

The victims become  
persecutors?

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Reviewed title:  
**The Red Guard  
Generation and Political  
Activism in China**

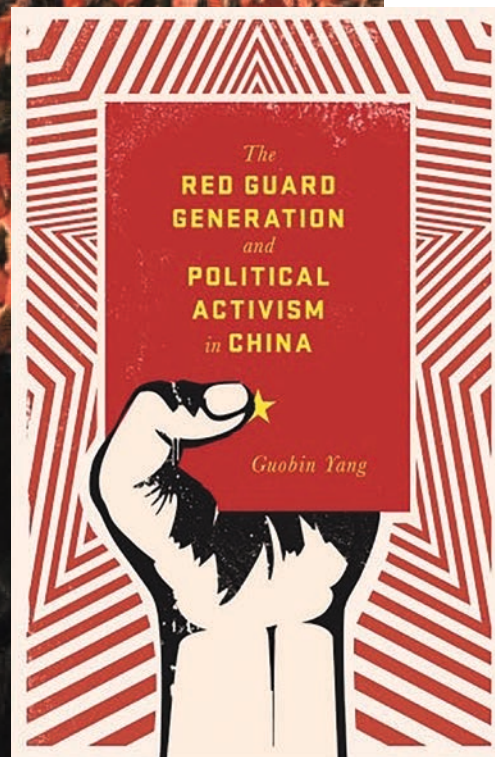
Guobin Yang, 2016.

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Children, apparently, are always the most deprived. In scores of Holocaust testimonies; within various totalitarian regimes; or in the context of child soldiers and in urban gangs: it is often the indoctrinated children who are most feared. The same fear and desolation lingers when discussing the Red Guards: images of little children, waving their Little Red Books, quick to pounce on their teacher; children whose own parents are afraid and cautious, watching what they say at home; fearing their own sons and daughters. Red Guards – children and teenagers, really – desecrating temples, holy places, books. Not only is it important to ask who they were, but also who they are? The Red Guard generation, as they are called, remain alive in vast numbers, but the path from who they were to who they are is more complicated, and paradoxical than might be guessed.

While memoirs like Wenguang Huang's *The Little Red Guard: A Family Memoir* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), or the collection of narratives in Yarong Jiang and David Ashley's *Mao's Children in the New China: Voices From the Red Guard Generation* (Abingdon and

New York: Routledge, 2000) are more lucid and absorbing, Guobin Yang's *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* provides functional and needed background and analysis to how the Red Guard generation continues to impact contemporary Chinese society. The work is based on over two decades of interviews, historical documents, and life histories – many previously not available in English. Its aim to be scholarly, particularly in sections employing various theoretical jargon – performance theory of collective violence or 'the routinization of liminality' (p. 15) are less successful than analysis of a range of voices and texts, from diaries and letters to newspaper accounts that give glimpses into the range of views felt and experienced by the Red Guard generation. The work is thus



Red Guards in 1967. Source: China Pictorial, 1967. Image in the Public domain, courtesy on wikipedia.

comprehensive but is pitched at an unclear audience. Just as Huang's bestselling memoir is not mentioned, neither for example, are other popular, cross-over texts like Louisa Lim's *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) or the writings of Liao Yiwu. Quoted poetry or diary entries are often banal, which shows the ordinariness of the youth involved, but also limits the book's impact and reach.

A key preliminary point: where there are deprived, soul-destroying children, armed with AK-47s as in Liberia, or pummeling their teachers during China's Cultural Revolution, there are the responsible adults, lurking, admonishing, teaching, and threatening in the background, using and abusing these kids as weapons. Such children are indoctrinated in perverse ideologies, taught in schools, drinking in the poison fed to them, as Alfons Heck, for example, depicts in his memoir, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Phoenix, AZ: Renaissance House, 1985).

How much, if any, the children, too, can be blamed, is obviously a complicated and messy question, though human rights lawyers and leaders generally focus on rehabilitating such children, most pronounced, for example, in Ishmael Beah's bestseller, *A Long Way Gone* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007). At what point, though, do child victims-turned-perpetrators become responsible for the choices they make as adults? And, how can those persecuted by totalitarian regimes grow up to then support the same regimes that caused their families so much suffering? Such accounts for the divided, or factionalized identities and memories, that play a big part in Yang's text.

### You reap what you sow

Mao unleashed the furore of the Red Guards through his verbal support of youth gangs in the 1960s (Yang also credits municipal and party leaders, p. 30), and used them until they were becoming a force threatening his own rule and aims. Once Mao expressed his disfavour, as Yang writes: 'The Red Guard movement came to a dramatic end on July 28, 1968' (p. 93). Then followed the *zhiqing* (sent-down youth) movement, where urban kids in the millions, many who were (once) devoted Red Guards, were sent down to live in the countryside with the peasants, to learn true communist ideology. It also minimized their urban impact and relieved pressure on urban unemployment. For most of these youth, hard lessons were learned, and with it, a sense of disillusionment. Many sought return (legally or illegally) back to the cities, and years later came to regret their lost years of education while the next generation seemed more prepared and employable. With time, they also looked back at this period with rose-tinted nostalgia: an example of the factionalized memories Yang highlights.

Many of the contemporary Chinese communist leaders also experienced hardship during that time, like current President Xi Jinping. His family had members persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, yet he later responded to such suffering, not with rebellion or serving as a witness to stop others' suffering, sadly, but by climbing up the power ladders and now enforcing (and adding to) the ideology of the Party. Such princelings, as they are often called, support these regimes, according to Yang, in part 'because they have an emotional attachment to the culture in which they had come of age' and because of their sense of entitlement (p. 179). It is a very important question, though greater depth, and perhaps, an interdisciplinary approach, is needed in trying to answer it.

Likewise, the cult of Mao has seesawed among various generations, declining after his death in the 1980s but with Mao fever returning in the 1990s (p. 168). The same sad spectacle also occurs in the former Soviet Union, with many wishing for return of Stalin – even among those whose families were once persecuted by Stalin. Such fractionalized memories, even within the same people, adds to the disunity and confusion. For some of the once-zealous *zhiqing*, they became more open to protesting injustice, a process they had learned as Red Guards supporting the Communist Party, and provided grounds for failed protests movements like the Democracy Wall Movement. Most accepted a greater need for economic development and economic freedom (without a concurrent call for social freedom and human rights) – a mantra of China's economic growth today. The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, so it goes, failed, but the lessons were education and economic growth were the keys to success – lessons many of the *zhiqing*, but especially the princelings, came to learn.

If we return to fear: are the children really worse? The Red Guards were tools destroyed by the communist leaders; and tragically, those that learned this, were themselves crushed in various failed uprisings. The rest either learned from these failures and so keep quiet; turn to nostalgia and try not to think of past hardship; or have become adult versions of those that once corrupted and sent them down, whether into the countryside or into violence. If victims become persecutors, what hope remains for justice?

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