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Unraveling the Chinese Cultural Revolution Through Media

How College Students Understand the “Ten Years of Chaos”

By Karintha Lowe

A photo of the Cultural Revolution’s polarizing figure, Jiang Qing, recently circulated the Chinese blogosphere with the heading: “do you know who this person is?” One of the leading members of the Communist Party of China and Mao Zedong’s second wife, the “first lady” of the Cultural Revolution formed the infamous Gang of Four group and became one of the Chairman’s closest advisors during the final years of his life (Linfield, 105). Yet for most of the college-age students frequenting blogs on popular websites Weibo and Sina, the woman in the old black and white photo remained a mystery. One of the students I interviewed explained, “You hear Jiang Qing’s name in classes and once or twice in the news, but if you’re not interested in history like me, that’s about it. When my girlfriend showed me the

photo, I thought it was [Taiwanese actress] Jiang Qingqin.”

Caught between the Chinese government’s agenda for economic development and social stability, and the stories of a deeply painful history that shaped the lives of their parents, grandparents, and teachers, today’s college and graduate students must sort through a complex set of expectations and emotions when determining their stance on the Cultural Revolution. Often, students simply do not engage with the Cultural Revolution at all, leading to the lamentation across the blogosphere that few people could recognize the photograph of a central revolutionary figure. The fact that such a photograph, and the discussions it inspired, circulated across blogs and social media sites, however, is no coincidence: as college and graduate students begin to form

their perceptions of the Cultural Revolution, many turn to sources of media in order to glean information on the tumultuous years between 1966 and 1977.

But what factors, exactly, influence how a college or graduate level Chinese student interacts with media in order to form an understanding of the Cultural Revolution?

In a national landscape dominated by both official ideology and the personal narratives of the men and women who experienced the Cultural Revolution firsthand, where does media fit in to the ways that Chinese youth aged twenty through twenty-five, perceive the time period? In order to answer these questions, I conducted research related to the Cultural Revolution and the generations of Chinese citizens born after 1974, as well as interviewed six students at Peking University either in person, via email, or using a combination of both. For each interview, I asked the students the same set of four open-ended questions, and followed up with more specific questions depending on their of

answers responses. I conducted the interviews in either English or Chinese, depending on what the respondent preferred, and all translations of answers are mine. I had two criteria for selecting respondents: that they should be indigenous Chinese citizens and that they should be currently enrolled as students at Peking University.

While a larger sample size would have provided a broader picture of how media affects a student's understanding of the Cultural Revolution, time and travel constraints limited my research to Peking University. I believe, however, that the small sample size allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews that, when placed in the context of additional research, provide an important window into how Chinese college and graduate students understand the Cultural Revolution through their interactions with the media.

The Cultural Revolution began during early summer months of 1966, when Mao Zedong, the political and ideological leader of

China, began to publically denounce key cultural leaders as well as writers critical of his regime. Lasting until Mao's death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution has since been termed by the Chinese public as the "Ten years of Catastrophe" (Shi nian haojie¹), a time period characterized by the destruction of cultural artifacts, the dissolution of traditional Confucian relationships, and the denouncement as well as torture of anyone considered an "enemy of the state."

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the new government allowed for public expressions of grief and anger against the "Ten Years of Catastrophe," but when the demonstrations quickly metamorphosed into a movement towards democratization, the government shut down protests and created their own "public transcript" for the Cultural Revolution. This official record places blame

¹ There is no agreed upon translation of "haojie," with other versions such as "disaster," "calamity," and even "Holocaust," used in scholarship. The translation of "Holocaust," however, with its allusions to the Jewish Holocaust, is hotly debated among academics today, with many arguing that a comparison between the Jewish Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution oversimplifies the distinct and complex forces at work during each time period.

for the destruction caused between 1966 and 1976 on the Gang of Four and their ultraleftist allies, thereby exonerating Mao Zedong and the Party from any real responsibility for the period of modern Chinese history (Kleinman, 714).

Today's current college and graduate level students, born mainly during the early 1990s, grew up under the rhetoric of China's "public transcript." Coming of age in a media landscape where state controlled news sources propagate the official stance on the Cultural Revolution, and many television and film programs still avoid the politically and culturally sensitive time period, these young citizens have found little variation in the traditional media's depiction of the "Ten years of Catastrophe." That is not to say, however, that traditional media offers only one interpretation of the Cultural Revolution. A recent article published by the widely read electronic journal "Chinese Digest" (Huaxia wenzhai), for example, features a partial list of well-known people who died during the

Cultural Revolution and asserts that all those on the list died due to unjust persecution (Gao, 16).

Such articles, however, are few and far between. Instead, the majority of critical information related to the Cultural Revolution stem from new media, which, as Yu Haiping writes, serves as an “outlet of public outcry and a transmission belt of public opinion” (116). As evidenced by the circulating picture of Jiang Qing, students in particular view blogs and social media websites as a way to discuss their perspectives of the Cultural Revolution outside of traditional information-based mediums. A recent study on Chinese youth’s media usage found that the average Chinese citizen between the age of 16 and 25 reported spending 3.5 hours a day on social networking sites, and 5 hours a day on blogs, further suggesting the important place of new media within the day to day lives of Chinese students (Mander, 7).

With such data in mind, I began my interviews with the hypothesis that students

are more likely to gather information about the Cultural Revolution from new media sources, as opposed to more traditional media such as newspapers or television programs. Further scholarship on the generations of Chinese citizens born during or after the end of the Cultural Revolution supports my hypothesis. Recent studies show that whereas older generations experienced turbulent events during their lives, later generations grew up in a relatively stable period of social and economic development (Dou, Wang, Zhou, 103). Current youth are therefore less likely to be inclined to constantly monitor national and international current events, preferring entertainment-based media programs rather than information-based media programs (Dou, Wang, Zhou, 103). Indeed, a recent study that drew from 48,000 consumer reports filed by the China National Readership Survey found that those born after 1974 tended to watch more entertainment-based television programs than those born before 1974, who preferred information-based

sources (Dou, Wang, Zhou, 103). New media, generally composed of blogs and social networking sites that often present news in more creative and entertaining ways than traditional forms of media, will therefore likely appeal to college and graduate students.

The findings from my interviews tended to support my initial hypothesis: of the six respondents, only two cited newspapers, among other forms of traditional information-based media, as greatly influencing their perspective of the Cultural Revolution. One respondent explained that news stories tended to focus more on the “human side” of the Cultural Revolution, providing details that allowed her to formulate her own responses to the time period. For example, she recalled one article that outlined the way certain inter-family relationships became estranged after relatives publically denounced one another. According to the respondent, “Mothers will publically shame children and children will criticize mothers, it doesn’t seem natural to me. After

you read these stories you will believe the Cultural Revolution isn’t very good.”

Interestingly, the other respondent who cited the importance of newspapers had a very different perspective on traditional information-based sources. For her, traditional media such as print publications and television news programs provided a more objective depiction of the Cultural Revolution that allowed her to trust the information more. While she believed that dramatic television shows and films played an important role in people’s communication, she found much of their content to be exaggerated or distorted depictions of reality. She explained, “Though news media still has prejudice and subjective comments, the basic objective of news media I believe is still to pursue the truth.” The two respondent’s differing takes on traditional media may stem from their different backgrounds. The second respondent was raised in Hong Kong, where newspapers and television programs face much less control from the government—

indeed, several well-respected Hong Kong publications are censored by the Mainland Chinese government—while the first respondent grew up in Guizhou, where newspapers and news programs generally perpetuate Party ideology. Whereas the Hong Kong student may therefore view newspapers as entities independent from the Party line, the Guizhou respondent would be less likely to view the newspaper as a purely “objective” source.

The other respondents, all from Mainland China, tended as well to view traditional media as highly influenced by Party ideology. One respondent pointed to the relatively little programming related to the Cultural Revolution and explained “Dramas will talk a lot of civil wars or World War II, but almost never the Cultural Revolution because it’s still so sensitive a topic. After all, it’s the Chairman and the government doesn’t want us to think he made mistakes. Even after he died, we still worship him. We don’t even bury him, we still put him

up in the mausoleum.” Another respondent echoed such sentiments: “In magazines, there’s really not much on the Cultural Revolution right now [...] But its not because people don’t care [...] I think the government is in an awkward position because we know that the Cultural Revolution was bad, that it was the Chairman’s mistake. He had too much power back then, he changed so many people’s fates into tragic ones. But the government can’t print that, so they just talk around it.”

The respondent’s wording here is significant. By emphasizing that the “government can’t print” certain presumed facts, the respondent reveals her awareness that the government and newspapers are interconnected entities, and that the articles and television programs she generally encounters are heavily influenced by what the government can and cannot say. Both respondents’ use of the “we” pronoun emphasize, as well, an understanding that the public shares a similar opinion of the Cultural

Revolution, one that is not necessarily mirrored in traditional forms of media. In such a way, the respondents revealed a disconnect between public opinion and the “official transcript.”

For five out of the six respondents, personal stories rather than the media or the “official transcript” majorly influenced their opinions of the “Ten Years of Catastrophe².” One respondent told me, “If you want a more complete understanding of the Cultural Revolution, you ask your family members or your teachers to tell you stories.” Another respondent added, “I learned a lot about the Cultural Revolution through my family members and professors. They experienced the time period, so what stories they tell are generally very detailed and vivid.” For both respondents, the personal stories were important because they provided a more holistic picture of the Cultural Revolution, as

² The one respondent who did not mention family as a factor in her understanding of the Cultural Revolution grew up in Hong Kong. A majority of her immediate family members hailed from the special administrative zone as well, meaning that they likely did not experience the Cultural Revolution to the same degree as those on the Mainland.

opposed to the generally “objective” or “sanitized” narratives disseminated by traditional forms of media.

Importantly, the theme of a “complete picture” or a “truthful account,” most influenced how a respondent chose what form of media to trust for information on the Cultural Revolution. Even the respondents who cited traditional newspapers as their main source of information did so because, as previously mentioned, such sources provided “truthful” and “detailed” overviews of the time period. This trend remains consistent when one turns to the respondent’s perceptions of new media. As one respondent reported on her interactions on the Chinese blogosphere: “These discussions [on the Cultural Revolution] seem more real to me than what you see on television or in the paper, because it is just people freely speaking their minds.” Another respondent, who prefers newspapers to social media, acknowledges, “most students I think tend towards Weibo because you can easily and quickly get a whole range of

opinions on the subject.” Once again, students appear inclined towards sources of information that they perceive to hold the most “truth” value or that can provide the most comprehensive narrative of the Cultural Revolution.

While my initial hypothesis that students would prefer new media to traditional media appears substantiated by the respondents’ general view that newspapers and television programs tended to sterilize accounts of the Cultural Revolution, my findings added another layer to my original analysis. The interviews indicate that while social media and blogs are more popular than traditional media sources, personal narratives had the greatest influence on understandings of the time period. After all, while only two and three respondents answered that traditional media and new media influenced their understandings respectively, five of the respondents cited narratives told by family members and

teachers as very important to their perceptions of the time period.

Such a trend was emphasized in my interview process—the moments when respondents seemed the most engaged in the interview occurred when they described family stories. As respondents excitedly recalled family lore surrounding the Cultural Revolution, it became clear that what most absorbed these students were the personal stories that they could easily relate to; indeed, many of the aforementioned discussions on blogs and social networking sites were composed of netizens sharing stories they had heard about the Cultural Revolution. In such a way, further study on how family narratives affect a student’s understanding of the tumultuous years between 1966 and 1976 may provide a more comprehensive examination of how exactly today’s Chinese youth perceive the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, the research presented in this paper offers the analysis that Chinese students tend to choose media sources based on the perceived

“truthful” or “comprehensive” qualities of the media—an important factor that helps shed light on why certain forms of media such as blogs and social networking sites, tended to

influence understandings of the Cultural Revolution to a greater degree than their traditional counterparts.

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