Mao's Children in the New China

Voices from the Red Guard generation

Yarong Jiang and **David Ashley**

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Mao's Children in the New China

In this inspiring collection of interviews with former Red Guards, members of the first generation to be born under Chairman Mao talk frankly about the dramatic changes that have occurred in China over the last two decades. In discussing the impact these changes have had on their own lives, the former revolutionaries give a direct insight into how they view both the past and the present, revealing an attitude perhaps more contradictory and critical than that of most western commentators.

These poignant memoirs tell the very personal stories of how people from all walks of life were affected by Mao's Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. They cover topics as diverse as politics, party leadership, nationalism, marriage and divorce, the privatization of industry, family relationships, education and the stock market. *Mao's Children in the New China* is essential reading for all those interested in learning more about modern China.

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For “Nini”and “Mei Mei.”
May they learn from this book.

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On youth

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you ....

(Mao Zedong, Talk at a meeting with Chinese students and trainees in Moscow, November 17, 1957, in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, New York: Bantam, 1976, p. 165)

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Foreword

Stanley Rosen

Oral histories, autobiographies and fictional accounts of the Red Guard generation have been appearing in China and the West since the 1970s. Far from abating, however, the outpouring of literature and film on this period seems to have gained momentum in the 1990s. Chinese participants in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and its attendant "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages" movement (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong*) (which lasted until 1978) have fascinated western readers and audiences with harrowing tales of their experiences in those years.[1] Critical acclaim for Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* – a compelling account of the life histories of her grandmother, her mother, and herself in the turmoil of twentieth century China that has achieved bestseller status in many parts of the world – has noted the volume's power to express "the tragic quality of life in China," "the survival of a Chinese family through a century of disaster" and the "shocking story."[2]

While Jung Chang was describing three generations of oppression, not just her own personal suffering during the Cultural Revolution, Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* – another bestselling personal memoir from the 1990s – is limited to her own experiences as a Red Guard and "sent-down youth." If anything, Min's account is even more harrowing, as well as titillating. As a Red Guard she denounces her beloved teacher as a reactionary, thus putting that woman's life in danger. Sent to the countryside she toils in near-starvation while fighting off leeches. Not allowed contact with the opposite sex she has a passionate lesbian affair with her squad leader, constantly aware that discovery could mean execution. More adventures – both political and sexual – follow, as Min becomes the star of Madam Mao's opera "Red Azalea." The *New York Times* chose *Red Azalea* as a Notable Book and observed that it told "the true story of what it was like growing up in Mao's China, where the soul was secondary to the state, beauty was mistrusted, and love could be punishable by death." The national advertisements used by the publisher – Pantheon – emphasized these same points, noting, again quoting the *New York Times*, how this remarkable story revealed both "the brutality of oppression and the incredible resilience of the human spirit."[3] Readers, to judge from

comments on the Amazon.com website, had similar feelings. One noted how the book helped him "understand communism much better," while another found it "incredible to think these atrocities occurred in our lifetime ... [It] makes you feel grateful to be residing in the United States."

More recently, Joan Chen's film *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl*, based on Yan Geling's novella, *Tianyu* (Heavenly Bath), has received critical acclaim as a stark portrait of life in China, circa 1975, for a young girl sent to a remote area. As Roger Ebert noted:

> In a time of movies about sex and silly teenagers, here is a film that arrives with a jolt of hard reality, about a 15-year-old Chinese girl who was not lucky enough to be born into the consumer paradise of "American Pie". To those who find savage satire in "South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut" ... here is a story about people who would weep with joy to have the problems "South Park" attacks.[4]

Joan Chen has defended her film from critics who object that this period has already been well covered in other Chinese films seen in the West, such as Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*. As she puts it, "It's not just another Cultural Revolution movie. This was as important to my generation and my people as the Holocaust is important to the world. Why did Oliver Stone make three Vietnam pictures? Why do people still make World War II movies?"[5]

Joan Chen is correct to note the importance of this decade of upheaval for those who experienced it. Within China, former *zhiqing* youth – to use the term most commonly applied to those of school age sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution years – have produced an impressive collection of memoirs, reportage and historical fiction.[6] Chinese journals and magazines have also introduced feature stories on the Cultural Revolution experiences of the *zhiqing* and their current situation.[7] Up until now, however, with very few exceptions, the vast majority of westerners who have learned about this period have received their knowledge from a small number of widely circulated popular memoirs, novels or films. All the works cited above are extremely well done and provide important insights into various aspects of that period. But such polished accounts, written by expatriates and clearly prepared for a non-Chinese public, represent only one part of a much larger story. The twenty-seven interviews collected in *Mao's Children in the New China* certainly cannot compete with the dramatic, even lurid, details that emerge in books like *Red Azalea* or *Wild Swans*. On the other hand, as narratives related in conversations with Yarong Jiang, a native Shanghainese, these accounts are both more varied and, in a real sense, more "authentic" than even the best work published for western audiences. More importantly, unlike the accounts of Jung Chang and Anchee Min, both of whom end

their story before the reforms, *Mao's Children* reveals the relationship between the Cultural Revolution years and the reforms that followed, bringing the individual stories that comprise the book up to the present.[8]

In most accounts of the Red Guard generation, including many written by participants, the Red Guards appear as thugs and the sent-down youth are portrayed as victims. In some cases, as in Ma Bo's *Blood Red Sunset* – another Cultural Revolution memoir that was very well received in the West – the protagonist is both a thug and a victim.[9] Unlike the works of Jung Chang and Anchee Min, Ma Bo's memoir was originally published in China, but it was quickly removed from circulation by the authorities. Indeed, given the restrictions that limit a thorough investigation of this complex and tumultuous era, the lack of understanding of the broader political context *within* mainland China, particularly among the younger generation, as illustrated by all the above-mentioned works, appears to rival that of the West. For example, in a recent book entitled *China Remembers*, that amassed a collection of thirty-four first-hand accounts of the crackdowns and campaigns that have shaped China since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), An Wenjiang, a former Red Guard, explained why he wanted to tell his story:

> When I was teaching at middle school, one of my students wrote in an essay that the Red Guards were all thugs. She thought I was joking when I told her I was not only a Red Guard, but also the commander of a rebel group. It made me realize the importance of portraying a truthful picture of the Red Guards in history. ... Perhaps my story will help people understand us better.[10]

Generations in post-1949 China

Mao's Children in the New China tells the story of the Red Guard generation, also called the "Third Generation." While westerners frequently use generational terms as shorthand – the familiar Generation X, the baby boomers and so forth – it is perhaps even more common to use such categories in China. Thus, those who became leading directors after attending the Beijing Film Academy in the first entering class after the Cultural Revolution, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, are widely known as "Fifth Generation Filmmakers." Perceived membership in a common generation – what Strauss and Howe writing about generations in the United States call "Awareness" – is also familiar in China.[11] For Strauss and Howe it makes a great deal of difference whether a person was born in 1942 or 1943. In China, there is a similar shared awareness among those who entered university immediately after the entrance examinations were restored in 1977 or 1978, when there were as many as 6 million applicants for a small number of places. Successful applicants are widely known as *qiqi ji* or *qiba ji* (class of 1977 or 1978). These students were

considered – and considered themselves – to be the best and the brightest of their generation, since they emerged victorious in the first open competition after ten years without such examinations.

There is also a shared awareness among those who "graduated" from secondary school in 1966, 1967 and 1968 as being from the *lao san jie* (old three graduating classes). Most of the interviewees in *Mao's Children* fall into this category. One can find specialized restaurants in Beijing and other cities named for this generation (such as *lao san jie* restaurant) or for the bleak areas of the hinterland to which many were sent in the late 1960s and early 1970s (such as *hei tudi* restaurant, named for the wilderness area of Heilongjiang province). These are gathering places for former sent-down youth, providing very simple fare similar to what was served during their Cultural Revolution exile. At the same time, however, it is important to distinguish between those in the Cultural Revolution generation of educated youth who were eventually able to attend college or rise through political channels and those who ended up as farmers or factory workers with few opportunities to rise. Both are represented among these interviewees and, in a sense, provide a partial explanation as to why this generation can be called both the lost generation (*shiluo de yidai*) and the thinking generation (*sikao de yidai*).[12]

To understand the place the Red Guard, or Third, Generation occupies within Chinese society it is necessary to situate this group within its larger generational context. The discussion below is of necessity presented in general terms. It is useful, however, as a starting point because it is based on the analysis prevalent in China today and is drawn largely from a variety of works by Chinese authors. After this overview, we will return to the more complex picture of the Third Generation that emerges from this volume.

There have been five generations that have shaped the People's Republic of China.[13] The First Generation founded the Chinese Communist Party and, through various armed conflicts, established the PRC on October 1, 1949. The most well-known members of this generation were Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. Chinese writers sometimes refer to this generation as "the Rebel Heroes." This was a generation that found it necessary to break with old traditions in order to create something new. They often betrayed their families, their education and their social class. As one author put it, there was no authority they could not overthrow, no myth they would not question. They are also seen as a romantic generation since their struggle required unlimited imagination. They were convinced that human volition could be transformed into material power, and that virtually anything – for example the Long March of 1934–1935 – was possible. Despite some horrendous failures after achieving power – most notably the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution – this generation has commanded and continues to command immense respect because of its revolutionary achievements.

If the First Generation were the Rebel Heroes, the Second Generation is often regarded as the Loyal Soldiers.[14] Although they also were born during hard times, they did not have the choices available to the First Generation. New authority structures were already in place by the time they reached adulthood. They came of age during the first seventeen years of "New China," before the Cultural Revolution. They accepted the leadership of the First Generation and many responded with both loyalty and enthusiasm to the call of Party and country. Because it was an era when the Chinese version of Marxism held sway, they had virtually no access to western or traditional thought alternatives. The only time this generation showed independent thought was during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956–1957, when some intellectuals raised criticisms of Party and state officials. After the anti-rightist movement of 1957, all such dissident voices were stilled. Politics, however, was very important in the lives of the Second Generation. Entering the Communist Youth League and then the Party was considered "glorious." As one commentator suggested, they were "collective animals," always putting state interests above individual interests. They were proud of their thriftiness and lack of material comforts. Their cultural lives were also circumscribed. They read Soviet literature and sang revolutionary songs. Even their family lives were politicized since political quality and social class background were priorities in choosing a spouse.

The Third Generation is often regarded as the generation that has experienced everything, having lived in three totally different eras. Indeed, it may be the only generation that Chinese writers have difficulty in characterizing. One author finds them "a combination of contradictions."[15] Yarong Jiang and David Ashley put it well in their introductory remarks to this book when they suggest that their subjects "develop themes that are contradictory, complementary and critical." It is a generation marked by paradoxes. Born in the late 1940s or early 1950s, it is often noted that the Third Generation experienced their happiest moments during their childhood, because they sensed the excitement of the 1950s. Some dissenting voices point out, however, that they were also confronted by the food shortages of the Great Leap Forward at an early age.[16] Still, most commentators suggest that elements of heroism and idealism have been deeply implanted within them and have affected them throughout their lives. As with the Second Generation, the Third Generation accepted mainstream state ideology unquestioningly. With the coming of the Cultural Revolution they transferred their complete devotion to Chairman Mao, competing to be the most loyal followers of the Chairman. Under these conditions they could commit the most violent crimes with the purest hearts. Objectively, therefore, these Red Guards should be seen as victims as well as criminals. They were compelled to forego their education and forcibly exiled to the countryside. When they were finally allowed to return to the cities, more than a decade later, there were often no jobs for

them. Paradoxically, some of them are leading the market reform while others are unemployed. They are seen as realistic, flexible, highly adaptable and often nostalgic for an earlier era not tainted by corruption and material values. It is frequently suggested that it is the Third Generation that is managing China today, although some of the interviewees in this book take direct issue with that conclusion.

The Fourth Generation is made up of those who were born in the 1960s. While they may have some memories of the Cultural Revolution years, and some witnessed the persecution of family members during their impressionable childhood, they themselves were not direct participants. This spared them much of the pain experienced by the Third Generation. In school, however, their education was heavily influenced by Cultural Revolution standards, offering little beyond Mao quotations or stories of model heroes and performances of model operas. When China opened to the outside world they began to be exposed to a wide variety of western thought and culture. For some, this generation is at the same time the luckiest and the most confused.[17] Many have become pioneers in China's reform program.

One way of distinguishing the belief systems that characterized the Second, Third and Fourth Generations is to examine the works of leading intellectual theorists associated with these generations. Second Generation intellectual thinkers such as Su Shaozhi[18] and Liu Binyan[19] – both currently in exile in the United States following the events of 1989 – are still heavily influenced in their writings by socialist concepts. Despite – indeed, in some ways because of – developments in China, they appear to have retained a strong belief in socialism. The key theorists of the Red Guard generation, such as Yang Xiguang[20], the Li Yizhe group[21] and Yu Luoke[22], were different from intellectuals such as Su and Liu. Red Guard theorists might be characterized as very thoughtful individuals with limited knowledge, all trapped, to a greater or lesser extent, somewhere between Marxism-Leninism and its Maoist fundamentalist variant. Interviewee no. 8 in this book – the widely known and respected liberal Professor of History at Shanghai University, Zhu Xueqin – refers to his generation as "moral idealists" and, in a particularly apt expression, "amateur intellectuals."[23] Younger Fourth Generation theorists, such as Hu Ping[24] and Fang Zhiyuan[25], did not have the restrictions on information that had marked the Second and Third generations. A variety of translation series appeared in the 1980s, such as *Dangdai xifang wenku* (Collection of Contemporary Western Works) and *Zouxiang weilai congshu* (Toward the Future Book Series), exposing Fourth Generation theorists to more pluralistic ideas imported from the West.[26]

The Fifth Generation is made up of those born in the 1970s and growing up in the 1990s.[27] They are the generation most affected by "globalization." Thus, they are equally at home discussing the latest American films or the exploits of the superstars from the National

Basketball Association. Michael Jordan, until his recent retirement, was one of the most popular and well-known individuals in China. The most desirable graduate degree is the Master's of Business Administration, or MBA. Indeed, "MBA" was listed in a survey of the ten most popular expressions used on the Internet in China.[28] At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, the more they have learned about the outside world the more patriotic, even nationalistic, they have become. Finally, they are marked by a strong tendency toward self-interest, if not individualism. Surveys have shown that this generation acknowledges the increasing importance of money in social, economic and personal life, even rivaling friendship and ideals. What is particularly striking about this generation is the ability to hold simultaneously the contradictory values of nationalism/patriotism on the one hand, and pragmatism on the other. However, these values exist in a continuing tension with each other, although this tension has thus far been handled successfully by the Communist Party. After the American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in May 1999, Fifth Generation college students saw no real contradiction between their participation in violent demonstrations against the United States and their continuing desire to work for an American joint venture company or study in the United States. Not surprisingly, the interviewees in this volume are often quite openly critical of the value orientations and beliefs of the young generation.

The reader will notice that this brief overview of Chinese generations does not discuss one of the major events in PRC history: the student demonstrations in the spring of 1989, followed by the military crackdown on June 3–4. Unpublished public opinion polls conducted in China on the eve of the millennium that asked respondents to list the most important events of the past 50 years reveal that "June 4th" (*liu si*) – as the military's "retaking" of Beijing is commonly known in China – remains one of the five or six most salient events to Chinese citizens, particularly those in Beijing. Not surprisingly, the subject is seldom addressed in the open press in China, except to reiterate the "correct" decision made by the leadership to restore order out of "turmoil." Moreover, given the sensitivity of the issue, it is difficult to gauge accurately current attitudes about this period. Fortunately, a number of the interviewees in *Mao's Children* do address this issue and their views will be discussed in the next section.

As suggested above, it is common in China to think in generational terms and to compare one's own generation to those that came before or after. This is not particularly new. A traditional saying had it that "Each generation is worse than the last" (*yidai bu ru yidai*). Generational conflict is therefore not unusual. For example, members of the Fourth Generation have referred to their Second Generation counterparts as "the gray or gloomy generation" (*huise de yidai*) because they were – and, allegedly, in many cases remain – overly cautious, fearful of breaking political and social taboos, and "completely worn out" (*pibei bukan*). In its turn, the

Second Generation criticizes the Fourth Generation for having no sense of mission or sense of responsibility. Indeed, they fail to see anything wrong with being cautious or with careful thinking. They criticize the Fourth Generation for being too much like western youth of the 1960s.[29] There is some evidence that they may be correct in this assessment. For example, a 1988 study of university students in Beijing found that 60.4 percent designated themselves as "the generation that pays no attention to authority" (*moshi quanwei de yidai*), while 76.7 percent demanded independent thinking. Only 7.5 percent said they were willing to obey authority.[30]

Chinese publications also reveal conflicts between the Third and Fourth Generations. Many young Chinese are critical of the Third Generation because they feel that the former Red Guards obstinately persist in defending their actions ("We were idealistic and enthusiastic") and claiming the status of victims ("We had no choice"; "we suffered in the countryside"). They are accused of an inability to reassess their past objectively or admit their mistakes and criminal acts.[31] The Third Generation is also attacked for its arrogance and conceit. Critics assert that this generation thinks of itself as the best and the brightest. Former Red Guards allegedly dismiss the oldest generation as good fighters in war but unsuccessful in constructing the nation. The Second Generation is regarded as too conservative and traditional, with no real ideas. The younger generation is seen as ignorant and naïve. Only the Third Generation, to hear their critics tell it, claims that it learned how to turn struggles into survival and suffering into maturity and flexibility.[32]

This harsh assessment suggests that some larger issues may be at play. In her thoughtful and highly entertaining book on Chinese urban popular culture, Jianying Zha, herself a member of the Third Generation, notes that "memory has generational gaps."[33] She feels that her generation may be fated to carry a heavier burden than their parents or younger siblings. Their parents often went to their graves with their faith in the revolution intact; the Red Guards lost their faith before reaching middle age. Their younger siblings, by contrast, often have little recollection of the Cultural Revolution. Their children may have no memory of the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Zha then provides an answer for critics of the Third Generation, such as those cited above. Her words are worth quoting directly:

> This is a country where nobody confesses sins. Massive destructions have occurred, atrocities have been committed, millions have died of starvation and persecution, children have turned in their parents, husbands have denounced wives, people have sold friendships for a casual nod from a Party secretary – yet it has *never* been popular to acknowledge openly the wrongs you have done to others. The venerable form of "self-criticism" is practiced only when individuals

> apologize to the Party: you may say you're sorry to the system, even if you aren't really sorry. Other forms of confession or self-analysis, however, are neither encouraged nor expected. In fact, it's hard to talk about psychological issues in Chinese – the language just isn't well-equipped with words and expressions to discuss your inner demons. The common attitude is to leave the demons alone.[34]

The Third Generation assesses itself: viewing the mid-1990s while looking back to the past

Mao's Children in the New China, as the title suggests, tells the story of the first generation that grew up completely in "New China," after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Most were between the ages of 40–50 at the time the interviews were conducted in the mid-1990s. They were in the prime of life, at an age that often elicits self-awareness and self-reflection. Whatever youthful dreams they may have harbored, their lives were now anchored in hard realities. Having witnessed the entire history of the PRC, this generation has certainly earned the right to speak, and their reflections reveal a great deal, both about the Cultural Revolution years and about current conditions. Sorting through the memories of these twenty-seven ordinary citizens, the reader may find a China that looks different from what conventional wisdom – and many other sources – may have led us to believe. Particularly fascinating is the interplay between their experiences in the Cultural Revolution and the outcomes of their lives in subsequent decades down to the present. Thus, the individual stories about the Cultural Revolution era and life in the countryside are often at least as compelling as those from the present. What does the student of China learn from these interviews? Considering that the study was conducted in Shanghai, China's most "modern" city, with a unique political tradition, can we generalize beyond these cases to also say something about other parts of China?

First, we find a populace that feels quite free to complain and express open disappointment; both with the way their own lives have turned out, and with the current state of China more generally. Even those with good jobs often seem to be dissatisfied. In part, interviewees have revealed their honest opinions because they were simply talking to another Shanghainese. They were not told that their reflections would appear in a book published in the West. If they had been, they almost certainly would not have been so forthcoming. Should one conclude from their stories that most Chinese from the Third Generation are unhappy, particularly if they happen to live in Shanghai? While there is no clear answer to this question, it appears evident that Chinese citizens, at least among themselves, feel rather able to speak freely.

A second theme that resonates in a number of the interviews is the option – even in the highly politicized atmosphere of the Cultural

Revolution – to ignore the call to "make revolution," and instead pursue one's individual interests. Ironically, to a certain extent, this appears to have been most possible for those of bad class origin. Certainly, the picture presented is far more complex than the familiar one offered in popular memoirs, novels and films that center on the life of one individual or family, and far more subtle than the generalized accounts that have appeared in overview histories and textbooks on this period. For example, there is the fascinating case of interviewee no. 6, a case study that offers several unexpected surprises. As someone from a wealthy – and even counter-revolutionary – family background, one would expect him to have suffered greatly in the past. Indeed, some of his story does echo familiar themes from this period, such as the constant danger of betrayal by a friend. Yet, despite the better conditions today, he reports that the Cultural Revolution years were the most fulfilling of his life. Although he was unemployed, he was left alone to write poetry and pursue ideas freely. Other interviewees – for example no. 10, whose father had been imprisoned in the 1950s and who used the Cultural Revolution years to study languages – reveal that, for an undetermined number, the "ten wasted years" were not really being wasted.

A third theme, one that spans the entire period, from the Cultural Revolution down to the present, is the possibility of "negotiating" with the regime to pursue individual interests. One perhaps is not surprised to find this today, nor is one surprised to discover that these "negotiations" are permeated with corruption. What *is* surprising is to encounter the same practice at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when "reason" was a more important negotiating tactic than bribery. A few examples from these interviews are illustrative. Interviewee no. 6, mentioned above, despite a bad class origin, refused to cooperate with the authorities in registering to leave Shanghai when job assignments were being handed out in 1968. He describes how he was able, when necessary, to raise his blood pressure so he could avoid being sent out of the city. Interviewee no. 10 recounts how his copy of Rousseau's *Confessions* was confiscated when a Workers' Patrol Team saw the words "Oh, Eternal Beauty," and concluded that the book was referring to God. However, by bringing his copy of Engels to the police station and showing the officers that Engels praises Rousseau, he was able to get the book returned. Interviewee no. 19, from a petit bourgeois background – his father owned a tailor shop before 1949 – took the initiative to visit the Job Assignment Work Team before they had made any decision about his future. Showing them a paragraph from Mao's "Analysis of Social Classes in China" that lists his particular family background as "half proletarian," he successfully argued that if Mao's thinking was correct – and who could possibly question that? – he should not be put in the same category as children from the bourgeois class. In the end he was sent to a factory rather than the countryside.

This suggests a fourth point: the arbitrary nature of the political system,