members who had been selected from the graduating class took charge of the new secret group. One was the daughter of the Second Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee, a post of very considerable power; the second, whose path would continue to cross that of Yang Xiguang, was named Xie Ruobing.<sup>6</sup> Her father, like Yang Xiguang's father, had been ostensibly rehabilitated and now held a high-sounding position but, it subsequently turned out, had remained powerless as part of the "faction in the wilderness."

The excited group of officials' children latched onto an editorial in the national press that suggested elements within the Party apparatus were opposed to Chairman Mao and must be combatted. A new work team of Party officials had just arrived at the school to conduct the campaign among students, and the student group soon turned against this work team. They put up posters charging the hapless work team with carrying out a tepidly "revisionist line," arguing that it was not sufficiently harsh toward the school's principal, whom they dubbed a "counterrevolutionary revisionist." It never crossed the students' minds that they might get in trouble for such attacks against the school head and a Party work team. Their own parents, after all, were so much more powerful than a mere schoolmaster or the members of the work team. Their attacks against the work team provided them with an exhilarating sense of autonomy and of release from the stifling demands for banal conformity that schooling in China had required of students.

At the end of June, the work team unexpectedly struck back at the student gadflies:

It pulled members of our group aside and confided that some of our participants, including Xie Ruobing and me, had political problems relating to our families. The work team also made public to some of the backbone members of the Communist Youth League my father's problems of 1959. Father was not yet under attack by the Provincial Party Committee, but this was a high-level work team and it knew that Father was in line for such an attack. Other members of our group were warned to keep away from us.

The group had expanded to about a hundred members by this time, but under pressure it divided. The great majority submitted to the work team, including those whose parents remained safely in power. Xie Ruobing and Yang and a few other students who were under Xie's influence desperately held out, unable to believe that their parents could really be in dire trouble.

They put up a militant poster, arguing that they were being persecuted and that loyalty to the Party could be expressed solely through loyalty to Mao's Thought. The work team organized a phalanx of opposing posters, arguing that loyalty was manifested through obedience to the leadership of each level of the Party. At one and the same time, the work team charged that the rump of Xie Ruobing's little group constituted an "active counterrevolutionary clique." Simultaneously, the work team sought to demonstrate its own ideological mettle by pumping up the campaign to persecute teachers of non-red background as "bourgeois intellectuals." Two distinct types of students thus found themselves under terrible political strain: Not just Xie's group, but also students of middling-class backgrounds, who could see that the attacks against the teachers on "class" grounds endangered their own

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<sup>6</sup> She and her father are both described in some detail in a Red Guard article antagonistic to both her and Yang Xiguang, which has been translated in Mehnert (1969: 102-106).

standing. At keypoint schools throughout China, much the same scenario was being played out. Within the next half year, these two kinds of teenagers who had come under pressure during these months would coalesce to form China's Rebel Red Guards.

In the short term, Xie Ruobing's small group of endangered red-class students resisted far more aggressively than did any of the middling-class students at No. 1. Through her family connections, Xie had inside information that Auntie Jiang Qing had announced in Beijing that only loyalty to Mao's Thought counted, and Xie desperately hoped that this could be her trump card. While Yang Xiguang stayed behind in Changsha, Xie organized several of her other followers to join her in boarding a train for Beijing, where they petitioned the Cultural Revolution Small Group to right the wrongs done to them. She was in luck. Mao had become perturbed by the way his campaign against opponents in the Party was being corralled by the local Party bureaucracies. At the massive Tiananmen Square rally of August 18th, a loudspeaker announcement called Xie Ruobing to the main podium, where Mao personally and very publicly talked with her and autographed her Little Red Book. She returned to Changsha touched by glory.

Back in Changsha, things had not been going so well for Yang Xiguang. In early August, the boom finally had been lowered on his parents. The provincial Party leaders had felt a need to protect themselves by sacrificing some of their members to Chairman Mao's new campaign. Father provided an easy target, and one that could be turned to the provincial leadership's own advantage. Since father's faction had remained in conflict with the Hubei banzi of the provincial Party Secretary Zhang Pinghua, he came under attack as a surrogate for that faction.

Mother felt surprised and confused when she simultaneously came under attack, since she had remained a member in good standing of the Liu Shaoqi "stream," which had not yet become a target in the Cultural Revolution. To an extent greater than Mother had realized, her open defense of Father since 1962 had left her politically vulnerable, and his fall that August of 1966 triggered her own.

When Yang's parents came under attack from above, he rushed to their organizations to read the posters that had gone up criticizing them as "counterrevolutionary revisionists." It was a devastating blow to his self-esteem and future prospects; his world had been turned upside down:

I felt terrible, that there was no longer any position for me in society, that there might be no way for me to survive. The first time I had been criticized by the workteam I'd had a similar feeling, but more so now. When I read the posters, for example ones denouncing my mother for opposing the class line and the Great Leap Forward, I knew all these denunciations were consistent with my parents' opinions, and I felt that my parents must be wrong. In China then, the influence of the school's teachings was greater than those of one's parents. I felt confused. I couldn't argue against my own sudden bad status, yet I felt aggrieved. I desperately started reading Mao's writings and pronouncements to find something that would sustain me in my terrible situation ... Consciously I sincerely believed that I totally supported Chairman Mao; subconsciously I supported only those statements by Mao that were in my own interest, and felt confused whenever Mao's statements went against my interests.

The message that Xie Ruobing brought back to Changsha—that Mao opposed the persecution by Party organs of those directly loyal to his Thought—provided the type of focus that Yang had been seeking in Mao's writings. That theme of the unrighteous powerful persecuting those without power or station, which would later figure large in Yang Xiguang's essays, was already taking hold in his mind.

It was an image that was greatly complicated by an eye-opening encounter with his family's housekeeper. She had always been smiling and respectful toward his parents, and after reading the wall posters denouncing his parents, he had gone to her for sympathy. To his shock, she declared that she approved of their fall. In a long talk with Xiguang, she said that

her respect for Father had been feigned, that Xiguang's parents had been exploiting her. She and other housekeepers were now organizing their own protest group. The talk made a lasting impression on him:

I felt as if the whole world had turned over. Lots of common people had smiled at me before the Cultural Revolution for being the son of a big shot, but I now felt it had only been pretence ... I suddenly recognized the keenness of the conflict, that those at the bottom actually hated those at the top, much as in Marx's writings on the conflict between classes. I began eventually to feel that Marx's theories were applicable not only to capitalist society but also socialist society.

Yang could not yet act on his insights. At school, events were continuing to go badly for him. That August, the red-class students, now under the leadership of the daughter of the provincial Party's Second Secretary, were emulating their peers in Beijing by forming a Red Guard group to press home both their loyalty to Party authorities and their own red-class superiority. They grandiosely titled their group the Red Power Guardian Army. Yang Xiguang witnessed their inaugural meeting, and was perturbed. They were promoting a variant of what was called the "blood-line couplet":

If your father's a hero, you're a good fellow;  
If your father's counterrevolutionary, you're a bad egg.

The couplet seemed to Yang like a dagger directed at himself, since his father was now enmeshed in deep political trouble.

### The Rise of the Rebels

On the 19th of August, a small group of university students placed posters critical of the provincial Party apparatus at the entrance to the municipal Party's headquarters. The Changsha Party Committee, rather than suppress them directly, organized the Red Power group from Yang's school and some loyal factory personnel to surround and beat up the offending university students. They were likened to the Rightist "counterrevolutionaries" of the 1957 Hundred Flowers period; and the Red Power students laid into them shouting, "It's time to stand up and show our loyalty to the Party." It was, Yang says, "a very significant date—the first division of the 'masses' in Changsha into two factions."

That same day, Party officials helped to organize a new workers' organization, formed of Party activists, to help keep the new Cultural Revolution campaign on appropriate tracks. But these were not the only members of the working class who were stirring politically. That very evening, Yang witnessed a demonstration by a large crowd of silent workers, standing vigil across from the municipal headquarters, holding signs condemning the beatings of the university students.

These workers were subsequently charged as counterrevolutionary. But, when directives from Beijing in October permitted rebellion in behalf of Chairman Mao's Thought, they seized the opportunity to shake off this persecution and to join forces with students and teachers to form an omnibus Rebel organization titled the Xiang River Storm (*Xiang Jiang Fenglei*). The commander was a literature teacher from No. 1 who had been labelled a "black monster" by the work team in June. He subsequently had supported the university students' actions of August 19th and, when that had been suppressed, had fled to Beijing to appeal. In Beijing that September, he attended the inaugural meeting of a mass Rebel organization, graced by the presence of Zhou Enlai. Encouraged by the Center's support for Rebel action, he and 50 other Hunanese in Beijing founded Xiang River Storm.

Until October of 1966, a Party regulation had stipulated that any nonstudent establishing an unofficial political association faced 15 years' imprisonment, and possibly even a death sentence. In October, that regulation was lifted to enable nonstudent Rebel organizations to function. Xiang River Storm quickly paralleled the structure of the

Communist Party, the only model of political activity that most Chinese knew about. Like the Party, it possessed a propaganda department, a political department, and so forth.

Xiang River Storm made appeals to all those who were dissatisfied with the status quo, and in the passion of the times, with rebellion seemingly encouraged even by Chairman Mao, its ranks expanded with incredible speed. By the end of December, it could count hundreds of thousands of members: disgruntled students, white-collar personnel, and workers alike. In particular, Xiang River Storm found partisans in the factories. Twenty years later, in 1986, Yang Xiguang wrote an essay on the Cultural Revolution, and in it he described whom the workers were rebelling against:

The spearhead of the workers' rebellion had at first been directed against some of the Party authorities at their work units. Ironically, most of those who came under attack had been demobilized army men who in 1964 had been dispatched by Mao Zedong to establish political departments in the industrial and transportation sectors in order to weaken Liu Shaoqi's influence. Many workers hankered after the piecework and bonus systems that had been in effect before 1964, and hated these intruding political personnel. They not only resented their economic policies, but also the absence of human rights due to the class line. At the time of the Cultural Revolution, China's grassroots work units contained two kinds of cadre. One kind consisted of the people who had actually been managing the work units before 1964; the other, as mentioned above, were those demobilized army men in the political departments. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, the workteams sent by Liu Shaoqi often employed members of this second group to criticize members of the first, pre-1964 group as revisionist. But when the workers spontaneously rebelled they seldom directed their attacks against the management cadres, but rather against the much-hated cadres in the political departments [Xiguang, 1986: 13].

Throughout these months, Yang Xiguang was frenetically active. Initially, he did not dare to affiliate with any group, since his family was in deep trouble; but, on his own, he busily wrote and pasted up posters defending those who were persecuted for supporting the university students. By January, 1967, when Party authority had collapsed and Rebel organizations were "seizing power" throughout the country, he felt daring enough to ignore his parents' pleadings and organized a small group of seven students to support the Xiang River Storm.

The Rebel euphoria was short-lived. Yang Xiguang surmises that, by the end of January, Zhou Enlai had been able to convince Mao that the massive organizations which were cropping up nationwide too closely resembled political parties, and might ultimately challenge the principle of Communist Party hegemony. In what Rebels subsequently titled the February Adverse Current, Mao gave the go-ahead for military crackdowns against "counterrevolutionary organizations."<sup>7</sup> Similar to what was occurring elsewhere in China, Yang Xiguang recalls, in Changsha vast numbers of the leaders and activists in Xiang River Storm and allied Rebel groups were imprisoned, overcrowding all possible places of detention, amidst massive popular resistance to the troops in the city's streets (Yang Xiguang, 1990: 71; Yang Xiaokai 1990: 43). Yang was quick to write angry posters denouncing the new turn of events, and consequently found himself among the arrested and beaten.

Mao soon reversed tactics. He wanted to continue to make use of Rebel groups to carry out his campaign against the Party apparatus, but he demanded that Cultural Revolution organizations be restructured in ways that ultimately would leave them less a challenge to national control. Henceforth, Cultural Revolution groups were to be tolerated if they were organized by vocational sector (*hangye*), rather than tending toward centralized political parties; and they were to be kept provincial in scale, rather than allowed to organize in

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<sup>7</sup> For descriptions of the February Adverse Current, see Liu (1980: 57-68); also Lee (1978: 169-190). For an interesting recent pro-Conservative faction history, see Suo Guoxin (1986: 18-96).

alliances that transcended provincial boundaries. Thereafter, Yang notes, “even when organizations in different provinces shared the same political views, if the authorities suppressed them in one province those in other districts did not dare to unite in opposition.” Eventually, he himself would suffer the consequences of this unwritten rule.

In March, after forty days in prison, Yang Xiguang and other student detainees were released, though the imprisoned Rebels who were not students remained behind bars until July, 1967. Once again, from March onward, the Rebels’ numbers swelled. They included Red Guard organizations that, in some cases, represented aggrieved middling-class students and, in other cases, groups of working-class youngsters. The Rebels also continued to dominate the large factories. But the most militant of the work-sector Rebel organizations represented the workers at small enterprises and in the other employment sectors that had received unfavorable treatment before the Cultural Revolution. As one such example, the small neighborhood firms of handicraft workers and tradesmen that had been collectivized in the mid-1950s were poorly capitalized operations that, by government policy, offered low wages. Another such branch of the Rebels was composed of construction workers, who had been nationalized in 1956 and resented having been forced to join a government monopoly that kept down their pay. They particularly hated the political departments in their industry, Yang recalls, for having opposed wage bonuses. Yet another militant Rebel branch consisted of transport coolies, who pulled the handcarts that manhandle freight through city streets. A sizeable percentage of these haulers, Yang recollects, had previously been in labor camps, and performed this tough low-paid labor because no one had been willing to hire political and criminal convicts for other lines of work.

In many of China’s other cities, Conservative-faction worker groups dominated the large factories.<sup>8</sup> But in Changsha, where the bulk of the workforce at such factories identified themselves as Rebels, the Rebel forces constituted a clear majority citywide. In June of 1967, they launched an onslaught against the headquarters of the Conservatives’ university-level organizations, after which the Conservative faction began fighting back with military weapons. The Conservatives were able to gain access to such weapons because their membership included the trusted “backbones” of the pre-Cultural Revolution work-unit militias.

Momentarily, the Conservatives gained the upper hand. But, from early July onward, the Rebels seized weapons from the Military District garrisons. The first groups to make the attempt were the Changsha Youth (*Changsha qingnian*), a Rebel organization of young pickpockets who had been in labor camps, and the Youth Guardian Army (*Qingnian weijun*), an organization of poorly paid apprentices. When army officers obeyed commands from Beijing not to interfere, other Rebel groups joined in the raids on military warehouses and depots.

Both the Rebel and the Conservative camps were desperate to triumph in Changsha, partly from a pragmatic realization that the losing faction in the Cultural Revolution was likely to be labelled as “counterrevolutionary.” The recent mass jailings of the Rebels in February served here as a sobering remainder to both camps of the perils of losing. In particular, grievances among some of the Rebels about pre-Cultural Revolution persecution became intertwined in their minds with fears of future persecution.

As casualties mounted in the civil war between Rebels and Conservatives, the outnumbered Conservatives fled Changsha for the Hunan industrial city of Xiangtan. The marketing center for the part of Hunan that Mao came from, Xiangtan had been transformed into an armaments manufacturing center after 1949. As such, its workforce had been granted

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<sup>8</sup> On the reasons why, see Liu Guokai (1980:75-76). Also see Hua Linshan (1987:120-135), for an interesting first-hand discussion of the workers’ situation in Guilin, Guangxi Province, a city where, similar to Changsha, workers predominantly sided with the Rebels.

a higher status than other workers, and they felt loyal to the status quo. In the fighting that erupted between the Rebel worker/student armies of Changsha and their Xiangtan-based Conservative rivals, the Xiangtan workers were able to draw on the military weaponry they themselves produced.

The triumph of the Rebels within Changsha was again shortlived, this time destroyed by internal divisions. In August, Zhou Enlai, with the aid of Qi Benyu, a radical representing the Cultural Revolution Leadership Group, worked out a name list of leaders from Changsha Rebel organizations who would be invited to Beijing to negotiate on the membership of a new Preparatory Revolutionary Committee to govern Hunan Province. Yang Xiguang feels that Zhou Enlai deliberately used the opportunity to foment a split among the Hunan Rebels. Those selected to attend were all from Rebel groups that were considered “reliable”: from organizations of red-class personnel in favored sectors such as the large state factories. The excluded Rebel organizations, finding themselves once again deemed illegitimate, once again in a dangerously precarious position beyond the pale of recognized political activity, refused to abide by the results of the Beijing accord.

Thus, by September 1967, what had been a united Rebel faction was pitched into conflict between two antagonistic camps. The Conservative-faction organizations in Changsha were being dissolved by Beijing, and most of their members quickly joined forces with the newly legitimated red-class Rebel organizations. These largely consisted of the “worker alliances” at the large industrial enterprises, plus the red-class Rebel Red Guard groups at the high schools and universities. Against them were poised the branches of Xiang River Storm that had been composed of workers from the disfavored neighborhood factories and construction and haulage sectors, plus the student Red Guards of middling-class background and the other organizations of have-not groups.

More clearly than ever before, the lines were drawn between the social groups that had felt sorely disadvantaged before the Cultural Revolution and those who had not. Yang Xiguang was now aligned firmly in the camp of the former groups—and acutely aware that their cause in the Cultural Revolution needed to be explained and justified ideologically.

## Shengwulian

The organizations of the political have-nots soon banded together in October in a new umbrella group, which they titled *Shengwulian*, the Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Alliance Committee. By 1968, Shengwulian would be known throughout the country, partly through the writings of Yang Xiguang, as the most famous of China’s “ultra-left” groupings.

Shengwulian consisted of more than twenty loosely affiliated organizations, each with its own particular grievances. They coordinated their activities through a Central Committee, on which sat a representative from each of the twenty-plus groups, plus a smaller Standing Committee. Besides the rump Xiang River Storm of the ill-favored trades, member groups included the Teachers’ Alliance (*Jiao lian*), composed of teachers who had been persecuted for “bad class” backgrounds or as Rightists, who subsequently had been labelled monsters early in the Cultural Revolution, and who now desperately demanded political rehabilitation. Shengwulian’s ranks also included the Red Flag Army (*Hongqijun*), composed of disgruntled army veterans; its leader, for instance, had been denied a proper civilian position for having held a Guomindang membership card before 1949. Included, too, was University Storm (*Gaoxiao fenglei*), composed of students who had been in trouble before the Cultural Revolution either because of unfavorable family backgrounds or personal political black

marks,<sup>9</sup> and a number of groups of politically disfavored secondary school students, including Jinggang Mountain, headed by Yang Xiguang's former schoolmate Xie Ruobing.

Also participating were former members of the Hunan Liberation Army (*Hunan jiefangjun*). This had been the original rural Communist guerrilla movement in Hunan in the 1930s and 1940s. When the PLA had arrived victoriously from the north in 1949, the PLA commanders were determined to squeeze the local guerrillas out of any share in local power and ordered that they disarm and disband. The Hunan Liberation Army had resisted, and its leaders had been jailed in the early 1950s as counterrevolutionaries, "alien class elements," "Trotskyist elements," and "localists." Many others among its members were given similar labels even though never jailed. Over the following 15 years the former guerrillas repeatedly but unsuccessfully had sought to "reverse the verdict" (*pingfan*);<sup>10</sup> and in the Cultural Revolution they furiously joined Shengwulian en masse. (Ultimately, they would pay dearly for this decision. To a greater extent than was true for other groups in Shengwulian, supporters of the Hunan Liberation Army would be sentenced to long prison terms in 1968–1969. Hua Guofeng and the other members of the Shanxi banzi who had emerged on top in Hunan were apparently determined to re-bury, once and for all, that embarrassing episode from their past.)

Shengwulian, in summation, 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. In this respect, the lines between the warring Cultural Revolution factions had become more clearly drawn in Hunan than in most of China's other provinces. To be sure, elsewhere in China, too, there were obvious distinctions in the overall social composition of the Rebels as against the Conservative faction (Lee, 1978; on Shanghai, see White, 1989: 244-245). But, by 1967, these differences had become partially obfuscated by the twists and turns of the Cultural Revolution, as the alignments of various subgroups and organizations shifted and split and re-coalesced in accordance with the vagaries of local repressions, desperate efforts to secure vengeance and to end up on the winning side, and subsequent alliances of convenience. Just one example would be Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province, where the distinctions between the warring camps became quite clouded (Forster, 1990); a second such example was provided by the city of Beijing; and a third by the rural county town described in *Born Red* (Gao Yuan, 1987).<sup>11</sup> Even in Changsha, there were a couple of anomalous crossovers after August 1967 that blurred the sharp distinction between the warring factions. Some of the Conservative-faction university students, for instance, joined Shengwulian for the simple strategic reason that their own groups had just been suppressed by the authorities and they wanted vengeance. But generally speaking, the realignments of late 1967 placed very clearly in one camp the disfavored groups in Chinese society—more so, it would seem, than in any other place for which scholars outside China have information.

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<sup>9</sup> Some of its leaders, for example, had been declared Rightists in their dossiers during the Socialist Education Campaign of 1964–1966 for having spoken disparagingly about the Great Leap Forward, or as Mid-Rightist Sentimentalists for having shown too romantic a passion for *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

<sup>10</sup> During her underground activities in Hunan, Yang Xiguang's mother had developed personal friendships with Communists who participated in the Hunan Liberation Army, and during the 1950s and 1960s she and some other officials in the provincial Party ineffectively joined in lobbying to have the verdicts against members of the guerrilla group reversed.

<sup>11</sup> A quite different sort of example was relevant to Guangxi province; there, the Rebels gained almost total ascendancy in the major cities, incorporating almost all urban sectors and social groups, but never subsequently redivided into two factions. The Cultural Revolution in Guangxi became transformed into a war between the cities and Conservative peasant militias (Hua Linshan, 1987).

## Toward “Whither China ?“

Their alliance in a common front began to clarify for Yang Xiguang the underlying causes of the mass upheaval in which he was engaged. Trying to frame his thinking in terms drawn from Marx, he felt that he could discern that the common thread in their struggle lay in their prior and present manipulated persecution by a ruling class eager to maintain its power:

Before August, 1967, my thinking had been in terms of a two-line struggle, of Mao’s line versus Liu Shaoqi’s line. After August, my ideas shifted to ideas of a new class. I felt the two-line struggle thesis couldn’t explain the mass conflicts of the Cultural Revolution, that it could only refer to the pre-Cultural Revolution political differences among the political elite.

Yang Xiguang’s musings along these new lines had, in part, been prompted by broadsides and fliers circulated by fellow student Rebels in Beijing. An anonymous poster that he had spotted during a visit to Beijing in April 1967, after his release from jail, had contained notions about a new privileged class of officials. So, too, he was affected by a Beijing student Red Guard proclamation entitled “Redistribution of Power and Property: Manifesto of the April 3rd Faction,” which cited Mao as saying that the privileged classes deteriorated through the generations in Chinese history, so that its members are killed in the fifth generation. The Manifesto declared that the target of the Cultural Revolution was to be the redistribution of property and the overthrow of the privileged. “I compared this with what I had experienced in the January Revolution of 1967,” Yang recalls, “and it occurred to me that a privileged class [composed of the Party officialdom] had been overturned then.”

Mao Zedong had railed against the corruptibility of officials and, in his more sardonic turns of phrase, had indeed likened them and their progeny to a soft new privileged ruling class. But Mao had never literally painted them as a “new class.” To do so would have gone against the Leninist dictum that the Party and its officialdom as a whole constituted the necessary bulwark of the revolution. Mao had been careful to refer instead to “elements” in the Party that had taken on unsavory attributes; the problem became one of individual attitudinal failings.

Yang did not recognize, did not *want* to recognize, this distinction in Mao’s thought. Quite the contrary. Though Yang Xiguang was moving into ideologically dangerous waters, like other heretical Rebels of the period, his faith in Mao remained unshaken. He searched for ideological clues in Mao’s writings, both the official texts and the unedited writings that were circulating underground through Red Guard publications, as a guide to his own thinking.

I still worshipped Mao then. I wished that his views would coincide with mine, and I believed in my wish. I willed him to be the right kind of a thinker.<sup>12</sup>

Yang Xiguang was edging toward concepts made familiar in the West by Milovan Djilas, a man whom Yang had never heard of; but all the while, Yang’s inspiration derived from Mao. Yang mulled over phrases lifted from Mao, subtly reformulated them, and drew his own lessons from them.

That autumn of 1967, Yang Xiguang penned several essays to explain these emerging views. In one of these, “Thoughts on Establishing a Maoist Group,” he argued that to comprehend why people hated cadres so much, a class analysis was needed, and to accomplish that, social investigations would be necessary. He took himself at his word, and

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<sup>12</sup> Yang Xiguang first became disillusioned with Mao in 1968 after he was placed in prison. He was angered that Mao was content to end the Cultural Revolution after it had served his narrow political purposes; and taken aback, too, to discover that the Great Helmsman had allowed a great many people to be jailed simply for having muttered some unkind words about himself. It was a sudden bitter realization of betrayal, Yang remembers: “The sight of his portrait sickened me; I thought, he’s a monster.”

arranged meetings with groups composed of angry youths who during the several years before the Cultural Revolution had been sent from Changsha to the countryside to settle.<sup>13</sup>

Other Red Guard groups ignored these young people and their demands. But because of my own family's situation, which was now so miserable—my parents were under house arrest, subjected to repeated struggle sessions, kneeling and self-denunciation—I empathized with them. Many of them were of very bad class background; fathers or grandfathers had been executed by the government. They'd been educated within their own families, and had been denied further education. They'd been very ambitious originally, but their position had become untenable, miserable. They hated the Party's regime, and so they maintained their own heretical analyses, critical of the new class of officials.

Out of these meetings, Yang wrote "Investigation Report on Sent-Down Youths."<sup>14</sup> He immediately embarked on a trip to the rural districts in late 1967, during which he lived with several peasant families to investigate their economic circumstances:

You see, I felt I didn't know enough about Chinese society, that I had to see and rethink everything for myself. Qi Benyu influenced me here. He'd said, "You Chinese students, you must go out into society, to the bottom of society; you can't carry out the Cultural Revolution correctly if you don't do so."

What he found in the villages were a litany of peasant complaints: that the prices that the state paid the peasants for their produce were exploitatively low; that taxes were too high, worse than under the Guomindang; that the Great Leap Forward had devastated their localities, with widespread starvation; that local cadres diverted collective funds into their own pockets as compensation for attending meetings.

On the one hand, Yang Xiguang was seeking out such complaints at the bottom of society, while on the other he was searching feverishly for explanations and, idealistically, for alternate ways of organizing society that would avoid inequalities and repressive hierarchy. In particular, he and two other students of like mind ruminated over Lenin's "State and Revolution," and discussed the 1966 Cultural Revolution articles commemorating the 95th anniversary of the Paris Commune, and the Red Flag editorial of January 1967 that had supported the Paris Commune's principles. It seemed to Yang and his friends that the ideas in these writings were consistent with the crying need at present to transform the Chinese polity, not just to oust particular officials.

One of the trio who participated in these discussions was Zhang Yuguang, a university student and son of an English professor, who very shortly thereafter took responsibility for writing the Shengwulian's Manifesto. Zhang covertly had been declared an "Internally Controlled Rightist" during the Socialist Education Campaign; he had only discovered this blight against his future when dossier files were raided during the Cultural Revolution. Now a leader in one of the Red Guard groups that participated in Shengwulian, the Manifesto that Zhang drew up in December 1967 adopted a tone that was in accord with the "new class" argument of Yang Xiguang's subsequent "Whither China?"

Although the January Storm this year [1967] raised the curtain of the struggle to seize power from the bourgeois headquarters, the seizure of power was regarded as the dismissal of individuals from their offices, and not as the overthrow of the privileged stratum and the smashing of the old state machinery ... As a result, political power is still in the hands of the bureaucrats, and the seizure of power is only a change in appearance.<sup>15</sup>

Almost simultaneously, Yang Xiguang was at work on "Whither China?," which he completed the first week of January, 1968. He framed the essay as a potted history of the

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed study of such youths' predicament and Rebel faction activities, see Rosen (1981).

<sup>14</sup> This and other essays by Yang Xiguang, as well as the Shengwulian's collective proclamations, are discussed in Jiang (1981: 43-46).

<sup>15</sup> The Manifesto is translated in Mehnert (1969: 74-77).

Cultural Revolution's development, with separate sections on the January Storm of 1967, the February Adverse Current, the August ascendancy of the Changsha Rebels, and the split in ranks in September 1967 over the formation of Hunan's Preparatory Revolutionary Committee. The events of the past year and a half were viewed through the prism of a class struggle, between the new bureaucratic class maneuvering desperately to stay in power, and the hitherto powerless masses, who, in each wave of revolt and repression, were progressively learning to comprehend the nature of their oppression and the possibilities of mass power:

The storm of the January Revolution within a very short time ... wrested the destiny of our socialist nation and the administration of the cities, industry, transport, and finance ... away from the hands of the bureaucrats and into the hands of the enthusiastic working class. The members of society suddenly found, in the absence of bureaucrats, that they could not only go on living, but could live better and develop more quickly and with greater freedom [Yang, 1968: 33; Mehnert, 1969: 84].

In order to attain this freedom permanently, it was not just the bureaucratic "class of red capitalists" (whose "chief representative" was Zhou Enlai) that needed to be forcibly overthrown, but also the military officialdom, the armed appendage of that class. In place of the structures of state machinery, a "new society of the Paris Commune type" would arise, whose officials "will be produced in the struggle to overthrow the decaying [ruling] class." As in the egalitarian principles of the Paris Commune,

These officials ... will have no special privileges. Economically, they will receive the same treatment as the masses in general. They may be dismissed or replaced at any time at the request of the masses [Yang, 1968: 49; Mehnert, 1969: 99].

Yang Xiguang and his colleagues in Shengwulian were not the only ones promoting the Paris Commune ideals and the notion that the underlying struggle of the Cultural Revolution was between China's ruling bureaucracy as a class and the suppressed masses. In other provinces, too, such ideas were being bandied about in groups similar to Yang's: in Shanghai, by the Support Station of the United Headquarters (*Zhilian zhan*), which comprised intellectuals and students; in Shandong, by the October Revolution Group (*Shiyue geming xiaozu*), whose head visited Changsha to meet with Shengwulian; in Wuhan, by the Big Dipper Society (*Beidouxing xueshe*); in Beijing, by the April 3rd faction and the Communist Group (*Gongchanzhuyi xiaozu*) of Beijing University.<sup>16</sup> They exchanged publications, influenced each other, and groped during these same months toward similar concepts.

"Whither China?" circulated far more widely and gained a far broader influence than these other groups' writings, in part because it was well-phrased and its argumentation more readily remembered than most Cultural Revolution writings. But its fame also owed to the fact that condemnations of Shengwulian became the focus of a conference in Beijing attended by the Cultural Revolution's leadership that January. In the wake of that conference, "Whither China?" and a couple of other Shengwulian essays were distributed nationally by the Party as "materials to be criticized."

By mid-January 1968, the leaders who were close to Mao had decided that it was strategic to disown the "ultra-left" organizations that were emerging throughout China; and they had determined, too, that it would do well to focus on Hunan as the example. At denunciatory sessions that spread over four days, from the 21st to the 24th of January, most of the members of the Cultural Revolution Small Group—Kang Sheng, Jiang Qing, Yao

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<sup>16</sup> Later, in the 1980s, former members of the Communist Group, including Chen Yizi, would, ironically, form the core of the most important of Zhao Ziyang's think tanks, the Institute to Reform the Economic System (*Tigaisuo*).

Wenyuan, and Chen Boda—as well as establishment figures such as Zhou Enlai and the Acting Chief of Staff of the PLA, Yang Chengwu, took turns to lash into Shengwulian.<sup>17</sup>

In a particularly vitriolic speech on the 21st, which set the conference's tone, Kang Sheng accused the Shengwulian authors of every variety of counterrevolutionary motive, including Trotskyism. (In Kang Sheng's own words: "From the article by Yang Xiguang, it can be seen that they probably have picked up some counter-revolutionary things of Trotsky" [Mehnert, 1969: 114].) Looking back at Shengwulian's suppression, Yang Xiguang believes today that in the eyes of the Maoist leadership, Shengwulian's great threat did indeed lie in what the Chinese loosely referred to as "Trotskyism"—that the group's destruction in early 1968 stemmed from that, and not from the strident calls by Shengwulian that struggle should be waged against China's regional military leadership. As Yang Xiguang notes:

A heck of a lot of groups were calling for struggle against the army at that time; it was commonplace. Rather, we were declared counterrevolutionary because we were stepping outside of the ideological control of the Party. The central leaders were most scared of a new ideology. They realized that they had underestimated the ability of students to think. The Party has always considered that "Trotskyist" thought was more dangerous than conservative thinkers, because thought on the left challenged their own monopoly on their own ground.

In Kang Sheng's speech, a different sort of charge relating to Yang Xiguang was also leveled—that Yang ultimately could not have been responsible for penning his own essays:

I have never read the writings of Yang Xiguang<sup>18</sup> ... but I have the following impression: the theory here could not have been written by a middle-school student, nor even by a university student. Back of them, there must be counter-revolutionary black hands [Mehnert, 1969: 108].

Since Kang Sheng, the father of China's secret police apparatus, was declaring publicly that "black hands" must lie behind Yang Xiguang, a witch hunt by public security personnel soon was underway to unearth the requisite miscreants. Not surprisingly, Yang Xiguang's parents fell under immediate suspicion. Yang Xiguang's mother was badgered and tormented for months to confess that she was one of the brains lurking behind her son's essays. It was an untrue charge; Yang Xiguang recalls that neither she nor any other adult had directly influenced the ideas that went into his writings, except in one modest respect:

Mother did influence my anti-Zhou Enlai stance. That was the one and only point on which the accusations against her were correct. My parents had held very mixed feelings about Zhou. On the one side, they liked Zhou's liberal policies toward intellectuals and culture, as exemplified by his famous 1962 speech. But from the angle of Zhou's organizational/loyalty "stream," they hadn't liked him. Zhou Enlai was linked to the Yan'an crowd and to the new provincial Party Secretary Zhang Pinghua, unlike my parents. In the February Adverse Current, therefore, Zhou Enlai had supported the formation of a Red Alliance Committee (similar to the later Revolutionary Committees) composed of cadres who were like Zhang Pinghua, the group of cadres who had suppressed Father's faction.

Again and again, from January 1968 onward, Mother was interminably interrogated and bullied to force her to admit that she had put the dangerous "red capitalist class" ideas into her son's head. In the end, the unrelenting pressures became too great. She was driven to suicide.

As soon as word reached Changsha of the speeches in Beijing, Yang Xiguang had gone into hiding. He stayed underground for a month in Changsha, hidden by one family after another:

I could stay hidden because so many in the city supported us. But I misunderstood how localized politics had become in the Cultural Revolution, and made the mistake of fleeing to

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<sup>17</sup> The speeches by Kang Sheng, Jiang Qing, and Yao Wenyuan are reproduced in Mehnert (1969: 107-118).

<sup>18</sup> Kang Sheng noted in his speech that he had read only the Shengwulian Manifesto and a speech by the leader of one of Shengwulian's member groups, University Storm.

Hubei Province. There, all that anyone knew was that I belonged to a counter-revolutionary organization that had been denounced by high-level Cultural Revolution leaders. They turned me in.

The dangers that he faced had not yet sunk in, however. The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution thus far had provided him with an adventure in self-education, and he looked forward to more of the same. It was a reaction akin to that of other interviewees—Rebel Red Guards similarly crushed in 1968. Yang Xiguang recalls:

On the way to prison, I felt excited, not scared. I felt I had been living in upper-class society. I felt I'd now have a chance to experience a fuller variety of society—what the bottom felt like. I was idealistic. I was influenced very much by Gorky's fiction then, about the underside of society.

The treatment by the public security personnel on the way from Hubei to Hunan, and then on to prison, was okay. A number of public security personnel sympathized with the Rebels and with my father. They themselves had witnessed purges and persecutions within the public security organs during the Cultural Revolution. It was only after the public security organs were deemed suspect by Jiang Qing and others, and control over the prisons was handed over to the military, that the beatings and torture of prisoners began.

Yang Xiguang ultimately endured ten years of prison, in punishment for having written "Whither China?". His experiences in prison, and the extraordinary people whom he met there, are the subject of a fascinating forthcoming book he has written.

## The Legacy

Shengwulian had been crushed, and all of its paramount leaders jailed or executed. A devastating personal vengeance had been exacted against Yang Xiguang and his family. But the impact of what Yang Xiguang had written could not be so readily terminated. As Yang sat in prison, "Whither China?" circulated from hand to hand. In 1980, the Democracy Movement writer Liu Guokai published a book-length essay entitled *A Brief Analysis of the Cultural Revolution*, and as the final statement of the final chapter, "Consequences of the Cultural Revolution," he wrote:

"Whither China?" struck a responsive note in the hearts of many people ... People hid copies of writings reflecting such ideas and passed them around among those they trusted, holding lively discussions. The great suppression of [August to late] 1968 [when the Cultural Revolution was crushed] infuriated many people and caused them to change their outlook. Ultra-left thought won more followers and supporters. Many who had missed the opportunity to read the article "Whither China?" searched for it. Those who read it told others about it in secret. Quite a few students and educated young workers accepted ideas in the article and developed them further. They lost interest in factional struggles and turned their attention to the larger issues of the existing system. They analyzed essentials behind appearances in an effort to find the root cause of social problems [Liu, 1980: 144-145].

All the while that Yang Xiguang sat in jail, in short, his essay was having a considerable effect in the world outside. Its influence, ironically, outlasted Mao's regime.

In what way, though, did the impact of "Whither China?" endure? Certainly not in its specific prescriptions for China, in its strident calls for the violent overthrow of the PLA chieftains or in the essay's idealistic dream of a polity shaped on the model of the Paris Commune. Within the space of just several years, by the early 1970s, Yang Xiguang himself, let alone others of his generation, had abandoned such hopes and beliefs. The influence of "Whither China?" lay at a different, deeper level—in a refraining of the paradigm in which these young people perceived the sociopolitical system of China. A great many interviewees of the Red Guard generation relate that, by the mid-1970s, they had "seen through" (*kantou*) the belief system that had been taught to them at school. They had "seen through" it in that

they no longer believed in the official Leninist ideology of “class warfare” between the proletariat and its allies under the leadership of the Communist Party against dangerously retrograde bad-class elements; nor the official ideology of a sage leader, Chairman Mao, battling to preserve the revolution against “capitalist roaders.” Rather, a great many in China had come to see the essential conflict in China in cynically ‘elite theorist’ terms: as a conflict between a manipulative class of Party officials intent on preserving their power and a powerless mass of ordinary people, who had been repeatedly conned into seeing the Party apparatus as their champions against imaginary foes.<sup>19</sup>

If the root problem lay with the monopoly on power of a Leninist *nomenklatura* that gradually and inevitably had become transformed into a grasping self-perpetuating “new class,” then an institutionalized means was needed to constrain and weaken and thwart these political *apparachiki*. In short, a more pluralistic and democratic polity was necessary. By 1973–1974, this had become one of the core arguments of the Li Yizhe group’s famous dissident manifesto “On Socialist Democracy and the Legal System.” Like Yang Xiguang, the Li Yizhe group took as its central premise that

The essence of the appropriation of possessions by the “new bourgeois class” is to “turn public into private” while still maintaining a system of socialist ownership of the means of production ... In order to protect the privileges already acquired and to obtain further privileges, ... they must suppress the masses who rise to oppose their privileges and must illegally deprive [them] of their political rights and economic interests [Li Yizhe, 1974: 35-36].

The echoes here of “Whither China?” were by no means coincidental.<sup>20</sup>

This image of the Chinese polity was further developed, in turn, by the Democracy Movement of the late 1970s, whose partisans argued in behalf of the rule of law, an independent press and that all-important “Fifth Modernization,”—democracy—to break the grip of the repressive “new class”—officialdom—that they perceived to be inherent to a one-party state,

In short, the ultimate impact of “Whither China?” was not to promote armed ultra-left revolution by the masses, as its young 18-year-old author had urged. Rather, its argument inadvertently helped to lay the foundations, the *weltanschauung*, for the “bourgeois liberalism” of the Eighties. That it had so ironic an ultimate impact did not, however, prove disappointing to Yang Xiguang, for he personally had traversed an intellectual odyssey similar to his peers. Indeed, within the past half decade, writing under the name Yang Xiaokai in journals such as Shanghai’s *World Economic Herald* (e.g., Feb. 20, 1989), he has developed a reputation in China as a champion of “bourgeois democracy” and of a decentralized, indeed privatized, economy.

It is a long curved road, but one whose outlines are clear. As was seen in this article, this intellectual transition, from mid-1960s faith in the PRC’s sociopolitical structure, through angry rejection of the officialdom as a repressive new class by the late 1960s, leading in turn to an ultimate rejection of socialism, had initially been rooted within the dilemmas and tensions of the Cultural Revolution and pre-Cultural Revolution times. As we have also seen, during the Cultural Revolution fighting of 1966–1968 these tensions had been played out in ways that promoted the development of heretical modes of thought—chief among them the “red capitalist class” paradigm of Yang Xiguang. As the 1970s progressed, the political infighting, the repeated campaigns of repression, the unfeasible economic and educational programs of Mao’s closest followers, and the repeated manipulative tactics of all of the

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<sup>19</sup> Chan (1982: especially 317-318) includes an interesting discussion of the influence of “Whither China?” on this new train of thought.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Xizhe, one of the two central authors of “On Socialist Democracy and the Legal System,” acknowledged this intellectual debt to Yang Xiguang. As quoted earlier in this article, he wrote of Yang as “the forerunner of the Thinking Generation.”

leading political actors alienated ever increasing numbers of China's young people—leading them, in their own phraseology, to “see through the system.” The teenager in Hunan who had first “seen through” the emperor's clothes was joined eventually by a vast crowd of others, who questioned and rejected everything that bore the stamp of the Maoist polity.

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