



The Great Separation

The Chinese Cultural Revolution and
the Political Origins of Ordoliberalism

Xiaohong Xu

EDITED BY Roi Livne, Robert S. Jansen, and Yang Zhang

FOREWORD BY Ho-fung Hung



The Great Separation

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the Political Origins of Ordoeconomism*

Xiaohong Xu

Edited by Roi Livne, Robert S. Jansen, and Yang Zhang
with a Foreword by Ho-fung Hung

University of Michigan Press
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For Jichun (Aubree)

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FOREWORD

Rethinking Revolution

The Romantic and Disenchanted Sociology of Xu Xiaohong

Ho-fung Hung

I knew Xiaohong for more than a decade, from his days in New Haven, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Ann Arbor. Those of us who knew him personally know that he was a gentle, soft-spoken, and humble intellectual. On the other hand, those of us who have read his works will well realize the rebelliousness and fire in his ideas. From his dissertation to the works included in this volume, he revisited the whole experience of the Chinese Revolution in the twentieth century. The conclusion is heterodox at least and revolutionary at most. It challenges not only the dominant interpretation of the Chinese Revolution promoted by the current regime, which rests its legitimacy on such an interpretation, but also the many explanations of revolutions in Western social sciences since the 1960s. When put together, these works constitute a potent challenge to the prevailing, larger paradigms about social revolution and neoliberalism.

In 1964, William Skinner organized the panel “Chinese Studies and the Disciplines” for the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in Washington, DC. He delivered an address titled “What the Study of China Can Do for Social Science,” in which he argued:

Social scientists . . . have been parochial while claiming universality. They studied Western man and spoke of mankind. . . . Too much

of social science limits its scope of inquiry to Western societies. Researchers in the disciplines shy away from empirical studies outside their own societies, and they are oftentimes unprepared to digest the implications of such “foreign” studies as have been done. And in consequence, theory falls woefully short of universal applicability. If these disciplines are to move away from parochialism toward a universal science of man, we need empirical studies on a large scale in societies outside the Western tradition. . . . All societies are unique, but some are more unique than others. In my view, China is the most unique of all, by which I mean to say that Chinese society has manifested and now manifests so many exceptional features that social scientists ignore it only at the cost of the universality of their science. (Skinner 1964, 518)

Xiaohong’s work exactly achieves what Skinner suggested, as it contributes to the general social sciences through the study of the Chinese Revolution as a very important case.

From Disciplinary Revolution to Deromanticizing Revolution

Xiaohong’s dissertation, “Revolutionizing Ethos: Powers of Organization in the Chinese Revolution,” revisited the origins and development of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a revolutionary organization in the early twentieth century. Transgressing many traditional works on the rise of the CCP from the perspectives of class analysis, resource mobilizations, and political opportunities, his dissertation employs the recent theory about the “disciplinary revolution” in political sociology to look at how the emergence and success of the CCP are possible. The theory of disciplinary revolution, pioneered by sociologist Philip Gorski, argues that state builders could create an efficient and powerful state with few resources if they could harness preexisting ideology that instilled discipline in individual bureaucrats who subscribed to that ideology. Gorski’s primary case to illustrate this theory was the making of the Dutch state in the seventeenth century, when Calvinists were recruited into the state bureaucracy. The ideology of Calvinism provided the discipline and cohesion among the bureaucrats that the state needed with inadequate supplies of material resources. Xiaohong applied this insight to study the making and rise of the CCP at challenging times.

One major publication that came out from Xiaohong's dissertation is his *American Sociological Review* article "Belonging Before Believing: Ethical Activism, Sectarian Ethos, and Bloc Recruitment in the Making of Chinese Communism" (2013). In the article, Xiaohong explained the rise of the CCP through the lens of preexisting group culture. He found that groups that have been oriented toward a union of social and moral self-reforms, like the many members of the early YMCA in China, were more prone to accepting the call of the communist movement, as their emphasis on collective self-cultivation resonated with the ideal and style of the communist movement as advocated by the Comintern of the time. The article presented a new empirical account of the rise of Chinese communism, providing new insights into the theoretical connection between ideologies and organizations. It is an impressive work that deservedly won several awards and honorable mentions.

The CCP always claimed that its revolution was a peasant revolution under the leadership of the working class. In the official historiography, CCP historians always traced their roots to the long history of peasant rebellions in imperial China. Influenced by this official historiography, many Western social scientists view the Chinese Revolution as an exemplary peasant revolution from below, and this model has been extended to understand other revolutions in Asia, including those in Vietnam and Cambodia. Such a perspective particularly appealed to the many student radicals of the 1960s, who grew up through their participation in the anti-war movement and later entered academia, becoming tenured professors.

Xiaohong's works were an important part of the effort to deromanticize the Chinese Revolution or peasant revolution in general by recovering what it actually was: It was, first and foremost, an effort of a group of nationalist elites striving to build a modern state. Their first task was to build a disciplined, ideologically motivated organization, and then came the task of finding the most opportune social milieu in which to survive and thrive. It is not exactly a bottom-up peasant revolution as we know it. Instead, it is more like a Machiavellian affair. The CCP was well cognizant of it, as later in the 1960s it advised the Cambodian communists to establish an alliance with King Sihanouk to draw the support of the peasants, who joined the revolutionary army not because of their passion for communism but because they thought they were supporting a royalist movement to reinstate the monarchy. And, of course, King Sihanouk was dumped and put under house arrest soon after the Khmer Rouge seized power, and the rest is history (see Hung 2026, 187–99).

China's Ordoeconomism and Its Contribution to Western Neoliberalism

In this new volume, *The Great Separation: The Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Political Origins of Ordoeconomism*, Xiaohong moves on to the latter half of the twentieth century to examine why the CCP, which originated as a mass movement party and continued to resort to mass mobilization to maintain its rule and advance its agenda in the first two decades of its rule, became averse to politicization and mass politics in the 1970s and onward after Mao and his allies stifled the Red Guard movement in the late 1960s. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Mao and his radical colleagues mobilized workers and students to steer the energy of the masses to advance their own political goals while neutralizing their economic demands. This separation between politics and economics, which first emerged as a strategy of the Maoists to seize power, created an unintended consequence of economism, which isolated economic demands from politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1989 uprising, during which students' and workers' economic demands rapidly evolved into political demands for democracy, alarmed the CCP's old guard, who viewed the uprising as a dangerous merger of economic and political demands that could fundamentally threaten its rule. This urged the party elite to double down on separating economics and politics by strengthening their tendency toward economism. Such an imperative of economic-political separation had a selective affinity with the Western neoliberal orthodoxy, which advocated for a self-regulating market. As such, the depoliticization of economics in the aftermath of 1989 unleashed the neoliberal revolution in China in the 1990s. By showing this contingent, eventful path of China's transition to neoliberalism in the 1990s and its origins in China's internal politics in the 1960s, Xiaohong transgresses the conventional Western-centrism that assumes China's neoliberal turn was simply the transplantation of a foreign idea. Xiaohong's alternative approach, which emphasizes the paradoxical indigenous roots of Chinese neoliberalism, significantly enhances our understanding of both the resilience and the limits of China's neoliberalism.

Maybe we could push further to explore how the rise of China's ordoeconomism, as uncovered by Xiaohong, not only constituted the local origins of neoliberalism in China but also contributed to the rise of neoliberalism in the rest of the world. Neoliberalism, as Milton Friedman originally formulated it by drawing on Hayek's work, is hinged on a fear of collectivist dystopia and a faith in individual freedom (Friedman 1951). Ordoeconomism, which was a regime or ideology that sought to shield economic management from democratic contestation and count on bureaucratic expertise

and control to deliver material growth, departed fundamentally from the basic premise of neoliberalism. Would the destruction of the revolutionary Maoist ideology, seen globally as a representation of the longing for an egalitarian and utopian society, by ordoeconomism in China contribute to the disillusionment about socialism in the West that helped open the path for the hegemony of neoliberalism there?

Structuralists tend to see the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and Europe in the 1980s as an inevitable outcome of the crisis of Keynesianism—a form of capitalism based on state regulation of the market, government consumption, and welfare—in the 1970s. However, if we carefully look back to the discussion in the 1970s about the future of capitalism, radical free marketization as a remedy to the stagflationary crisis at the time was not obvious. Milton Friedman and his Chicago School pals were still at the margin. Their advocacy for radical free-market reform simply lacked any successful, convincing case to show for it. The Chilean neoliberalization experiment under Pinochet and the “Chicago Boys” was just starting, and its success was far from warranted. The nightmarish memory of the Great Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression still served as a vivid reminder of the danger of the free market. Friedman was so desperate that he had to resort to a distorted image of laissez-faire British Hong Kong as the sole actually existing neoliberal economy that succeeded. However, as many later works have found, 1970s Hong Kong was not exactly the neoliberal paradise that Friedman had fantasized (see Slobodian 2018, 98–99). The colonial government was highly interventionist in the housing and other markets, as showcased by its vast public housing program, which was one of the largest in the world and housed nearly half of the city’s population at its peak (see Hung 2022, chap. 2).

To many scholars and writers in the 1970s, capitalism seemed to be losing and socialism was winning in the Cold War. The Vietnamese communists defeated the United States and unified their country. Communist guerrillas were expanding their territories across the global south. The Soviet economy, buoyed by surging energy prices, seemed to outperform Western economies. Cutting-edge cultural and social theorists spoke of the contradiction of “late capitalism” or the socialist world system on the horizon. The *New York Times* published in its op-ed page on March 19, 1978, a lengthy analysis by a Soviet economist titled “A Marxist Look at the Dollar Crisis.” It proclaimed that the crisis of the US dollar following the Bretton Woods order was a reflection of the crisis of US monopoly capitalism and the international economic order it dominated. A restructuring of the international order was on the horizon. Today, some fret that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world

than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003). But to many of the brightest minds in the Western world in the 1970s, it was easier to imagine a socialist future than to imagine a free market future of the world.

Recent historical studies demonstrate how “global Maoism” emerged as a formidable ideological force, inspiring optimism for progressive change on university campuses, in ethnic ghettos, on factory floors, and in remote countryside areas in both the Global North and South. It is also well documented how Deng Xiaoping’s rise and the CCP’s official denunciation of Mao’s Cultural Revolution—the single most radical revolution in the most populous nation in the world that kept the flame of revolutionary imagination alive around the world in the 1970s, particularly among those already fed up with the Soviet-Stalinist bureaucratic state—sent a shock wave throughout the progressive circles around the world at the end of the decade.¹ It was in this context of great disillusionment that Margaret Thatcher was able to declare in 1980, “There is no alternative.” To a certain extent, can we say that the rise of ordoeconomism to dominance in China helped clear the way for the full neoliberalization in the West, and not the other way around? If this is the case, then Xiaohong’s discovery of the eventful rise of China’s ordoliberalism was a truly global event.

Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party and Not a Heroic Fairy Tale Either

In the article “The Misruling Elites,” in which Xiaohong led a group of coauthors, he set up an amazing database that systematically verifies the alternative view on the secret behind the success of the Chinese Revolution that has so far been supported by isolated case studies only, such as Prasenjit Duara’s study of state involution in Republican North China that helped fuel unrest and support for the CCP (X. Xu et al. 2024). According to this view, the Chinese Communist Revolution gained its support and succeeded not because of its program of class struggle or the appeal of an idealist socialist society. Instead, the disruption that state centralization created in the late nineteenth century to the local social fabric undermined the traditional local power structure based on the gentry elite; yet, it was far from creating a new power structure. When the “ruling elite” misruled, hardship and chaos followed, and the people started missing the “good old days.” Such

1. For discussion of the connection between Western intellectuals’ disillusionment with Maoism and the rise of conservatism and neoliberalism in the West, see, e.g., Anderson 2021; Zamora and Behrent 2014.

hardship and chaos created room for the CCP to garner popular support by promising effective and clean governance. In other words, the Chinese Revolution is about competing groups of state builders who all promised effective governance and stable order to the people. The CCP won because the people believed in their old-school promise of capable and stable governance. What the party actually did after it successfully seized power on the back of people's trust is another issue.

Undoubtedly, Xiaohong was a romantic. He was a serious intellectual who maintained his faith in ideas and the historical-comparative sociological conviction to unearth large processes, big structures, and huge comparisons, to paraphrase Charles Tilly (1984). His romanticism was very well captured in the beautifully made poster for the "Xiaohong Xu Memorial Conference" in May 2024 that featured a photo of him reading a big book (it looked like a book by Weber or Bourdieu or something of comparable depth) and having a deep thought in a shopping mall—I suppose it was in Hong Kong, a city that despises knowledge and intellectuals and glorifies shallowness and ignorance of history and ideas, something I feel I'm entitled to say as a Hong Konger who grew up painfully as an intellectual serious about history and ideas.

Despite Xiaohong's romantic spirit, the content of his research and writing is genuinely anti-romantic, as his project consciously or unconsciously leads to a disenchantment of the Chinese Revolution by revealing the realist foundation and Machiavellian machination of it. Following the social history revolution in Western social sciences in the 1960s, numerous historical and sociological works on revolutions have focused on the social bases and the structural inevitability of such revolutions. Most social scientific studies of social revolution since Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* assume the revolutionary masses joined revolutions because they signed up for the bottom-up social transformations that the revolutions were essentially about. This perspective made a powerful contribution to overthrowing the "elite makes history" premise in traditional historiography and restoring agency to the people. After reading the collection of Xiaohong's works, we should be reminded that people make history, but people also make mistakes. Oftentimes, they fell for the scheme of the manipulative Machiavellian revolutionary elite and fought for the deceptive cause that the leaders declared (such as restoring the Cambodian king). Social conditions created a revolutionary opening, but which revolutionaries won and the direction of postrevolutionary development were very much determined by the revolutionary elite, most of whom did not fulfill their revolutionary promises and did something very different from what they purported to do when



Xiaohong Xu in Hong Kong, circa 2017.
(Photograph by Fei Yan, reprinted by permission.)

striving to gain the initial popular mandate. Mao famously said, “Revolution is not a dinner party.” Yet, Xiaohong’s work reminds us that revolution is not a heroic fairy tale, as propagandized by the postrevolutionary elite and believed by many students of revolution, either.

It is not an accident that many Western Marxist or Maoist theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, were so fascinated and even obsessed with Machiavelli and wrote admirably about *The Prince*. This includes Gramsci’s *The Modern Prince* and Althusser’s 1972 lecture course on Machiavelli, which was put together in the Verso collection *Machiavelli and Us*. Xiaohong’s works resonate and converge with an expanding group of a new generation of historical sociologists who strive to bring political parties back in. He also pushes the boundary of this group of literature, which so far focuses on parties in constitutional electoral politics in the global north, further to include vanguard revolutionary parties and authoritarian party-states engaged in armed uprisings in the global south. It helps broaden this exciting, emerging field of historical sociology from a focus on the sociology

of political parties and electoral politics to the sociology of organized political action in general.

Xiaohong's works exemplify the kind of critical and realist reinterpretation that not only debunks the mythology of a revolution or the history written by the victor of history but also problematizes the many attempts of Western leftist radical scholars, who became frustrated by the lack of revolution among the Western working classes and other subaltern classes and looked to the East to romanticize as much as theorize about the so-called peasant revolution, as exemplified by Eric Wolf's *The Peasant War in the Twentieth Century* and James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasants* and many other works.

Of course, my views here represent only one of many possible projections and interpretations of the multiverse of theories and worldviews that Xiaohong's writings inspire. I am certain that his works, like the works of all other great intellectuals, will inspire a multitude of projections among scholars of different theoretical and political convictions. I am sure that we are going to see many different projections by my fellow social scientists, some of whom contributed to this volume. For this, we thank the University of Michigan for bringing together a group of distinguished scholars in May 2024 to mourn the loss of a brilliant mind among us and to celebrate and discuss the many ideational currents that radiate from Xiaohong's works. Thank you for putting together this volume of Xiaohong's work to ensure that he will continue to live with us through his powerful ideas and findings. I look forward to the many debates and new research that these ideas and findings will inspire in the years to come.

Introduction

Roi Livne, Robert S. Jansen, and Yang Zhang

Xiaohong Xu died on December 12, 2023, leaving many in the sociology world shocked and pained. Despite his young age, Xiaohong was a well-known figure among historical and political sociologists in China and the United States. Not many, however, were aware of his illness, and even those closest to him did not realize how serious it was. About two weeks before his death, Xiaohong wrote on social media about a “major setback” that he had experienced; yet the text was sufficiently vague to elicit quite a few instinctive “get well soon” responses. His friends and colleagues still held the image he had left them with the last time they crossed paths, which for many had been just four months earlier at the American Sociological Association’s conference in Philadelphia, where Xiaohong was pacing from meetings to sessions, to lunches, to coffee dates, to receptions, to book panels. Debating and critiquing, agreeing and encouraging, catching up with old friends and making new ones, Xiaohong was basking in the enthusiasm that such events always kindled in him. His thin and fragile body stood in marvelous contrast to the alacrity on his face. He was beaming.

As one can expect from an untenured professor who lived and worked with the sword of job loss hanging over his head, Xiaohong was secretive about his diagnosis. Yet the main reason he did not share more about his condition was that he was unaware of it. The realization that he was dying dawned on Xiaohong only ten days before he passed, when shortly after midnight a young physician at the University of Michigan Medical Center told him that he probably had a week or two left to live. Time was scarce, and the merciless disease that spread throughout his body made him progressively drowsy, claiming ever more precious hours of clarity and wakefulness.

It was time to quickly reflect on priorities and finalize affairs. The financial concerns that tormented him in the previous months were lifted when a group of friends launched a worldwide fundraiser that collected over eight hundred donations from close friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and even people he had never met. This moved Xiaohong to tears. There were other worldly matters—bank, insurance, and immigration paperwork—and there was the emotional impossibility of parting ways with his beloved, far and near. Yet somehow Xiaohong seemed at peace with these matters, perhaps because he trusted that his wife, Lang Chen, and daughter, Aubree Jichun Xu, would land on their feet after his passing. His concern lay elsewhere. Xiaohong felt that his short lifespan did not allow him to fully release his scholarship. At stake was not the narrow-minded obsession with academic productivity. For Xiaohong, the issue was existential. He did not fear death but was disheartened when realizing that he would be unable to conclude what he solemnly and unapologetically called “my life-defining work.” Only Xiaohong could use such a phrase without sounding presumptuous, because for him the issue was straightforward: He walked a path and crafted ideas but did not get to publish all of them. And, so, he requested that this volume be edited and published posthumously.

XIAOHONG XU WAS BORN on May 9, 1978, in a rural village near the city of Quzhou in the Zhejiang province of southeastern China. His family, like the rest of the village, was of very modest means. His father, Huomu Xu, was a farmer, and his mother, Yanxiang Fu, began as a farmer and then obtained a sewing machine and worked her way to becoming the village tailor. When Xiaohong was a young child, his mother often spoke to him of the world that lay beyond his village, saying that, as an exceptionally bright boy, he belonged in that big world. When he turned twelve, Xiaohong left the village for a middle school in the county town. He shared a dorm room with twenty-some other boys and came home only for weekends. Every week, before heading back to school, Xiaohong’s father packed him rice, steamed buns, and pickles as weekly provisions. In the rainy season, when the road connecting the town to the village was at constant risk of flooding, his father packed double the amount of rice, so Xiaohong would not be hungry if he had to stay in the town for an additional week.

Xiaohong went on to attend the best high school in Quzhou. The day he arrived at school was also the first time he ever settled in a city. Challenging as the move must have been for him, Xiaohong was a stellar student. He read books about world historical figures like Napoleon and events such as the French Revolution, which brought his mother’s words back to him: This was

the big world she had promised when he was a little boy in the village. This world had an enormous appeal to Xiaohong, and excelling academically was the way to reach it. At age eighteen, he was admitted to China's leading higher education institution, Peking University (PKU, also known as Beijing University). The train he boarded to the capital city took him beyond the boundaries of his province of birth for the first time in his life. He was living the dream.

Xiaohong began college as a chemistry major but was drawn rather quickly to the social sciences and humanities. He frequented a reading group on Michel Foucault alongside other young scholars who would later become very influential in China; he read Carl Schmitt and Leszek Kołakowski; and he broadened his horizons to Søren Kierkegaard and existentialism. Sociologist and longtime friend Yan Long, who first met Xiaohong around that time, described him in college as “the guy with the long hair and Harvard T-shirt”—a deep thinker, a romantic dreamer, a proverbial village kid who gradually carved out space for himself in Beijing's hustling and bustling cultural and intellectual scenes. Around that period, Xiaohong began working as an assistant editor for the prominent academic publication *China Scholarship*. His engagements, however, extended far beyond academia. He loved music and art, and at some point in mid-college he played guitar and sang with a group of musicians on a daily basis. Later, Xiaohong even wrote music reviews for a new online literary website.

PKU assigned students to dorm rooms by department, and as an intellectual omnivore Xiaohong spent nights in many different rooms, as well as in many off-campus spaces where groups of students made their home for intellectual and cultural activities. One of his dorm rooms was colorful enough to settle in people's memories. Room no. 1021 in building no. 46 attracted scores of interesting and creative people who broke bread, drank, and smoked together while passionately debating culture, history, art, and films. Historian and friend Xiaoxuan Wang, who was among the students who shared this room with Xiaohong, remembered him as “a social butterfly with a signature smile that was warm, shy, and mischievous at the same time, a shoulder-length hair that he was anxious to cut short before meeting important women like his mom, and a backpack always filled with one or two newly acquired academic books.”

At some point in college, Xiaohong fell in love with sociology. He read Weber and was drawn to his ability to connect analyses of religion, culture, and politics. He also read Marx independently and got into arguments with a cadre whom the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appointed to trumpet the party line on the same campus that less than a decade earlier had birthed the Tiananmen movement. Xiaohong did not get himself into too much

trouble but could see very clearly the cost that intellectual integrity might bring. This understanding deepened as he befriended many young activists in Beijing's radical circles. Xiaohong was Marxist-leaning, and he believed that true socialism meant democracy in the fullest and deepest sense of the term: popular participation, equity, and social embeddedness of both politics and economy. The CCP's disregard for these principles motivated him politically and intrigued him intellectually. He refused to settle for simplistic explanations and wanted to understand the historical accidents, conjunctions, and unholy alliances and compromises that brought the CCP from its initial embrace of effervescent mass politics to its later emphasis on the apolitical techno-bureaucratic management of economic affairs.

IN HINDSIGHT, it may appear as if the ambitious historical-sociological project displayed in this volume motivated and defined Xiaohong's life as a scholar from the beginning. He wrote his undergraduate thesis on the physical violence of the Red Guards and continued pursuing his interest in the formation of the CCP, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the revolution's long-term unintended consequences until his very last days. (Some sixty hours before he died and already in hospice, Xiaohong delivered a spirited lecture on the Cultural Revolution to a group of academic friends who had flown in from all over the continent.) As Ho-fung Hung shows in the foreword to this volume, virtually everything Xiaohong wrote was connected, in some way or another, to the overarching picture of the gradual end of mass politics in China and the narrowing of what can be spoken of politically and by whom.

The real picture is probably more complicated. Xiaohong came to Yale interested in the sociology of religion and particularly Christianity. Throughout his career, he entertained several projects simultaneously—some related to religion, others to culture and politics, and yet another to development in Southeast Asia. When it comes to the Cultural Revolution's long-term historical significance, Xiaohong's view emerged gradually and iteratively. He initially wrote individual texts without necessarily having a clear sense of how they fit into a bigger macro-historical picture, which began to clarify for him only in the last few years of his life and which he tried to chart out in a long and theoretically dense essay that, paraphrasing Karl Polanyi, he entitled "The Great Separation" (chapter 3 of this volume). This was the text to which he referred as "my life-defining work" on his deathbed and that he desperately wanted to see printed. When asked if he would like to have any other works included in a volume, he quickly selected the two previously published articles that appear here as chapters 1 and 2. The first, printed in

2017, was about the “becoming” of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the second, published in 2023, was a more theoretical piece coauthored with Isaac Reed on the social experience of time in revolutions, which took the Cultural Revolution as its main case study. When Xiaohong spoke of these three articles-turned-chapters, his face brightened. “Together,” he said with a smile that betrayed none of his deteriorating physical condition, “these would add up to a volume that summarizes my thinking about the Cultural Revolution.”

IN 2003, XIAOHONG FLEW to the United States to pursue a graduate degree in sociology. This was the first time he left the country and the first time he boarded an airplane. During the preceding two years of denied visa applications, Xiaohong worked several jobs in Beijing and sent money to his family back in the village. At some point he even started his own business—a consulting company for Chinese students who wanted to study abroad. Leaving China for graduate school in a field as nonlucrative as sociology was not an easy decision for him and certainly not a common one for people with his background. Young women and men from rural areas who graduated from PKU typically capitalized on their newly acquired credentials to pursue government careers or, in later periods, careers in business.

In Xiaohong’s case, intellectual proclivities won out. He began at the University of Notre Dame, and then with the support and encouragement of his adviser Lyn Spillman he transferred to Yale, which was clearly a better fit for him. Xiaohong gradually immersed himself in cultural, political, and comparative historical sociology, working with some of the biggest names in these fields—Julia Adams, Philip Gorski, and Jeffrey Alexander. And he lived with Lang, whom he married shortly before the move. The couple made their home a social hub that saw traffic and intellectual excitement comparable to Xiaohong’s old PKU dorm rooms, although it was, as his friend Xuan Gui delicately remarked, “more tasteful.” In 2014, upon earning his PhD and becoming a father to Aubree, Xiaohong moved back to East Asia to take an assistant professor position at the National University of Singapore. Some four-and-a-half-years later, he moved on to Lingnan University in Hong Kong to unite with Aubree and Lang, who had taken a position at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Then, in 2019, the three of them crossed the Pacific again to join the University of Michigan.

Xiaohong was as enthusiastic as only he could be about working at Michigan Sociology and the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies, but there was also much ambivalence in him. He left Hong Kong during a turbulent summer, when hundreds of thousands marched the streets in

protest of the government's extradition law and Chinese influence more broadly. Xiaohong, too, was in the streets, invigorated by the energies that washed over the city and characteristically analytical in his evaluative gaze. His stance did not necessarily reflect pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the heart, as contrary to many academics, his thinking oftentimes had less than fatalistic tones. Still, as Ho-fung Hung accurately observes in the foreword, romantic as he was, Xiaohong never saw the *longue durée* of China and its regional influence in rosy terms. Regardless, he was conflicted about leaving Hong Kong in such consequential times.

The United States was not an easy destination for Xiaohong either. He and his family arrived in the country deep into the first Trump presidency, when xenophobic and anti-Chinese sentiments abounded. Throughout his life, Xiaohong was at odds with much of what the United States has represented globally. His scholarly critique of Chinese politics, economics, and culture was entwined with a deep antipathy toward US imperialism and neoliberalism. This set Xiaohong apart from numerous Chinese intellectuals who embraced the United States as an alternative model to the course their country has taken. Xiaohong, by contrast, had a fraught and ambivalent relationship with both China and the United States; he wrote into the explosive space between the countries and had to navigate the symbolic charge that each of his words could carry.

Formulating a nuanced position within this space felt like passing a camel through the eye of a needle. On the one hand, Xiaohong was wary that his critical approach to China would echo unintended meanings in US academia. Few scenarios concerned him more than having his work harnessed to support paper-thin liberal positions, which portray the Chinese people as passive victims manipulated and brainwashed by the CCP and which present US bourgeois democracy as the panacea to all maladies in China and beyond. On the other hand, Xiaohong was concerned about the ease with which sentiments against American imperialism were leading to chauvinism. In one debate, when he pointed out how nationalistic his interlocutor's critique of Western influences on China sounded, Xiaohong was horrified to hear the response: "We are not a nation. We are a civilization!"

It is remarkable that amid such an unforgiving ideological minefield, Xiaohong managed to formulate an original and independent theoretical approach, which seamlessly weaved ideas from Chinese, French, German, British, and US traditions. "The Great Separation" (chapter 3) borrowed from Wang Hui and Karl Polanyi, and "The Misruling Elites" (not included in this volume) linked Fei Xiaotong to Alexis de Tocqueville and illustrated their combined explanatory power empirically (X. Xu et al. 2024). Xiaohong

rejected uncritical and indiscriminate applications of Western ideas globally, yet like Frantz Fanon, he refused to jettison the entire Western corpus in favor of a narrow and somewhat performative search for authentic forms of native knowledge. Xiaohong's creativity as a social theorist thrived on pluralism: drawing from different theoretical strands and traditions, while studying sociality both relationally and comparatively.

Nothing guaranteed that this approach would be recognized and appreciated in the United States. American sociology has been notoriously ignorant of social theory written outside Europe and the United States, although it has recently embraced a small subset of thinkers fashionably labeled as "post-colonial" (most of them living and writing in the global north). Chinese social theorists, however, have never quite fit into the postcolonial box. US academia's professional orientation, its anti-intellectual way of evaluating scholarship by counting peer-reviewed publications, and its general instrumental approach to knowledge added up to an inhospitable environment for a person like Xiaohong. As if to complicate things further, Xiaohong moved to Ann Arbor—a habitable yet by no means cosmopolitan suburban enclave—and did so shortly before COVID-19 struck the world and social isolation began. His appetite for social, political, and academic engagements could hardly be satiated in this context. Leaving vibrant and dynamic Hong Kong for the padded seat of a traditional intellectual felt wrong.

Yet Xiaohong knew how to channel his frustrations in productive directions. He continually participated in dialogues within the United States and across the Pacific. He played a vital role in cofounding Theory, History, and Society (THiS)—a scholarly collective that organizes online events and runs a widely read blog dedicated to political, cultural, and sociological analyses of China and transpacific relations. At the University of Michigan, Xiaohong connected and supported many students who struggled with challenges similar to his own: East Asian students living through their first experiences of being racialized through US eyes, working-class and first-generation students struggling to prove themselves in an elite academic environment, and international students navigating the unfamiliar and stormy waters of Trump's America.

These years were very productive for Xiaohong. He wrote a lot, developed and revised his ideas, and workshopped and gave talks; it was clear to him and to any person who read his work seriously that he was making very meaningful progress. This progress, however, did not show in his formal publication record. Journals kept rejecting his articles, in part because of an old guard that refused to accept his iconoclastic and innovative take on the Cultural Revolution and in part because his ideas and analyses were so

complex and multilayered that it took time for him to strike the right tone and make his texts sufficiently communicative. Xiaohong's refusal to compromise on his ideas meant that when an article of his was finally published, readers could trust that it was making a substantive and meaningful contribution. But it also meant that publishing was a long and arduous process. Shortly after his death, *Theory and Society* printed "The Misruling Elites"—a masterful piece that Xiaohong coauthored with a group of economists on the CCP's formation in the aftermath of World War II. The stunning empirical and theoretical ambition of this article will be evident to any reader who braves through it. Unnoticeable is the fact that the first full draft of this article was completed seven years prior to its publication!

THIS VOLUME IS DIFFERENT from Xiaohong's earlier publications. For one thing, it is incomplete. Throughout his time at the University of Michigan, Xiaohong was very eager to write a book. Chapter 3, "The Great Separation," is effectively an abridged, anticipatory version of the book, which Xiaohong envisioned would be a more empirically detailed rendition of a similar argument. Xiaohong's stubborn fight with his disease was also a fight to buy time that would allow him to finish the book. When he realized this would not happen, he wanted to put together a monograph that would be the closest to what he had intended to write. The outcome can legitimately be described as a collection of works, but still one that has a clear thematic line and would give a sense, even if imperfect, of the book Xiaohong would have written had he had more time.

Xiaohong refused to compromise or amend any of his substantive arguments in any way. At the time of his death, "The Great Separation" was under review in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR), and his direction was to withdraw the publication if the journal requested any more than minor typographical and editorial revisions. (It may very well be the case that the journal has not delivered such a decision on a first submission in its ninety years of existence.) Xiaohong further requested that when preparing this volume, "The Great Separation" would be minimally edited for clarity with one exception: He wanted to reincorporate into the text an earlier theoretical elaboration on Polanyi that he had removed before submitting the paper to the ASR.

Xiaohong appointed us as editors, and we followed his instructions as closely as we could. Editing the work of a deceased colleague and friend is no easy task. Words, sentences, and paragraphs that we were quite certain Xiaohong would have wanted us to rewrite acquired a special weight after he died. They felt like authentic artifacts that Xiaohong had left behind—texts

that carried internal truths about how he thought, wrote, and expressed himself. We struggled with the wish to publish things as he left them, to preserve his unique grammar and taste for tangential anecdotes but were nevertheless aware that this could contradict Xiaohong's own guidelines, which permitted copyedits as needed and also directed us to reincorporate several paragraphs from an earlier draft. We did our best to stick to Xiaohong's directions religiously, revised only what we felt was necessary, and eventually reached consensus on all revisions and amendments.

The final product preserves the incomplete nature of Xiaohong's work. Readers will easily find repetitions in the three essays gathered here. For example, Mao's meeting with rebel leaders on June 27, 1968, in which he dramatically proclaimed that "I am the black hand!" is described in chapters 2 and 3 in very similar terms. We could have edited these repetitions out, but this would have required a more active editorial intervention in the text that we wanted to avoid. Another value in preserving such repetitions is that they highlighted the historical moments Xiaohong deemed to be key in the trajectory of the CCP and modern Chinese history. The repetitions indicate that in Xiaohong's mind certain historical moments were important enough to be mentioned in essays that tackle fundamentally different questions.

This volume also reflects the progression of Xiaohong's thinking over the course of his short life. Most obvious is the chronological progression. Xiaohong's first publications examined the CCP's formation, Mao's political and ideological maneuvers, and the crystallization of the Cultural Revolution into a Sewellian historical event (Sewell 1996). Much of his later work, especially "The Great Separation," extended to a later period, spanning the 1980s and China's transition to neoliberalism, the Tiananmen movement, Xi's reforms, and the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. Indeed, Xiaohong was masterful in showing how past events institutionalize into the structures that condition the present. No less important and somewhat less obvious is the conceptual development that this volume reflects. Xiaohong's thinking about the long-term impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution developed markedly as he was writing about it. Its furthest reach can be found in "The Great Separation," in which he analyzed the Cultural Revolution as the foundation for China's turn to authoritarianism and what he ultimately came to call "ordoeconomism."

IT IS A TERRIBLE TRAGEDY when the author of a book does not live to thank the many people who supported him during the writing process. There is some solace, however, in knowing that in his last days Xiaohong received hundreds of emails and messages from friends, colleagues, students,

and many others who crossed paths with him and caught a glimpse of the infinite kindness and generosity that he projected in every place he walked. These people thanked Xiaohong, he got to thank many of them, and even those who did not get a response from him as his condition declined knew how he felt.

Quite a few people contributed to the publishing of this volume after Xiaohong died, however, and to them we owe our own gratitude. Lang Chen was a supportive and empowering presence. She clarified from the beginning that this monograph should be purely academic and should focus on Xiaohong's scholarship rather than on his family's grief. Lang answered many questions very patiently, and she helped provide access to old drafts from Xiaohong's computer. Mary Gallagher established the connection with the University of Michigan Press and was an unconditional supporter and advocate for this project. Marcella Landri was an attentive and responsive editor who immediately understood the stakes and was ready to make all adjustments and accommodations. We are grateful to the University of Chicago Press, the editors of *Critical Historical Studies*, and especially Stacie Kent for permission to reprint Xiaohong's "Dialogic Struggle in the Becoming of the Cultural Revolution" as chapter 1 of this volume. Elizabeth Armstrong, Jennifer Eshelman, and Elizabeth Jahn from the University of Michigan's Sociology Department worked budgetary miracles that helped the publication process a great deal. We are grateful to Xianni Zhang and Jun Zhou, who assisted with copyediting, formatting, and indexing. Special thanks to Xuan Gui, Yan Long, Xiaoxuan Wang, and the many others who shared stories about Xiaohong at his memorial service and at the "Xiaohong Xu Memorial Conference" held in his honor in 2024. Some of these stories made it into this text. Also in the special thanks category is Dahong Liu, who generously allowed us to use his magnificent painting *A Tale of Two Cities* for the cover. Immediately after being invited to Xiaohong's memorial conference, Hofung Hung rolled up his sleeves to write and deliver a penetrating keynote address, which he later revised for this volume as a foreword. We thank him and the rest of the conference participants for their excellent and heartfelt contributions.

And thank you, Xiaohong Xu, for entrusting us with putting the final touches on your work. You left us with brilliant scholarship—a joy to read and ponder—and allowed us a tearful, painful farewell ending, with a glimmer of satisfaction and a great deal of pride.

Congratulations, friend.

The Great Separation

Dialogic Struggle in the Becoming of the Cultural Revolution

*Between Elite Conflict and Mass Mobilization,
1962 to 1967*

On August 1, 1966, in one of the most pivotal moments in modern political history, Mao Zedong found himself lecturing about the philosophy of history to his colleagues within the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in order to convince them to make a historic decision. He wanted them to condemn the use of work teams during the previous two months, a policy that they had been used to for decades during mass campaigns. Yet Mao now said that the work teams were obstructing the mass movement of the Cultural Revolution. In this inaugural meeting of the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the CCP, Chen Boda, Mao's close associate and head of the newly anointed Central Cultural Revolution Group, gave a speech that accused the work teams of cracking down on student initiatives and estranging themselves from the masses. When Chen stated that "the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is a necessity yet there are many contingencies in great revolutions," Mao interjected: "The necessity is hidden in the contingencies. Who knew that, when Nie Yuanzi put forth that big-character poster, which then was broadcasted, chaos would ensue? It's all because of blind faith, blind faith in

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your own wisdom and no faith in the wisdom of the masses. In fact we have little wisdom. Workers, peasants and revolutionary intellectuals are wiser than us. We must rely on them. We know nothing” (Pang and Jin 2003, 2:1426). There were two motives for Mao’s interjection. First, he acknowledged the unintendedness and contingencies that students’ action brought forth in redefining the project of the Cultural Revolution; second, he tried to sway the doubters by casting a sense of inevitability about his push to withdraw the work teams and endorse the militant students’ rebellion. His colleagues eventually conformed by passing the “Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (“Sixteen Points”) on August 8. For Mao, “the necessity is hidden in the contingencies” because the necessity of history in general and the Cultural Revolution in particular is realized only through actors’ “correct” response to the unfolding contingencies—and, in this case, his.

This subtle tension that Mao announced between contingencies and necessity, however, has been lost in the teleological narrative that dominates the existing literature. The dominant narrative attributes the Cultural Revolution merely to the preexisting conflict between Mao and the party bureaucracy. This essay, by contrast, addresses a question that has been obscured by the teleological narrative—the question of the “becoming” of the Cultural Revolution, that is, the interactive process between Mao, party officials, and students through which the Cultural Revolution was transformed from a Stalinist purge to a mass rebellion under the slogan “rebellion is justified” (*zaofan youli*).

The process of becoming is a crucial issue during disruptive and destabilizing historical events. Historical social scientists have increasingly drawn attention to symbolic and strategic interactive processes as part and parcel of social transformations, through which old institutions break down and new repertoires of action acquire valence (Sahlins 2009; Sewell 1996; Wagner-Pacifici 2000; Ermakoff 2015; Reed 2016).

In one sense, the purpose of this essay is to extend this emerging agenda to an analysis of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, because the way the existing Cultural Revolution literature papers over its becoming also characterizes common blind spots in the analyses of other contentious political events, this case study also throws into sharp relief the added value of the cultural analytical approach over competing modes of explanation—particularly the structural conditional theory of causation and the rationalist conception of agency.

In order to capture the becoming of the Cultural Revolution, it behooves us to ask, first, why elite conflict within the party-state was able to catalyze

student rebellion and, second, why student rebellion in turn aggravated elite division. To address these questions, I draw on and advance two theoretical strands: the perspective of “dialogic struggle” in collective action, which Marc Steinberg developed from Mikhail Bakhtin’s social semiotics (Steinberg 1999), which helps to explicate the dialogic processes between elite conflict and mass mobilization, and William Sewell’s theory of ideological contradictions as sources of social transformations (Sewell 1985, 1992, 1996), which sheds light on the mechanisms of cultural appropriation that unraveled the hegemonic discourse of the Stalinist party-state and gave rise to the new political configuration of Maoists aligned with rebel students against the party bureaucracy. In doing so, I make use of party documents, Red Guard publications, and, more importantly, memoirs of many students who were deeply involved in the emergence of the Cultural Revolution.

Before I delve into these questions, it is necessary to first clear the ground by examining the literature on the Cultural Revolution and explaining how its theoretical underpinnings have left unsolved puzzles and staved off the question of the “becoming” of the Cultural Revolution.

I. Between Cause and Process

The existing literature divides the cause and process of the Cultural Revolution into two separate stages and treats them as two separate questions. Its cause, it is assumed, is a question that is already settled and not worth asking; instead, what the scholarship is overwhelmingly concerned with is its process/outcome, particularly factional formation. Andrew Walder, for example, claims that “the enduring puzzle about the Red Guards is not the perennial preoccupation of students of contentious politics—how insurgents are able to mobilize adherents to make claims against the existing polity,” because apparently “the Red Guard movement was instigated from the apex of the political system” and “facilitated from the beginning by access to the mass media, funding, means of transportation and communication, and the support and advice of a powerful leadership faction.” Rather, “the real puzzle is why politically active students were divided into factions” after political elites set the movement in motion (Walder 2006, 712).

As Jeffrey Paige points out, to temporally divide cause and process/outcome into two separate questions is an unexceptional but questionable scholarly practice, epitomized by Theda Skocpol’s *State and Social Revolutions*, because it tends to reduce causal explanation to identifying variables of initial structural conditions and posits two separate sets of variables to

explain the cause and outcome of, for example, social revolutions (Paige 1999). This practice also applies to the Cultural Revolution scholarship: It attributes its cause to elite conflict (between Mao and the party of officialdom) as a sufficient explanation and concentrates on explaining one feature of its process outcome: Red Guard factionalism.¹ What makes this literature characteristically interesting is how the two complement each other. While the initial condition of elite conflict is held as the standard account for the cause of the Cultural Revolution, the dominant mode of explanation for Red Guard factionalism is premised on a rational choice conception of individual agency. Thus, initial conditions seem to make peace with the rational actor's agency in the movement through this temporal division.

The Cause

Specifically, scholars have searched for the cause of the Cultural Revolution in the conflicting policy styles and preferences between Mao and his party comrades after 1962, when Mao stepped down from the first front of managing the party-state and retreated to the second front in charge of ideological guidance, while his lieutenants, such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, took over the first-front duty (MacFarquhar 1997; Dittmer 1982). In this account, the Cultural Revolution was an escalation of this conflict and was Mao's personal attempt to rectify the discord within the party. As an authoritative account put it, "the movement was largely the result of the decision of a single man, Mao Zedong" (Harding 1991, 107). According to this view, the Red Guard movement that emerged in the first stage of the Cultural Revolution was called into being by Mao and was his shock troops to unsettle his hitherto lieutenants. Joel Andreas, for example, argued that Mao "went outside the party organization to directly mobilize students" in order to attack the party officialdom.² Thus, this account assumes that the starting condition of elite conflict is sufficient to explain the cause of the Cultural Revolution.

Such an assumption is in alignment with the structuralist approach in the social movement scholarship that emerged in the 1970s (Goodwin and Jas-

1. An important exception is Yi-Ching Wu's (2014) examination of the dynamics of ideological transgression in the movement. See also Andreas 2007.

2. Andreas 2007. As I show below, both Walder's and Andreas's analyses often bear out more complexity than their theoretical models. My critique here is meant to identify analytical inadequacies in order to draw attention to unaddressed questions.

per 2004). Yet, it takes a narrower interpretation of the political opportunity structure, which it reduces to elite division, because it seems to sufficiently explain the resources made available for student mobilization (see Meyer 2004). As I will explicate below, elite division is a necessary but insufficient condition. Students also played an important role in shaping the rise of the Cultural Revolution, as Mao himself acknowledged in the opening vignette of this essay. Moreover, the existing account has emphasized elite division at the expense of other structural affordances at play, especially symbolic structures and cultural schemas, which, as William Sewell Jr. has pointed out, are part and parcel of eventful social transformations (1992). A richer conception of structures can shed light on the dynamics of becoming that the existing account has left out.

As Walder's quotation above indicates, because most social scientists take for granted the elite-conflict account of the rise of the Cultural Revolution, they regard this question as uninteresting and shift their attention to what came after the movement came into being, particularly its factionalism.

The Dynamics of Factionalism

While factionalism is a common phenomenon in many social movements, what draws Cultural Revolution scholars' attention is the particular paradox that, while pledging common loyalty to Mao, students (as well as workers and cadres who later joined the movement) were divided into opposing factions and fought each other relentlessly, even defying Mao's call for unity.³ Eventually, frustrated with its factionalism, Mao had to send in the military to neutralize the movement. There must have been real motivations beyond the students' professed ideology that drove their actions and generated this "failure of charisma" on the part of Mao (S. Wang 1995). For this, scholars have predominantly looked for instrumental interest calculations such as career opportunity and political security. There have been two theoretical presuppositions along this line: the older "social interpretation" and the newer "political interpretation."

The social interpretation identifies a strong correlation between an individual's social background and his or her factional allegiance: Students who had privileged class origins or ties to the party authority in the status quo ante tended to join conservative factions; those who were disadvantaged joined rad-

3. For factionalism in other social movements, see Ansell 2001.

ical factions.⁴ The point is clear: Concern for educational and career prospect was the real motivation for individual actors, whereas ideological pronouncement was simply its justification and rationalization. An upshot of this interpretation is that Red Guard factionalism mirrored the fracturing of elites; two groups of competing elites tried to influence their favored factions through political sponsorship and patronage (see Walder 1991, 41–61). The newer “political interpretation,” advanced by Andrew Walder, challenges the social reductionism of the social interpretation and professes to take seriously the political process of factional formation (Walder 2002, 2006, 2009). It argues that initially the opposing factions were actually composed of students with equally impeccable backgrounds, whose factional choices were rather stochastic due to the contradictory signals sent by two conflicting groups of political elites—the conservative-oriented party hierarchy and the radical Central Cultural Revolution Group blessed by Mao. Only after August 1966, it contends, did factionalism take on social signification as the two factions legitimated their initial factional choices along sociopolitical lines and attracted followers accordingly in order to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of party hierarchies. While correcting the social interpretation by showing that in highly uncertain and ambiguous situations like the beginning of the Cultural Revolution the direct link between material interests and action is broken, the political interpretation nevertheless retains the social interpretation’s assumption of instrumental rationality. In fact, it mainly adds to it political calculations of reading elite signals and following the correct line, since standing in the wrong camp could be lethal in a politically punitive context. In this interpretation, the language and content of political articulation are again relegated as epiphenomenal to instrumental calculations (Andreas 2010).

II. The Missing Links

Thus, what’s remarkable about the current literature is that it makes the structural conditional theory of elite conflict seemingly compatible with the instrumentally rational conception of individual factional choice. Thus, political elites widened their conflict by mobilizing mass support and competed to define the situation, in which students made their factional choices based on their instrumental calculations, whether these calculations were social or political.

4. The most articulate among them are Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980 and Lee 1980. For a more nuanced social interpretation, see Andreas 2002, 2009.

While this characterization enhances the understanding of some aspects of the Cultural Revolution, it disregards the role of interpretation in the event and suppresses the question of how and why the Cultural Revolution turned out the way it did. Addressing this question would help to draw the links between elite conflict and student mobilization that the existing literature lacks.

The conventional narrative that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in order to call on the masses to rectify the problems within the party's officialdom is built, first, upon a selective reading of Mao's critical enunciations about the party officialdom before the Cultural Revolution and, second, upon the retrospective account that Mao and his associates constructed after it was already well into its course.

First, there indeed existed tensions between Mao and the party bureaucracy: He had previously initiated campaigns to rectify the party bureaucracy, and before the Cultural Revolution, Mao made harsh comments about it on a few occasions. During the polemics of the Sino-Soviet split (1963–64), Mao explicitly attributed Soviet revisionism to the succession of Stalin by party bureaucrats, whom he believed had become a privileged stratum and betrayed the communist cause (MacFarquhar 1997, 363). He made it clear that he would by all means prevent the same from happening in China. In January 1965, during the Four Cleans Campaign to rectify the party, he targeted the “capitalist roaders” within the party and even spoke of “a class of bureaucrats . . . who are sucking the blood of the workers” (Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 1992, 21). On another occasion, he expressed his distrust of the work teams in charge of the campaign on the ground, for they lacked local knowledge or became bureaucrats “obstructing the campaign” (Mao 1969, 221, 227).

Second, since early 1967, Mao and his associates articulated the thesis of two-line struggle: a long-standing struggle between two party lines between Mao and revisionists within the party, which began in the early 1960s and culminated in the epic battle of the Cultural Revolution. According to Mao, the Cultural Revolution was “a form, a method, to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-round way and from below,” a comment made in February 1967 but often taken as Mao's grand vision before the fact.⁵ This thesis was reinforced and naturalized by Red Guards' ex post facto justification claims that they were following Mao's instruction, even though such claims were not borne out by actual organizational

5. Mao 1969, 288. It was this expression that Lin Biao, in his report to the Ninth National Congress of the CCP, selected to prove Mao's great vision (Lin 1972).

dynamics. The post-Mao official verdict, although inverting the moral judgment of the Maoist narrative, retained its explanatory framework: Mao, it claims, was misguided by a handful of power-hungry leftists and erroneously called on the masses to attack innocent party officials.

Drawing a linear connection between these before/after statements, the conventional narrative depicts the inevitable clash between a charismatic leader and his administrative staff, thus reading the event in light of Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma, Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy," and the neo-Marxist "new class" theory.⁶ Yet, this linear connection suffers from some crucial missing links and does not match with the unfolding of events in between. Indeed, the existing literature has unearthed ample evidence to demonstrate Mao's strategizing to purge party officials whom he singled out for accommodating the ideological assault in the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from the Office*, a historical play that Mao considered a satire of himself (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 15). Yet, what is missing is the evidence to draw a clear connection between elite conflict and mass mobilization that would demonstrate how Mao directly mobilized students *in order to* unsettle the party establishment. A thorough search of historical records, ranging from party documents through Mao's official chronological records (*Mao Zedong Nianpu*) to *People's Daily*, yields no clear evidence that Mao had a master plan to orchestrate that outcome before the event, not to mention to carry it out through concrete organizing mechanisms. The existing literature is fully aware of these missing links yet tends to resort to mysticism due to its attachment to the elite-conflict theory. For example, in *Mao's Last Revolution*, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals acknowledge that "the process by which Mao translated high-level political intrigue into mass mobilization remains one of the many obscure issues of the Cultural Revolution" (2006, 54). The main seemingly credible evidence—the big-character poster incident at Beijing University encouraged by the wife of Mao's close associate Kang Sheng—was essentially intra-bureaucratic conflict: All seven individuals involved were party cadres deeply implicated in the university's bureaucratic infighting since 1964 (T. Chen 2013, 212; Walder 2006, 1025–26).

Moreover, a close examination of the initial phase of the Red Guard movement indicates its relatively autonomous logic: (1) students were

6. Weber 1978, 246, 1121; Michels 1949; Konrad and Szelenyi 1979. A typical example of this interpretation is Andreas 2007, even though his analysis of organizational dynamics is actually a departure from the elite-centered interpretation of charisma. For critiques of the elite-centered interpretation of charisma theory, see Bourdieu 1987, 119–36; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 25–26.

already well disposed toward radical mobilization on the eve of the Cultural Revolution; (2) instead of Mao going “outside the party organization to directly mobilize students” to attack the party officialdom (Andreas 2007, 442), students were actually initially mobilized by the party bureaucracy to attack those party officials and intellectuals whom Mao had singled out for the purge; and (3) their conflict with the party establishment instead emerged and expanded in the process as they clashed over how to define the Cultural Revolution. These factual incongruities indicate that the rise of the Cultural Revolution cannot be reduced to elite conflict, as the “two-line struggle” thesis posits.

As Lowell Dittmer insightfully suggested, the two-line struggle thesis was teleological: A retrospective construction crafted by the Maoists, it in effect papers over the interactive contingency in the Cultural Revolution’s emergence. Taking it for granted is analytically guilty of confusing cause with effect. Although there existed a functional division since 1962 between Mao and his lieutenants who exhibited different policy styles, it did not become a power cleavage until August 1966, when Mao recalled work teams, which he had earlier authorized Liu Shaoqi to dispatch to the schools. It was only because of the work teams’ heavy-handed handling of students that Mao was able to frame the work teams and the Central Party leadership in the image of Soviet “revisionists.” Hence, “in the absence of *mass mobilization* no line struggle could have conceivably developed” (Dittmer 1977). In other words, the tension between Mao and his lieutenants was necessary but *insufficient* for explaining the rise of the Cultural Revolution.

This means that student mobilization not only should be conceptualized as subsequent progress triggered by the antecedent elite conflict, which defined the political context in which students made their choices. Rather, student mobilization also helped to redefine the terms of elite conflict. The emergence and becoming of the Cultural Revolution was a conjuncture of these two causal chains, as a result of the struggle among various actors over the definition of the unfolding situation. The perspective of dialogic struggle helps us to capture these dynamics. Developing Bakhtin’s dialogicist theory, Marc Steinberg argued that “struggle over interpretation” should be placed at the center of understanding collective action (1999, 745). Because of the multivocality of ideological formations, actors sometimes are able to appropriate elements of hegemonic discourse and in the process refine collective issues. This perspective implies rethinking both individual agency and structural affordances at play: The former can be more than instrumental calculation, and the latter can be more than elite conflict.

Agency

The existing literature conceptualizes individual students as instrumental calculators in a context defined by political elites. This is straightforward for the “social interpretation” of factionalism. While the political interpretation has emphasized situational ambiguity in this emergent process, it conceptualizes it only as a context in which students of identical background made stochastic factional choices, which then became path dependent. This way, it ignores the struggle over interpretation in the emergence and unraveling of this situational ambiguity by overlooking, first, that students were engaging in sense making, which was contingent but not purely by chance;⁷ second, that the situation was ambiguous not only to students but also to political elites;⁸ and, most important, that students’ actions also helped shape the definition of the situation and create interpretative problems for political elites. A brief examination of the June 18 Incident at Beijing University—a pivotal event in the early Cultural Revolution—helps to clarify.

Two weeks after the Party Center, with Mao’s consent, sent a work team of 208 members strong to take over control of Beijing University on June 1, 1966, the university was again in turmoil, as students demanded struggle sessions against ousted university leaders, whom the work team had disgraced and put in custody. On June 18, militant students went against the work team’s rules, dragged more than sixty former university cadres out of custody, and organized struggle sessions against them. Students styled these struggle sessions after Mao’s 1927 “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” in which young Mao celebrated tactics and rituals of peasant jacqueries against landlords in his home province (Nee and Layman 1969, 62–63; Tang 2012). Yet, these practices contradicted the routine political repertoires in the postrevolutionary era (1949–66). Hence, both the work team and the Central Cultural Revolution Group actually declared the incident counterrevolutionary (Zhang 1999, 31; L. Wang 2001, 607–8). The party central administration then set it up as a negative example nationwide.

Yet, the incident immediately polarized students. Some students defended these practices by quoting from Mao’s 1927 report that “revolution is not a dinner party”; others condemned them by arguing that “Yan’an [socialist China] is not Xi’an [old regime China]” and that old revolutionary repertoires no longer apply (Y. Li 2013; Ma 2006, 53; Y. Xu 1999, 36–37;

7. For the distinction between chance and other types of contingency, see Ermakoff 2015.

8. Li Xuefeng’s memoir best captures the state of confusion among political elites (1998, 1–11).

Ling, London, and Lee 1972, 19). Such division escalated when wall posters appeared on July 12, in which some students attacked the work team for “suppressing mass movement” in the June 18 Incident (Zhang 1999, 33). After Mao returned to Beijing on July 18 and expressed his disapproval of the work teams to his close associates in top party echelons and the Central Cultural Revolution Group, the latter reversed its position and began accusing the Beijing University work team of mishandling the “revolutionary” incident, leaving the work team bewildered. This drove a deeper wedge among students over whether the work team was guilty of suppressing mass movement. On the nights of July 25 and 26, thousands from the university and nearby schools attended two “big debate” meetings on campus, where elite division as well as student factionalism went public (Zhang 1999, 39; X. Li 1998, 7–9).

Therefore, the process of initial factional formation in this most pivotal case was rather contrary to the political interpretation, which would predict that the conservative work team and radical Central Cultural Revolution Group would send contradictory signals to students, who would then scramble to stand on the right side. Instead, students mobilized distinct cultural repertoires and performed actions that contradicted the party’s institutionalized scripts and contributed significantly to the confusion and chaos. Initial factional formation was largely based on the struggle over interpreting this contingent event and the party bureaucracy’s response to it. And this struggle over interpretation in turn confounded political elites. As Deng Xiaoping put it at this juncture, “[W]e the old revolutionaries have run into new problems” (Walder 2009, 90). While students were imitating the practices of past revolutionaries, party officials at the time, including many of Mao’s close followers in the Central Cultural Revolution Group, considered these practices disruptive of the socialist social order (Zhang 1999, 31; L. Wang 2001, 2:607).

Ideological Contradictions as Source of Contention

The fact that students invoked past revolutionary repertoires—which were elements of the state ideology—that contradicted established policies suggests that a broader conception of political opportunity structures should include cultural resources that afforded the construction of political contention in this case (Meyer 2004). More specifically, it brings to light the importance of ideological contradictions in generating social change. While Marxism has been the most notable in advancing the notion of inner structural

contradictions, William Sewell Jr. has broadened it to encompass ideological tensions. Extending the notion—expounded in French structuralism and Giddens’s idea of the duality of social structures—that ideology is deeply structural and hence constitutive of social order, he argued that ideological dynamics are also part and parcel of social change. He showed that the rise of the French Revolution was largely driven by internal ideological contradictions within the Old Regime in France, such as that between corporate privileges and the impersonal centralizing monarchical state (Sewell 1985). In a series of articles, he further developed this approach to social change, which he argued should be considered as disarticulations of the old structures and rearticulations of the new, effectuated through momentous events, in which actors’ interpretive struggle over contingent yet disruptive happenings, such as the storming of the Bastille, is constitutive of the structural transformations.⁹

Here, the terminologies of articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation convey two interrelated senses: Social structure is “an unevenly articulated network” of schemas, resources, and power relations (Sewell 1996, 842); and its stability and change necessarily depend on social agents’ dialogic struggle, which either repair the unevenness of that network and weave social structure together (articulation and rearticulation) or fail to do so and generate new social structure (disarticulation and rearticulation). The presence of strong ideological contradictions, when embodied by a carrier group, often coincides with shifting resource distribution and unsettling power relations and leads to major social transformations like the French Revolution.

This approach helps us to comprehend the prevalent sense of ideological contradictions on the eve of the Cultural Revolution that former Red Guards often recall, as well as the causal role of these contradictions in the becoming of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ As will be shown below, these contradictions resulted from the party-state’s attempt to synthesize its ideological justification with a routinizing socialist order after the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) and the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–60). Yet, they deeply shaped the group ethos of militant students, which predisposed them to spontaneous and disruptive styles of mobilization that ran counter to what Joel Andreas calls the party’s bureaucratic methods of mobilization (2007).

9. Sewell 1992, 1996. For a thoughtful discussion of structural contradictions as methodology, see Callinicos 2006, 182–216.

10. Carma Hinton’s documentary film *Morning Sun* has most visibly highlighted it.

*Dialogic Struggle as the Missing Link Between Elite Conflict
and Mass Mobilization*

Advancing notions of dialogic struggle and structural disarticulations enables us to grasp the coming into being of the Cultural Revolution as a structured yet contingent process. It is more structured than the conventional narrative, because, in addition to elite division, it also involved other structurally afforded sources such as ideological factors. It is also more contingent than the conventional teleological narrative, because it hinged on the conjuncture of two largely separate causal chains—elite conflict and the formation of a student militant ethos—whose intersection induced contingent interpretive and significative interactions among various actors.¹¹

Hence, instead of Mao orchestrating students' conflict with the party bureaucracy beforehand, he in fact intervened after militant students were clashing with it, when he interpreted the latter's heavy-handed treatment of students in light of Soviet "revisionism." What is particularly noteworthy is the changing meaning of "cultural revolution" resulting from these contingent interactions. Mao indeed began to push for a "cultural revolution" as early as 1964 and stepped up this initiative in late 1965 through the critique of the *Hai Rui* play. Yet it is mainly conceived as an ideological offense against "bourgeois" intellectuals, which escalated in April–May 1966 into a purge of officials who he believed had been ideologically contaminated. The party bureaucracy followed by mobilizing students for loyalty fortification that typically accompanied political purges in Stalinist polities. So far, there was little disagreement between Mao, party officials, and students regarding the *goal* of "cultural revolution" as an ideological purge.

Yet, at this juncture, frictions developed between party officials and students regarding the *means* and *meaning* of carrying out this "cultural revolution": While party officials interpreted it as a bureaucratically controlled purge after the fashion of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, students were informed by spontaneous styles of mobilization that resulted from the disarticulations of ideological contradictions they experienced.¹² During their escalating conflict with bureaucratic control, students rearticulated the meaning of "cultural revolution" as "rebellion is justified." It is in this

11. For the relationship between contingency and conjunctural causation, see Mahoney 2000. See also Ermakoff 2015.

12. This brings up the observation, complementing the current conception of spontaneity in collective action, that ideological contradictions may induce spontaneous collective action even in highly controlled and regimented environments. See Snow and Moss 2014.

context that Mao decisively pivoted toward student rebellion and embraced these new constituents, cementing what Bu Dahua, leader of the first Red Guard organization, called the “telepathy” between Mao and Red Guards at that historical moment (1993, 9).

Therefore, the conjuncture of the intra-elite purge and the formation of a student revolutionary ethos created an emergent process in which tension between the party bureaucracy and students arose and was rearticulated into how to define “cultural revolution.” Mao initiated a purge, which triggered the causal conjuncture yet came to embrace students’ interpretation in light of their growing conflict with party officials. Because the existing causal explanation has already focused on the first causal chain—elite conflict—the rest of this essay focuses on two agendas: first, to introduce the second causal chain, the formation of a revolutionary ethos, and to show how on the eve of the Cultural Revolution students were well disposed to interpret “cultural revolution” radically differently from party officials; and second, to trace the interactive dynamics emerging from the conjuncture of the two causal chains, through which the Cultural Revolution came to be what it is known for: “rebellion is justified.”

III. Intermediate Considerations

My analysis of the emergent dynamics of the Cultural Revolution is divided into two parts. Section IV below accomplishes my first agenda by examining the ethos of students on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. I show that students were experiencing contradictions between their longing for the revolutionary past and the reality of the routinized present, contradictions that were induced by Mao and the party’s relentless ideological campaigns to reassert their authority and control after consecutive legitimization crises in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Due to these deeply felt contradictions, party officials took the Cultural Revolution as another typical top-down loyalty fortification campaign and called on students to support Mao’s purge in early May 1966. But students approached the Cultural Revolution differently, in effect reordering the temporal landscape and turning the “cultural revolution” into their long-desired chance to become revolutionaries.¹³

Section V executes my second agenda. It examines the emergent dynamics whereby students, empowered by these dispositions, came to clash with

13. For how individual agency is manifested in experiences of temporal landscape, see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Tavori and Eliasoph 2013.

the party bureaucracy (which initially called them into action) and to articulate the notion of “rebellion is justified,” which Mao then endorsed. By examining the case of Qinghua High School Red Guards—the first Red Guard organization—section V demonstrates that the notion that Cultural Revolution activism was about justifying rebellion was not Mao’s original program, as the conventional narrative posits, but the outcome of a contingent interactive process in which students played a vital role.

In section IV, I mainly draw on primary sources concerning pre-Cultural Revolution party policies and Red Guard activists’ self-accounts that I collected from a rich body of memoirs, autobiographies, and interview materials. These sources helped me to reconstruct the general ethos of students before they encountered the Cultural Revolution. Using retrospective self-accounts has methodological limitations in that they might bear the imprint of subsequent events and ideological changes, which might have influenced how individuals interpret their experience during the period under study. However, this limitation is significantly offset by the fact that the pattern I identify is quite consistent in the self-accounts of Red Guards who came from different family backgrounds (cadres, intellectuals, professionals, workers, etc.); belonged to various factions (“old Red Guards,” “rebels,” “conservatives”); adopted different ideological orientations in the post-Mao period (neo-leftists and liberals); and currently live on different continents (China and in diaspora, especially in North America).

These accounts are by no means representative of the whole population of former Red Guards. Rather, they are skewed toward the better-known participants. Most of these self-accounts come from highly articulate individuals: historians, philosophers, social scientists, literary scholars, filmmakers, writers, and so forth. Their accounts have a degree of reflexivity similar to what Thomas Merton called “sociological autobiography” and are particularly useful to sensitize my analysis to the historical dynamics involved (1988, 17–21).

Section V relies on a collection of wall posters and other primary sources related to the Qinghua High School Red Guards as well as self-accounts of individuals who directly witnessed or were involved in its formation. These include party officials from the school’s work team and higher-level officials and students who were members of the organization as well as those who were opposed to or victimized by it. These diverse angles provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics leading up to the confrontation between students and the party bureaucracy, before Mao weighed in to support students. By detailing how the students’ revolutionary ethos documented in section IV intersected with the elite division in the emergence of Cultural

Revolution activism, section V strengthens my focus on dialogic struggle. I then discuss how this approach helps to contextualize Mao's ideas and actions.

IV. The Paradoxical Genesis of a Revolutionary Ethos

Group ethos plays an important role in social movement mobilization (X. Xu 2013). To understand the students' general ethos when the party bureaucracy mobilized them to participate in the Cultural Revolution in early May 1966, it is necessary to place it in the context of the series of bureaucratically orchestrated mobilizations and propaganda campaigns that they had already been subjected to since the early 1960s. These bureaucratic mobilizations did not generate straightforward authoritarian indoctrination but rather internal contradictions that shaped how students approached the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴

After the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957), which purged over half a million individuals, and the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), which resulted in one of the worst famines in world history, the party-state stepped up political educational campaigns targeted at the youth. The official rationale was based on a speech Mao delivered in 1957:

Because of their lack of experience in political and social life, quite a number of young people can't make a proper comparison between the old and new China; it is not easy for them to thoroughly comprehend what hardships the people of our country went through in the struggle to free themselves from the oppression by the imperialists and Kuomintang reactionaries, or what a long period of painstaking work is needed before a happy socialist society can be established. That is why political educational work should be kept going among the masses in an interesting and effective way. (Mao 1957, 60)

The early 1960s saw relentless campaigns to reassert Mao's and the party's authority. These campaigns generally took two forms. On the one hand, they stressed the people's sufferings in the old China and glorified the revolutionary struggles through which Mao and the party heroically led the

14. Chan (1985) used Adorno's notion of "authoritarian personality" to analyze the role of ideology in Red Guards. Although Andreas (2007) emphasizes the tension between bureaucratic and charismatic mobilization, he nevertheless believes that it was Mao alone who unleashed the students' charismatic mobilization.

people to found a new socialist society (Mao 1957). On the other, the party promoted a series of ordinary Stakhanovite “socialist builders” for students to emulate in their daily life.¹⁵ Among them, the most prominent was Lei Feng, a soldier whom Mao called on the Chinese youth to emulate after his death in 1962. Lei was celebrated for his utmost loyalty to the party and selfless devotion to helping others and building socialism. His posthumous diaries, in which he prided himself for being a “never-rusting screw” in the “socialist machinery” and a forever “docile tool” of the party, were widely distributed (Lei 1964, 77, 12). An engineer and former Red Guard, Zhai Zhenhua, recalls that every student in her school had a copy of *Excerpts from Lei Feng’s Diary* and was able to recite his famous quotations (Zhai 1992, 41). Students were instructed to follow his example to do good deeds and to imitate his writing and thinking.

While being effectively carried out, these campaigns generated enormous tensions as perceived by students. As historian and former Red Guard Ye Weili put it, “[O]ur education was filled with contradictions. On the one hand, we were told to be screws and obedient tools of the party and the nation. On the other hand, there was so much talk about revolutionary heroism” (Ye and Ma 2005, 89–90). The contradictions took a temporal form, between the past and the present. On the one hand, students longed for the glamor of the revolutionary past. As philosopher Xu Youyu put it, “We thought the glamorous moment of life was not in the lab, on the award-granting podium, but in the torrent of great revolutions. . . . But, our classroom study in more than ten years seemed so far away from this kind of idealist world. I often thought that our generation was so miserable: Why was I not born in the age of great revolutions? Why have I missed the May Fourth demonstration, the Long March, the Anti-Japanese War, etc.?” (1998b, 20). On the other hand, they were confronted with the routinized socialist present. As sociologist Ma Xiaodong recalled, “Paul and Gadfly, along with Gao Shan and the soldiers in the Red Detachment of Women were all people who lived in exciting war times. I loved books and films on war. I often thought that it was a shame I was not born in wartime. I missed the opportunity to become a hero. . . . I just longed to live a thrilling life like the heroes in books and on screen. What I couldn’t bear was being mundane” (Ye and Ma 2005, 89). To make up their lost opportunity to participate in a real revolution, some resorted to playing “revolutionary games.” Shi Tiesheng, an acclaimed writer of the Red Guard generation, remembered that whenever he and his

15. Sheridan 1968. For broader historical context and post-Mao legacy, see Bakken 2000.

friends learned about revolutionary stories, they would role-play the stories. Sometimes they had trouble deciding who would play the enemies because it was always preferable to play the revolutionary heroes (Shi 2004, 81).

While Xu Youyu, Ma Xiaodong, and Shi Tiesheng had spent their revolutionary fantasy in private thought and games, others began to challenge the kind of exemplary education that they were subjected to. Many students openly declared that they identified themselves less with “docile” and conformist models than with past revolutionary heroes. They disdained to spend their wits and time on those petty “good deeds” that were promoted in the “Learn-from-Lei Feng” campaign and could help individuals get ahead in the system. However, the educational authority denounced their argument and reasserted that only by serving the party as “never-rusting screws” could they contribute most to the socialist cause (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980, 411–12; also see Ye and Ma 1999, 60–61).

The party policy deemed revolutionary history to be useful to foster students’ loyalty yet unsuitable for their emulation due to different historical circumstances. As a pamphlet by the Communist Youth League instructed, “Many of our young comrades admire heroic figures and are determined to learn from them. This is understandable. But because the concrete environment and social condition in which heroes lived differs from our condition, we should not emulate them on the surface, but ought to learn from them in essence, that is, learn their revolutionary spirit, their high responsibility for the revolutionary cause and their lofty altruistic character. . . . If we just emulate the deeds of heroes, then we would meet many limits, and moreover, would not be able to draw more spiritual strength from heroes” (CYPH 1953, 15).

Crucial to this temporal demarcation between revolutionary past and socialist present was the dissociation of revolutionary spirit, which was now embodied in socialist builders, from revolutionaries qua actors. Literary scholar and former Red Guard You Xilin captures this perceptively: “From the 1950s on, ‘revolutionaries’ had become a historical concept and been replaced by ‘builders.’ Even in years when class struggle was much emphasized, the image that the word ‘revolutionary’ invoked was not someone who was handcuffed and shouldered the revolutionary cause. A deep impression was that ‘revolution’ and ‘revolutionaries,’ on the one hand, were two of the most frequently used words in New China after the victory of revolution, yet, on the other hand, became more and more abstract. However, it was the Cultural Revolution that restored the true meaning of ‘revolutionaries’” (You 1966, 5).

Although the educational authority did not tolerate open challenge to

its exemplary education, students' imitation of past revolutionary heroes in their daily lives appeared less deviant. Filmmaker Chen Kaige recalls that on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, his high school was full of students imitating the ascetic lifestyle of young Mao Zedong, their greatest hero:

On the campus of my No. 4 High School, there were many students of this kind [imitators of young Mao] walking around. They all kept crew cuts, held books under their arms, and dressed very simply. Even when their clothes were still new, they would put patches on. Some even refused to wear socks in winter. . . . Some of them could recite Marx and Lenin passage after passage and cited them for oratory persuasion. During heavy rains, one could always see people running and shouting under the raining sky; when thunder roared, they walked as if unruffled. For every meal, they brought simple food in aluminum containers and discussed earnestly while eating. (K. Chen 1996, 23–24)

Even in the “Learn-from-Lei Feng” campaign, revolutionary ethos began to take over the routinized mundaneness. Xu Youyu recalls: “There were two interpretations of the Lei Feng spirit. The first one was: be ready to help others, achieve extraordinary contribution in an ordinary post, and be a willing screw of the revolutionary cause. But the closer it approached to the Cultural Revolution, the more prevailing the second interpretation was, that is, ‘to treat our comrades with the warmth of spring, and to treat our enemies with the cruelty and mercilessness of severe winter’” (1998a, 135).

From the above analysis, it is evident that Mao and the party's efforts to reaffirm their authority in the early 1960s generated internal contradictions. Students found themselves emulating past revolutionary heroes instead of present socialist builders, thus transposing and repurposing the state-promoted exemplary education (Sewell 1992, 17; Padgett and Powell 2012, 1–29). On the other hand, their enactment of revolutionary identification was contained by the official temporal landscape that relegated revolutionary events to the past. When party officials called on students to participate in the “cultural revolution” in early May, which they (and, probably to a lesser degree, Mao) interpreted as another Anti-Rightist purge, students approached it rather differently: They in effect unraveled the ideological contradictions they were confronted with, just like the kind of structural disarticulation that Sewell has examined with regard to the French Revolution (Sewell 1985, 1996). Specifically, students engaged in reordering the official temporal orientation in a way that Emirbayer and Mische point out

as essential to social agency: They embraced it as their long-lost chance to become revolutionaries (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). By imitating past revolutionaries and mobilizing their repertoires (as the aforementioned June 18 Incident shows), they brought revolutionary events back to the present. As philosopher Xu Youyu recollects vividly: “Suddenly, chance and fortune have come to favor us. Under the encirclement and blockage of imperialism and reactionaries from various states and after the Soviet Union has betrayed socialist principles, China has waged a great revolution that will save human destiny. . . . The sense of mission is mixed with the sense of happiness. Immense excitement and waves of joy are battering our heart and making me breathless” (1998b, 20).

Therefore, it is clear that elite division and purge—the first causal chain that the existing literature has underscored—activated the second causal chain, that is, students’ predisposition for militant activism, which was well in force by the eve of the Cultural Revolution. The next section shifts the focus to the conjunctural causation of the two chains by examining the microdynamism of the rise of the first Red Guard organization—the Qinghua High School Red Guards—which was also the first to elucidate the notion of “rebellion is justified.”

V. Rebellion Unbound: The Qinghua High School Red Guards

Founded on May 29, 1966, in the high school attached to Qinghua University, China’s leading university of technology, the Qinghua High School Red Guards was the first mass organization to emerge in the Cultural Revolution. After its founding, the name “Red Guards” was immediately adopted by students in other schools who organized similar groups (D. Bu 2011a, 34; W. Bu 1999, 113; Yan 2008, 19). The name soon spread across the country. Since then, the youth movement in the Cultural Revolution has been known as the Red Guard movement.

Qinghua High School was one of the most academically competitive high schools in Beijing in the 1960s. With its dual emphasis on active political education and academic performance, it attracted aspiring and bright students from families of middling intellectuals and revolutionary cadres (Yan 2008, 15; Zhong 1996, 9). This dual emphasis also meant that students here were even more susceptible to the contradictions between revolutionary legitimation and bureaucratic control than elsewhere. I have shown above that students had already developed their predispositions for militant mobilization on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. This was also true in Qinghua

High School: Already in October 1965, a few students who later made up the core of the Red Guards wrote a wall poster (*xiaozibao*) entitled “Long Live the Spirit of Rebellion.” In it, they claimed that rebellion was “the great motor of history,” as there would have been no socialist New Society without revolutionaries’ rebellion against the semicolonial and semifeudal Old Society. They championed the same spirit of rebellion against rules and discipline in education and ridiculed the “royalists” who knew only to “obey the routine order” (Qinghua High School Red Guards 1966, 17–18; Luo 2006, 16; W. Bu 1999, 99). This fledgling rebel ethos would eventually predispose students to clash with the party bureaucracy.

Initially, these students bonded together as an informal group because of their common disagreement with the school party authority’s managerial approach to Communist Youth League recruitment and selection of classroom leaders.¹⁶ Gradually, they began to elevate this disagreement to the level of revolutionary struggle. This elevation was undoubtedly related to the heightened ideological rhetoric during the debate on the historical play *Hai Rui Dismissed from the Office* and its increasing politicization (W. Bu 1999, 99). Yet, it was students’ interpretive agency, and not Mao’s direct intervention, that propelled them into action. Bu Dahua, one of their leaders, recounted how they forged a new interpretation of their own role in this context. On April 30, sixteen of them went together for a three-day spring outing. On the trip, they eagerly discussed the escalation of the *Hai Rui* debate that led to the recent purge of the leadership in the Beijing municipal party committee and felt that a hoped-for revolution was coming:

I felt my body seemed to be possessed by many revolutionary souls: there were Zou Rong who eulogized revolution; Chen Tianhua who didn’t hesitate to lay down his life for the revolution; Lu Xun who grasped “his pen as a sword”; Lenin when he studied in Kazan University; Mao Zedong who zealously expressed himself in Aiwang Pavilion; and even Russian Decembrists. . . . Ideal, illusion, fantasy, and reverie were all swirling in my mind. . . . Before going back to campus, we stood at the mountain pass, reciting in unison a poem Mao Zedong wrote in his youth:

Alone I stand in the autumn chill,
Watching the Xiang River flow north still . . .

16. Many of them shared similar “red” family backgrounds. See Andreas 2002. For the question of family social backgrounds, see the discussion below.

The sacrificial passion and heroic aura this poem invoked filled our eyes with tears. Sincere and solemn, we seemed back in the May Fourth era. (D. Bu 1993, 6)

With “many revolutionary souls” possessing their bodies, these students began to completely identify themselves with past revolutionary heroes. Empowered by this identification and by their interpretation of an increasingly conducive political climate, they left with a sense that “our life will no longer be ordinary and plain” (D. Bu 2011a, 31). In the next three months, their style of mobilization would clash with the bureaucratic mobilization, first of the school party committee and then of the work team.

The Cultural Revolution is conventionally understood to have begun on May 16, 1966, when an enlarged meeting of the CCP Central Committee passed a directive that Mao had prepared. The directive criticized high-ranking official Peng Zhen, who Mao believed had accommodated the ideological assault in the *Hai Rui* play, and vowed to purge revisionists like him in this “Great Cultural Revolution.” The directive elevated the *Hai Rui* debate to a political purge. Yet, it was then only circulated in the upper- and middle-party echelons and did not get publicized until one year later.

Moreover, what this narrative papers over is precisely the changing meaning of “cultural revolution” that the dialogic struggle between Mao, party officials, and students brought about after May 16. The May 16 directive was essentially the continuation of the ideological offense that Mao had invested himself in within the cultural spheres since 1964, when he called for a “cultural revolution.” The directive simply elevated it into a political purge. This document did not hint at any form of mobilization different from the kind of loyalty fortification campaigns that typically accompanied political purges in Stalinist polities—calling on the people to pledge support for the purges. Such was the case when, on May 4, the Youth League leadership called on students and youth to participate in the Cultural Revolution (*People’s Daily* 1966). In practice, party officials interpreted the Cultural Revolution in light of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 for its combination of ideological offense and political purge. Their approach, however, clashed with students, not so much for its goal of purge as for its means, as students were looking for a genuine revolutionary role for themselves to play.

Hence, when the principal of Qinghua High School called on students to participate in the Cultural Revolution on May 10, he instructed them to “attack wherever the Party points to.” Students like Bu Dahua, however, accused the party committee of being “fake revolutionaries,” for it only wanted students “to monotonously fire at anti-Party persons without bring-

ing their own ideas” and without “big debates and big criticisms” (W. Bu 1999, 101). In response, the Youth League secretary at the school warned them of the dire consequences of their actions, citing precedents in 1957 when students raised criticisms of party committees and ended up being labeled as Rightists.¹⁷

Her intimidation, instead, provoked students’ further resistance. As both the party committee and militant students tried to collect “black materials” against the other side, other students were forced to choose between them. The dissenting militants now agglomerated into a few dozen students. The school authority declared that whoever continued to target the school administration was an anti-party person. Since the school leadership had already treated them as a heretical group, on May 29, core individuals met secretly to form an organization—“Red Guards”—adopted from a pen name that one of them had used. On the second day, they held an assembly in which “a rumored ‘directive’ from Mao, full of passion, was read: ‘How precious and important the next few decades will be for the future of the motherland and the fate of humanity. . . . Youth of this generation will turn our poor motherland into a great socialist country and will directly participate in the battle of burying imperialism. . . . Chinese youth with will and ambition must fight for life in order to accomplish our great historical mission.’ Many present burst into tears and even out crying” (Luo 2006, 19). This rumored “directive,” which was misattributed to Mao yet spread widely, was very likely students’ collective invention and epitomized the misrecognition of their own agency: They projected it onto Mao.¹⁸

The broadcasting of the big-character poster by seven staff members at Beijing University attacking the university leadership on June 1 strongly boosted the Red Guards’ morale.¹⁹ From June 2 on, they posted a series of big-character posters criticizing the high school’s party leadership. They created a big stir but were still outnumbered by posters defending the party committee. In the following days, as like-minded students from other schools poured into the campus to support the Red Guards, they also adopted their name. “Red Guards,” hence, quickly diffused to other campuses (D. Bu 2011a, 34). The conflict led to a ten-hour standoff when the school locked out Red Guard supporters from other schools who tried to fight their way in.

17. D. Bu 2011a, 31; W. Bu 1999, 103. For similar scenarios, see Wu 2014.

18. For the appearance elsewhere of this rumored directive, see You 1998, 2.

19. In terms of grassroots mobilization, the big-character poster incident at Beijing University on May 25 was less a breakthrough than the founding of Red Guards on May 29.

On that night, the Party Center sent in a work team to replace the school party leadership and control the situation, as was happening on other campuses too. The work team immediately declared their support for the Red Guards. The situation turned around, and many from the Red Guards were elected to the newly formed Revolutionary Committee, which functioned under the work team's leadership. However, as the work team tried to keep the Red Guards under control and particularly to absorb them into the Youth League organization, the Red Guards proved intractable (Liu 2008, 32; D. Bu 2011a, 36–37; Yan 2008, 21). Their relationship with the work team began to sour.

On June 23, the Red Guards managed to secure a secret weapon when they found a quotation from a speech by Mao during the Yan'an revolutionary era that had been omitted in its post-1949 editions: "rebellion is justified!" (D. Bu 1993, 11–12). On the following day, they declared this revolutionary message, without directly quoting Mao, in a big-character poster titled "Long Live the Revolutionary Spirit of Rebellion" (Qinghua High School Red Guards 1966, 6). The work team, in keeping with its spirit of bureaucratic control and having no knowledge about this revolutionary doctrine, fired back fiercely by claiming: "Now, the Red Guards have exposed their counterrevolutionary true face. Why do you rebel? Whom do you rebel against? Need you rebel when striving for socialism?" (D. Bu 1993, 12). Defenders of work teams in Qinghua High School and Qinghua University overwhelmed the Red Guards, whose heretical poster was now labeled as reactionary by the Party Center (Song 2006, 88–89; Yan 2008, 21–22).

However, in their next poster on July 4, they revealed Mao's quotation and claimed that, according to Mao, "to rebel and struggle is the true strife for socialism." By invoking this saying of Mao from the revolutionary era, the Red Guards effectively severed the ideological linkage between Mao and the party bureaucracy and undermined the legitimacy of the elaborate apparatus of social control under its aegis. The doctrine then became a rallying point for student rebels citywide and, later on, nationwide. At Qinghua High School, it severely demoralized the work team, which then tried to negotiate with the Red Guards but failed (D. Bu 1993, 13–14; W. Bu 1999, 120; Yan 2008, 22). On July 28, during a gathering of Beijing students where members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group declared the recall of work teams, the Qinghua High School Red Guards managed to approach Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, and petition their case to her and Mao (D. Bu 1993, 15–16; Yan 2008, 23). On August 1, on the day of the opening vignette of this essay, Mao wrote a letter to the Red Guards, openly declaring his support for

them and his recognition of mass organizations independent from the party hierarchy. Thus did he seal his “telepathy” with the Red Guards (D. Bu 1993, 9). With Mao’s blessings, the Red Guard movement diffused nationwide in their toppling of the educational authority and party establishment.

VI. Ethos and Interests in Dialogic Struggle

The case study of the Qinghua High School Red Guards further demonstrates that (1) students had already cultivated predispositions for militant mobilization before the Cultural Revolution;²⁰ (2) such predispositions resulted from their agentic disarticulation of the contradictions between ideological legitimation and bureaucratic routinization; (3) such predispositions for disruptive mobilization brought them into antagonism with the party hierarchy’s bureaucratic control (following the 1957 pattern); and (4) in clashing with the party’s style of mobilization, they contributed to defining the unfolding situation (“rebellion is justified”) and transforming an initially bureaucratically organized purge into a frontal assault on the party bureaucracy.

As the first Red Guard organization, the Qinghua Red Guards by no means represented average students. Rather, they highlighted the ideological contradictions they experienced and the social process through which such contradictions were disarticulated and rearticulated in Cultural Revolution activism. Nevertheless, the fact that the name and the style of the Red Guards quickly diffused to other campuses suggests a more general pattern. Furthermore, the predispositions for militant mobilization were rather ubiquitous among students, even though the first Red Guards, like the Qinghua Red Guards, were mostly children of “red” families, especially those of revolutionary cadres (Yan 2008, 19).

Despite this shared ethos, there were good reasons why “non-red” students did not actively participate initially (He 2006). First, they looked on from the sidelines because it was riskier for them to challenge the party hierarchy than it was for students of “red classes” (D. Bu 2011b). In fact, some “non-red” students at Qinghua High School withdrew at this stage.²¹ Second, they were discouraged from participation and, after August, were

20. For the extension of the Bourdieusian concept of habitus to social movements, see Crossley 2003.

21. Y. Zheng 1996, 29; Zhong 1996, 11. For exceptions, see Zheng 1998, 108–15; Zhang 2011, 47–53.

often victimized by students of “red classes,” who saw a hereditary connection between their revolutionary parents and themselves and considered many non-red students unreformed for revolution. This was what happened to novelist Hu Fayun: “Although in the beginning, I was also very excited and enthusiastic, as if we were back to the scenes of the May Fourth era, the Anti-Japanese War, and the December Ninth Movement, just like what I have read from novels like *Song of Youth*. But I soon discovered that this exciting and challenging revolution, this revolution which I had longed for for years, was not my revolution” (1998, 206).

It was not until after October, when these two inhibiting factors were removed, that “non-red” students reclaimed their “right to be revolutionaries” (Hu 1998, 206). Before that point, Walder is right to claim that early activism was confined to students of impeccable backgrounds (2002). Class did not, as the social interpretation claimed, play a role in early factional formation. But it did function as an exclusionary mechanism—especially in high schools. Later, when “non-red” students participated, it emerged as a dividing issue in factionalism (Andreas 2002).

Notwithstanding their different conclusion about the influence of class in early factional formation, both the social and political interpretations only consider actors as instrumental calculators. Coupled together with the teleological narrative about the cause of the Cultural Revolution, they suppress the question of its becoming by overlooking the dialogic struggle in the process. As Charles Tilly said about the sustained interactions in social movements, “[R]eal social movements always involve a symbolically constrained conversation among multiple actors, in which the ability to deploy symbols and idioms significantly affects the outcome of the interaction” (1984, 31). What the Red Guards did was to precisely deploy and retool symbols, idioms, and repertoires enmeshed in the hegemonic discourse of the pre-Cultural Revolution party-state, with the effect of gaining Mao’s support and antagonizing his staff. The dialogic struggle that I focus on here highlights the temporally embedded and structurally transformative agency through which actors brought forth the collective outcome of the Cultural Revolution. Paying attention to these dynamics does not deny that individuals are strategic rational actors. Rather, as James Jasper points out, making strategic choices and interactions is a culturally constituted and constitutive process (2004). Looking at dialogic struggle enables us to chart out the ongoing structural transformations in which individuals’ understandings of their interests are anchored and realigned. I summarize the contrast between the existing approaches and my approach in table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the Dialogic Struggle Perspective with Existing Approaches

Cause	Process	Student Agency
SOCIAL EXPLANATION OF FACTIONALISM		
Assumes the cause to be the conflict between Mao and the party officialdom; students unleashed by Mao as his shock troops to unsettle the party establishment	Difference in family origins or ties to the party authority created the social basis for opposing factions	No agency in cause; agency as rational tabula rasa in choosing and sustaining factional allegiance according to their interests; yet within situation defined by political elites, with no impact on the definition of the situation
POLITICAL EXPLANATION OF FACTIONALISM		
	Stochastic choice by students of impeccable backgrounds into opposing factions, due to the ambiguous and conflicting signals sent by political elites; path dependence of initial random factional choice through organizational competition and ideological justification	No agency in cause; agency as rational tabula rasa in stochastically choosing factional allegiance and sustaining it; yet initially acting within situation defined by political elites, with no impact on the definition of the situation
ANDREAS (2007) AND WU (2014)		
	Creating and sustaining charismatic mobilization and ideological transgression	No agency in cause; agency emerged only after Mao unleashed students
DIALOGIC STRUGGLE PERSPECTIVE		
Modus vivendi between Mao and his lieutenants led to interactive processes that created two causal chains, which conjuncturally shaped the early phase of the Cultural Revolution	Initial factional formation was contingent but not random; students' predispositions to emulate past revolutionaries contributed to situational ambiguity and were crucial in creating initial factions and widening elite division; disruptive mobilization and ideological transgression continued from pre-Cultural Revolution period, not emerged only after it	Agency with interests and identities, yet not as rational tabula rasa, but as carrying repertoires of action structured and enabled by a historical trajectory of interaction with political elites; hence had interpretive agency that made effect on the definition of the situation
Against the separation of cause and process that employs separate explanatory models for them		

VII. Contextualizing Mao

The conventional explanation that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in order to attack the party officialdom entails a very strong assumption that is insufficiently substantiated by historical evidence: Mao, whether a hero or villain, had formulated a master plan beforehand that he strategically played out. By contrast, the dialogic struggle perspective posits that his goals were more like Dewey's notion of "ends-in-view," ever adapting to changing relational contexts and situational exigencies (Joas 1996). It shifts our focus to the actual organizational dynamics of the Cultural Revolution's emergence instead of relying on the speculation, barely supported by extant evidence, that students did exactly what Mao had orchestrated and expected them to do. While the relationship between Mao and the Cultural Revolution would warrant a separate study, it behooves me to clarify briefly how the dialogic struggle perspective helps contextualize Mao's motivation and action.

The existing literature provides two accounts of Mao's motivation: He was driven either by a vision of reviving revolutionary enthusiasm or by a shrewd design of egoistic struggle to take power back from his lieutenants (see Leys 1981). Both accounts, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, construct a narrative of his motivation based largely on the outcome of this process. Because Mao had a record of rationalizing unintended consequences by his alleged intention (an example of which is his justification of the Hundred Flowers movement in 1956–57 as an "open conspiracy" to purge Rightists), such constructions should be taken with a grain of salt. What historical evidence does indicate is his growing frustration with the entrenchment of the party officialdom since 1964, many of whom he suspected had colluded with "bourgeois" intellectuals to erode his personal authority (through the latter's insinuating and sarcastic works) and the party's revolutionary commitment.

His frustration should be understood in the context of *modus vivendi* after the legitimacy crises, when Mao retreated to the second front in charge of ideological guidance, while his lieutenants such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping took over the first front. Two consequences followed from that arrangement. On the one hand, his image within the party's ideological makeup grew even larger when his actual organizational control outside of the ideological domain had shrunk. The production of the song-and-dance epic *The East Is Red* in 1964 and its release as a film in 1965 were especially instrumental in apotheosizing Mao as the embodiment of the Chinese Revolution, the will of the masses, and the correct line of the party all at the same time. On the other hand, as he was now shielded from the onerous complexity of running the party administration, he was increasingly inclined toward

ideological consistency and polemical coherence, which would have taken much less priority had he not stepped down from the first front. After the Sino-Soviet debate in 1962, Mao branched out to diverse ideological fields such as Marxist historiography, literary criticism, and philosophy, which all converged into his ideological offense against *Hai Rui Dismissed from the Office*. It is in this context that we should understand why Mao grew increasingly frustrated with the party bureaucracy, especially after the Four Cleans Campaign in 1964 (Dittmer 1982; MacFarquhar 1997).

Yet, his frustration did not itself translate into a coherent master plan to unsettle it, even though it helps explain why he subsequently embraced student rebellion. What he did initiate was a purge involving party officials, particularly those in cultural and educational domains. The idea that Mao directly and intentionally incited students to attack the party officialdom grossly misunderstands how politics actually worked on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, when a vast and highly organized party bureaucracy penetrated deeply into the body politic and every policy initiative went through this system (Walder 2002, 2009). Indeed, the party bureaucracy executed Mao's purge initiative quite faithfully, only to be baffled by students' recalcitrant attempt to make it into their own revolution. During this crucial period, Mao was traveling in the provinces until his return to Beijing on July 18, and little evidence has emerged indicating his state of mind, except a letter to his wife, Jiang Qing, on July 8 in which, after learning of the chaos that student mobilization had wrought on campuses, he expressed his delight at this "great chaos under the heaven," which he believed would eventually lead to the "great peace under the heaven." Counterfactually speaking, without students' rebellious thrust and the conflict between students and party officials regarding the means and meaning of the Cultural Revolution, it might have been just another instance of ideological offensive-cum-political purge, like the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957.

It is also in this larger context that we should understand why Mao soon abandoned much of the party bureaucracy to embrace student rebellion: Since the early 1960s, he had pursued an ideological consistency, which his party could not live up to, yet which the students seemed to express with impressive clarity. Like the students, he experienced intense contradictions too: the decoupling between ideological consistency and bureaucratic complexity. This constituted, from his end, the basis of the "telepathy" between Mao and the students that Bu Dahua has spoken of.

In endorsing student rebellion, Mao recast party officials' action as revisionist suppression of mass movement and framed the students' action as part of his struggle against revisionism. In late 1966 and early 1967, he further

articulated the two-line struggle thesis, reframing the Cultural Revolution as “a form, a method, to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-round way and from below” (Mao 1969, 288). The thesis crucially locked in students’ misrecognition of their own agency: While it projected a sense of consistency to Mao’s rather situationally embedded actions, it was also enthusiastically accepted by students as it conferred legitimacy upon their earlier actions. It was a narrative rationalization of the new political landscape whereby the convergence between Mao and students had been sealed and the ideological linkage between Mao and the party hierarchy had been shaken. In short, the thesis itself was an outcome of the conjunctural causal process dissected in this study. In this sense, students’ interpretive agency in shifting the meaning of the Cultural Revolution remained captive to the Maoist aura. Their rebellion did not diverge from Mao’s campaign of ideological purge but infused it with new repertoires. Yet, their rebel ethos paved the way for the “unruly margins,” as Yiching Wu (2014) put it, that emerged when Cultural Revolution activism came into full force and eventually for the heretical ideas that blossomed in the 1970s.

VIII. Conclusion

Returning to the opening vignette of this essay, the struggle over interpretation was also in full display here. While Mao acknowledged contingency in the unfolding Cultural Revolution at the factual level, he nevertheless used historical necessity to account for, envelop, and tame it. His power in this unfolding event hinged upon his success in making his interpretation prevail over those of his colleagues, which he accomplished when he pushed through the Sixteen Points. It is this politics of interpretation that this essay has been concerned with.

The existing literature has hidden this dynamic politics of interpretation. By temporally dividing the cause and process of the Cultural Revolution into two separate questions, it complements the teleological narrative of elite conflict with instrumental rational notions of individual agency in factional formation. This leaves two contradictory images of the Red Guards seemingly in harmony with each other: On the one hand, they were ideological zealots who were easily schemed into an elite-designed power struggle; on the other hand, they were rational choice actors looking after their own instrumental interests.²² What is missing is a robust analysis of their agen-

22. For the former, see Chan 1985. Guobin Yang’s work is attentive to both aspects,

tic appropriation and articulation of symbols, rituals, idioms, and artifacts. What the dialogic struggle perspective does here is address (1) how students' militant heroism came about and (2) why it mattered in shaping the Cultural Revolution as we know it.

(1) I show that students' militant heroism resulted not from straightforward indoctrination but from their active appropriation in response to the severe contradictions that were created by official ideological campaigns. The Red Guards were not alone in such appropriation of hegemonic ideology. Their emulation of past revolutionaries echoed Marx's vivid account of how French revolutionaries of 1848 spoke and acted after the fashion of the revolutionaries of 1789 (Marx 1934). Similarly, nineteenth-century English cotton spinners actively appropriated and rearticulated millowners' dominant discourses to forge their own movement (Steinberg 2006). One also thinks of how Polish workers' appropriation of the official discourse of the "radiant past" of the proletariat informed the Solidarity movement (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Burawoy 2000). As Swidler put it, "It is the reappropriation of larger, culturally organized capacities for action that gives culture its enduring effects" (1986, 283). As active operators of cultures instead of "cultural dopes," individuals manifest their agency partly by navigating the internal relations and contradictions in their structurally afforded cultural repertoires.²³

(2) I clarify that revolutionary heroism mattered because it introduced a separate causal force that intersected with a typical Stalinist purge mechanism—the 1957 template—and spawned an emergent process whereby the students' clash with the party bureaucracy changed the meaning of "cultural revolution" and widened elite division. By dislodging teleological construction, the dialogic struggle perspective introduced in this essay renders visible the state of struggle over interpretation in transformative historical events. In this rendition, paying attention to historical contingency not only does not compromise structural inquiry, as deterministic thinking would assume, but helps to shed light on hidden structural affordances and build up more robust explanations of social change (Ermakoff 2015; Reed 2016).

The Cultural Revolution is a deeply polarizing issue in Chinese society. Any causal claim about its dynamics carries serious political and moral connotations. The Mao-era official line claimed that party officialdom was gradually estranged from the masses and the original revolutionary ideals

even though he has not explicitly tackled the tension between them (2000, 2016). Xiaowei Zheng's work also highlights the role of "passion and conviction" in initially propelling student rebels (2006, 33).

23. For critique of "cultural dopes," see Garfinkel 1964.

embodied by Mao, who then mobilized the masses to rectify party officials; the post-Mao official verdict, on the other hand, claims that Mao, misguided by a handful of power-hungry leftists, was erroneous in calling on the masses to attack innocent party officials and intellectuals; there are also unofficial narratives, which cast Mao as a villain who “launched” the Cultural Revolution for his egoistic purpose and plunged the country into chaos, human rights abuses, and destruction.²⁴ Notwithstanding their different moral evaluations, they largely share the same narrative structure derived from the two-line struggle thesis that Mao himself had built up. Decades of historical research have enormously complicated these moral tales of opposing orientations but still have not fundamentally shaken their teleological cornerstone. By explicitly unsettling this foundation and addressing the question of becoming, this essay hopes to contribute to the ongoing reflection on political and moral responsibility in collective action.

24. CCP Central Committee 1981. For a survey of various evaluations in the post-Mao era, see Qin 2014.

Modernity and the Politics of Newness

Unraveling New Time in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966 to 1968

With Isaac Ariail Reed

In politics, more than anywhere else, we have no possibility of distinguishing being and appearance. In the realm of human affairs being and appearance are indeed one and the same.

—Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*

The meaning of the term “masses” changes in accordance with the changes in the character of the struggle.

—Vladimir I. Lenin, July 1921 (in *Selected Works*, vol. 10)

Marx’s exclamation “The revolution is dead!—Long live the revolution!” should be inverted: “Long live the revolution!—the revolution is dead!” That is, whoever pushes revolution to the point of “long live” is ultimately the murderer of revolution. Such is Mao Zedong.

—Zhu Xueqin, in *Morning Sun* (documentary film, 2003)

Revolutions are capricious times, when actors engage in enormous guesswork (Sendroui 2022), including regarding the temporal horizons their action is anchored in. Are we, the actors, involved in or witnessing an occasional food

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riot? Or are we in a rare moment of exercising popular sovereignty and reordering society (Sewell 1996)? Questions like these are pertinent in modern revolutions, in which revolutionaries' conscious search for newness—a new beginning for a new society peopled by “new men”—accentuates this uncertainty of navigating competing temporal horizons (Arendt 2006; Arjomand 2019). Recent scholarship on revolutions has significantly enhanced our understanding of the uncertainty and contingency of revolutionary times (Kurzman 2004; Ermakoff 2015). Yet, more exploration is possible, particularly concerning how actors' lived experiences with contentious interpretations over time shape the dynamics of revolutions.

Important work has pushed in this direction. On the one hand, sociologists of time have fruitfully examined the micro-dynamics of the everyday lived experiences of engaging the past, the present, and the future, drawing especially from the pragmatist and phenomenological perspective (Zerubavel 2003; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). On the other hand, historians and sociologists have dissected the macrostructural shifts in how temporalities are organized through the advent of modernity and postmodernity (Koselleck 1985; Ozouf 1991; Hall 2009; Adam 2013; Rosa 2013). While these two literatures have usefully advanced sociology's engagement with the temporality of social life, their foundational insights have yet to be brought into the studies of the eventful dynamics of modern contentious politics.

This essay suggests a third approach that examines closely how contentious politics of interpreting time shapes the eventful dynamics of revolutions. To capture actors' competing interpretations of their experiences of time in revolutionary settings, we propose to go beyond the prevalent dualistic conception of social time—settled times versus unsettled times—that originated in the cyclical and rhythmic understanding of social life (Durkheim 1995). In addition to ordinary time, we distinguish two kinds of *unordinary* time: “carnival time” as conventional iterative collective effervescence, which is expected to be followed by the restoration and reinvigoration of ordinary time; and “new time” as emergent collective effervescence contingent on felicitous creative processes. This distinction allows us to discern the lived experiences of political newness in revolutions and capture the kind of guesswork like “occasional riot or revolutionary breach?” that actors face in revolutionary settings.

We build toward this tripartite theory of time in modern politics through a case study of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR), particularly the years 1966–68. Through granular analysis of the eventful dynamics of the CCR and actors' pivotal speech acts that propelled them, we show that the Maoists and students were first successful in performing revolutionary/new

time into being—in distinction from carnival time—through dramatic public events.

Yet, growing factionalism among mass organizations jeopardized the Maoists' Jacobin aspiration of unifying mass action for new time. The fortuitous circumstances surrounding an industrial workers' uprising in Shanghai offered the Maoists a breakout performance to overcome this difficulty and make new time real again, but the replication of the Shanghai model nationwide led to even more rampant factionalism. Mao then refurbished the party-state's dualistic management of social time and cast the CCR as a carnival time. When even that failed to quell mass factionalism, Mao eventually suppressed new time and abandoned the Jacobin aspirations that the CCR had begun with. The disastrous failure of CCR Jacobinism reverberated through Chinese politics, paving the way for the post-Mao rejection of political newness and fetishism of stability-maintenance. This case study vividly illustrates the importance of understanding the politics of interpreting and acting on new time to comprehend the logic and consequences of revolutionary events.

I. Revolutionary Modernity and the Politics of Time

(a) *The Dualistic Conception of Time*

It is well received in sociological theory that times of uncertainty and unsettlement can foster innovation and creativity. For example, Robert Jansen (2016) employed pragmatist theories of action to develop a theory of political innovation as a creative recombination of existing practices rooted in crisis situations. In such crises, Jansen argues, taken-for-granted practices become insufficient to provide guardrails for action. Pragmatism thus conceptualizes newness as an emergent property born of actors' responses to the situational inadequacy of the old; this response draws upon and manifests the actors' capacity for creativity.

Jansen's intervention draws, refines, and departs from a long-standing dualistic sociological conception of time—from Durkheim's (1995) cycle of mundane life and collective effervescence to Swidler's (1986) distinction between settled and unsettled lives. Indeed, the prevailing conception of social time in social theory has been consistently dualistic. Durkheim looms large here; in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995, 441), he contended that the basic category of time that humans developed "has the rhythm of social life as its basis" because it was rooted in the rhythmic distinction

between the season of collective effervescence and the season of mundane economic life, a distinction that helped create the binary of the sacred and the profane.

In mid-twentieth-century sociological theory, this rhythmic distinction was married to the distinction between social order and social change, perhaps due to the influence of structural functionalism. Thus, social order is conceptualized as the phase of integration, equilibrium, and tranquility whereas social change is understood as the other phase of crisis, excitement, and creative destruction. Interestingly, this midcentury marriage of concepts survived the critique of structural functionalism articulated in Ann Swidler's (1986) seminal reconceptualization of culture. Her distinction of "settled lives" and "unsettled lives" is often construed through the dualistic lens of routine situations and collective effervescence.

The conflation of these pairs of concepts—mundane time versus sacred time and social order versus social change—is deceptively intuitive. Has it, perhaps, muddled the search for an understanding of the varieties of temporal experience? Recent studies suggest as much (e.g., Tavory and Elia-soph 2013; Rosa 2013). We hazard that this distinction between settled and unsettled is incomplete because it grasps the dynamic of political modernity only awkwardly. This becomes especially clear when we consider the most paradigmatic of modern political crises—revolutions.

(b) Revolutions as Modern Political Crises

Historical sociologists have often approached revolutions as recurrent phenomena demanding explanation via the same theoretical schemas that are used for accounting for other events and patterns of social life. These "structural" accounts view revolutions not as caesuras in time but as outcomes to be explained through the study of networks of alliance, resource mobilization, and political opportunity. This has resulted in a well-developed research program with many exemplars (Gould 1995; Tarrow 2011; Goldstone 2001). However, such work has not adequately considered the felt experiences of revolutionary times.

In response, historical sociologists have shifted to a renewed focus on the experiences of revolution as events. Particularly influential in this regard is the dialogue that has emerged in the last twenty years or so about events and contingency. It built on Sewell's article on the storming of the Bastille (Sewell 1996) and culminated in a series of works on events and eventness that, while not always concerned with revolutions, always takes modern

revolutions as at least a reference point (Clemens 2007; Wagner-Pacifici 2010; Ermakoff 2015; Arjomand 2019). These works recognize revolutions as involving the lived experience of temporal rupture as a key dimension of the disruption of social and political structure.

However, while Sewell clearly states that to qualify as events, social occurrences need to be transformative of structures, the prevalent dualistic conception of time risks obscuring and compromising the analytical purchase of “eventfulness,” by subjecting Sewell’s insights to the broader dualism between “settlement” and “unsettlement.” By subsuming Sewell’s histories of the French Revolution in this way (Swidler 2001), a certain purchase on the difficulties attendant to revolutions is lost. Consider an example. Both the “mass incidents”—episodic collective protests—in contemporary China and mass politics during the Cultural Revolution are disruptive, unsettling occurrences. But the former does not attempt or claim political newness; they become such regularized occurrences that officials have developed a multipronged repertoire for “the *quotidian* management of popular unrest” (Lee and Zhang 2013, 1503).¹ What, then, differentiates protests in contemporary China from the systematic attempts at newness pursued in the Cultural Revolution?

Sociologists of revolution have sensed this difficulty and sought ways to articulate how the “new” comes into being in revolutionary crises. In studying the Iranian revolution, Kurzman (2004, 166) insists that scholars must “recognize and reconstruct the lived experience of the moment”: The “instability of the moment and the disruption of routine” is characterized by confusion and ambiguity, which he analyzes through the lens of collective perception. Similarly, Ermakoff (2015) points out that the lived experience of uncertainty should be treated not as exogenous to the explanatory model but as endogenous to it.

Yet, even in Ermakoff’s analysis, the lived experience of newness *named and claimed as newness* struggles to find independent analytical standing and is absorbed in emergent moments of “collective indeterminacy.” In other words, this generic emphasis on contingency is made at the expense of the constitutive role that *political cultures of new time* play in the Great Revolutions (Arjomand 2019; Eisenstadt 1999; Fehér 1987). Different authors struggle to name the ways in which cultural codings of new time are accumulated and communicated. Arjomand insists that a “myth of revolution”

1. In a slightly different fashion, modern capitalism is teeming with celebratory rhetoric of economic and technological “revolutions” but develops market devices to tame fundamental uncertainty and convert it into manageable and profitable risks.

has become a key facet of politics in modernity, and Hannah Arendt (2006) grapples with the seemingly paradoxical appearance of a “revolutionary tradition” in modernity.

Indeed, the notion that revolution becomes a marker of modernity bears further attention. The idea that modernity is itself a *constant crisis*, a fast-moving world of technological innovation and political turbulence, also inflects classical and contemporary social theories. The possibility of newness—new ideas, new politics, technological innovations, new forms of exclusion—is rendered in many classical-era texts as an existential feature of modernity. Marx and Engels famously noted that, in modern capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air,” which beautifully captures the permanence of change in modernity (Berman 1983, 88–129), while Simmel depicted how modern urbanites are constantly encountering new sensations and develop psychological mechanisms to cope (1964, 402–24). The search for political newness in the Great Revolutions has also been grappled with by political theorists from Burke to Arendt ([1963] 2006, 42–47). Political modernity emerges, in part, by invoking the possibility of newness and hence creates highly dynamic tensions and paradoxes. As Koselleck (1985, 39) writes, “[S]ince the future of modern history opens itself as the unknown, it becomes plannable—indeed it must be planned.” And as the arch-conservative critic of modernity Koselleck repeatedly noted with dismay, modernity’s uncertain planning of the future was nowhere more present than in modern *revolutions*.

(c) *Ordinary Time, Carnival Time, and New Time*

Wherever widespread understandings and experiences of change as open-ended and not fixed by past routines emerge, and wherever the cyclical rendering of collective life is upset, it is necessary, then, to theorize beyond Durkheimian dualisms.

We propose instead to distinguish two different kinds of *unordinary* time: the time of conventional collective effervescence, through which actors reinvigorate social life through ritual disruptions; and the time of “newness,” through which actors knowingly experience an uncharted path with an uncertain end. We call the former “carnival time,” following Mikhail Bakhtin, to designate the periodic disruption of social routines, qua *communitas*, during which there is often symbolic disruption and inversion of social order (e.g., charivari in Medieval Europe or rituals of rebellion in traditional Southeast Africa), followed by the restoration and reinvigoration of routine life (Turner 1969). By contrast, we call the latter “new time,” during which a

new social order is attempted, at least by a significant number of people, and social actors do not have sufficient existing repertoires to cope with and seek to create new forms of action (Swidler 1986; Jansen 2016).

Unlike the duality of ordinary time and carnival time, new time is a particularly modern modality of time. It is revolutionary politics since the French Revolution that has introduced new time as an ever-present possibility, in which *le peuple* can intentionally carry out collective political action to transform society and culture (Arendt 2006; Eisenstadt 1999). New time, thus, is a temporal anticipation that sees the future as an ongoing “event” and an open-ended process of collective transformation (Tavory and Elia-soph 2013; Wagner-Pacifici 2017; Badiou 2007).

The moderns struggle to organize the relationship between ordinary time, carnival time, and new time and, thereby, to inflect social order with a temporal dimension. When newness is on the horizon, what actors experience is not so much a transformation from ordinary time to carnival time, relatively well understood in Durkheimian terms, but rather an interpretive and highly political struggle to *tell the difference* between carnival time and new time. It is this ambiguity of unsettledness, in which carnival time and new time are set against each other, that characterizes modern political crises.

Let us begin with some examples. Concertgoers, for example, may perceive an upcoming music festival as a usual celebration of fun, drugs, sex, and peace, whereby they “let go” of dreary work obligations, which they expect to return to reinvigorated—this is carnival time. But certain festivals can become loaded with the meaning of constituting a radical break from previous forms of politics and sociality and may be conceived and retroactively narrated as an inauguration of new time (e.g., Woodstock). Or, a group of protesters may strive to create a movement free of the problems associated with old guard leaders and open to ongoing transformation (new time) but ultimately find themselves beset with “politics as usual” (ordinary time), thus indicating that their brief moment of euphoric disruption was, viewed in retrospect, carnival time. The quintessential example of the modern struggle with these ambiguities of the two kinds of *unordinary* time is revolutions, which Lenin (1962, 113) described as “the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited,” an imagery blending the senses of carnival time and new time.

While both carnival time and new time can be times when societies experience collective effervescence, collective effervescence is much harder to come by in new time than in carnival time, when iterative ritual practices and familiar scripts are sufficient to achieve collective effervescence (Alexander 2004). By contrast, the collective effervescence of new time is an

emergent phenomenon that depends upon contingent and unpremeditated creative processes, as Sewell (1996) shows in the classical case of the storming of the Bastille. Thus, in a nontransformative context, a rhythmic model of ordinary time and carnival time suffices. Whereas, in a transformative context such as revolutions, a triadic model of ordinary time, carnival time, and new time is necessary.

At the core of modern revolutionary politics, according to Antonio Gramsci (1971), is the question of Jacobinism, or the “modern prince”—a revolutionary force taking charge of steering history forward *into new time* through creating and shaping collective will. Since the French Revolution, this politics has been tied to the idea, organization, and accession to power of vanguard parties like the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks, and the Chinese communists.

(d) *New Time and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

To explore the *politics of time* in revolutions, we examine closely the Chinese Cultural Revolution, for three methodological reasons. First, the Maoists’ radical aspiration, from its very beginning, for “an unprecedented revolution in human history” (*People’s Daily* editorial, June 1, 1966) and “700 million critics” of the old world (*People’s Daily* editorial, June 8, 1966) makes the CCR a suitable case for studying the “Jacobin dimension of modernity” in revolutions (Eisenstadt 1999). Following Fehér (1987) and Eisenstadt (1999), we define Jacobinism as projects of totalistic transformation of society through unifying mass political actions as an expression of the people’s will (see also Arjomand 2019). Embodying this Jacobin revolutionary tradition, the Maoists embraced and pursued new time.

Second, what is peculiar and significant about the CCR is that it radically disrupted an established (and avowedly Jacobin) party’s organizational control over the project of creating a new time, when the vanguard party (of 1949) was itself interpreted as a *backward-looking bureaucracy* and carriers of “politics as usual.” Through and after this disruption, it further accentuates the contingency and uncertainty of making a new time through mass political actions.²

2. These two reasons make the CCR distinct from mass bureaucratic politics, which often occurred in China between 1949 and 1965. What MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006) call “Mao’s Last Revolution” involved a massive disruption of economy, social structure, and political institutions, including the resettlement of approximately 16 million young people in rural areas. The core of this transformation and disruption

Third, the CCR is also characterized by the Maoists' ultimate failure in performing into being, sustaining, and institutionalizing the experiences of revolutionary new time vis-à-vis carnival time and ordinary time. The stark contrast between the CCR's radical aspiration for newness, its highly volatile and fluid process, and its catastrophic failure throws into sharp relief the politics of new time in modern revolutions, thus revealing dynamics that are widespread but often only partially visible in other revolutions.

Our analysis begins with the situational ambiguities that confronted Cultural Revolutionaries. *Situational ambiguity* is a central characteristic of revolutionary moments, wherein actors struggle to take stances and articulate their positions (Walder 2006; see also Kurzman 2004; Ermakoff 2015). Yet the *hermeneutic* nature of such ambiguity is underappreciated. By "hermeneutic ambiguities," we mean the situations in which the languages used to describe and navigate the world contain multiple meanings, exhibit gaps between how the world was coded and how it was experienced, and contain unsettling contradictions that destabilize social actors' vision and division of the world (Bourdieu 1985; Glaeser 2011). In what follows, we show that many of the hermeneutic ambiguities that Cultural Revolutionaries were up against involved the discernment of new time from carnival time, the identification of the proper agents of new time, and the reorganization of authority relations in new time.

To attain their avowed goal of an unprecedented revolution peopled by "700 million" new men, Cultural Revolutionaries were compelled to overcome hermeneutic ambiguities by staging collective performances that would render "real" the experiences of revolutionary new time. These collective performances involved social actors' bold and often dramatic speech acts, speaking to the fleeting moments, above and beyond actors' mobilization of relational and discursive resources (Reed 2013; Austin 1962). When such performances succeed, they momentarily attain what Goffman (1983) called "felicity's condition," in which such speech acts come off as referring to real things, articulating moral goods, and defining the operative hierarchies or authoritative views of a situation.

In revolutions, some actors succeed in attaining such performative felicity, by defining a moment in a certain way, thus delivering themselves and their comrades from hermeneutic ambiguities—and often achieve power as a result. Sewell (1996), for example, notes how the initially ambiguous act of

occurred between 1966 and 1968, in which collective violence and political uncertainty created a "revolutionary situation" (Tilly 1993). This disruption makes the CCR a pertinent, albeit exceptional, case for the study of revolutionary politics (Ermakoff 2014).

storming the Bastille came to be widely understood as an exercise in popular sovereignty, with momentous consequences. As Wagner-Pacifci (2010, 1364) writes, “[P]erformatives assume a world in the process of destabilization and restabilization. Actors in this world intervene in the world to alter it and/or undergo these transformations through their orders, declarations, vows, signatures, and so forth.”

Theories of performance have often noted that the pursuit of felicity enacts a core paradox of social life’s performative dimension. On the one hand, performances actualize the contingency and creativity that attends action, because when they succeed, they engage in world building or making. In this regard, performances enact realities that, after the fact, may be retroactively attributed to the world; performance is *poesis*. Yet, on the other hand, performances, as they engage in this creativity, must be legible (to some audience) to be felicitous. Therefore, performances inevitably feature citationality, referring to previous performances or, more precisely, their traces in symbol and memory; performance is *mimesis*.

The transformative publicity of performative power (Adut 2008; Reed 2013) exists in the space between *poesis* and *mimesis*. In revolutions, however, this tension between *poesis* and *mimesis*—which, formally speaking, is a feature of all performances—is brought to an exceptionally high pitch. For the demand for and projection of new time imbue the desire for revolutionary action with emotional significance and often violent consequences for those who fail to perform felicitously. At the same time, because of these stakes, the legibility criterion for felicitous performance takes on a new bite: One *must be read* as revolutionary. Actors meet this challenge in part by selecting lines of action from their repertoire of past and present revolutionary examples, whose congeniality with the moment is anything but preordained (Pang 2017). Thus, in the pursuit of new time, the way in which performatives are always new and not new becomes a central focal point of politics itself.

The CCR, as we show below, was deeply shaped by dialectic processes between hermeneutic ambiguities about new time and the emergent attempts by Cultural Revolutionaries to overcome these ambiguities and to attain performative felicity and collective effervescence. These attempts sometimes succeeded momentarily, when a combination of fortuitous circumstances and the Maoists’ strategic acumen engendered performative felicity. Yet, ultimately, they did not sustain themselves, to such an extent that Cultural Revolutionaries’ radical endeavor to embrace new time became a grand failure.³ Hence, the Maoists were compelled to carry out alternative

3. As mentioned above, Jansen (2016) theorizes political innovation as stemming from actors’ creative responses to problem situations. Sendroi (2022) introduces the

lines of action to cast “new time” out of existence. This failed Jacobinism of the CCR paved the way for the subsequent rejection of mass politics, which in turn conditioned post-Mao China’s aversion to political change and its embrace of gradualism and depoliticization. The contentious struggle over the control of the distinction between the three forms of time and the boundaries of the temporal experiences, hence, is constitutive of the dynamics of the CCR and its consequences.

II. The Chinese Cultural Revolution and Its Eventful Politics of Time

We employ an interpretative approach that is sensitive to the interaction between actors’ speech acts and flows of events. This approach can cast new light on certain common (mis)perceptions of the CCR.

Recent decades have seen a rich and vibrant literature on the CCR. Yet, it tends to bifurcate between sociological inquiry into its power conflicts and organizational dynamics with insufficient attention to its cultural and discursive dimension (Andreas 2009; Walder 2009; Su 2011) and cultural-historical scholarship on its material cultures, arts, and discourses, which often detaches them from the flows of contentious events that they spoke to (Mittler 2016; Pang 2017; for an exception, see Wu 2014).

Our interpretative approach pieces actors’ wording, phrasing, and interpreting together with the flows of events that they responded to and propelled. So, while many of the events and political lexicons we examine are familiar to scholars of the CCR, it is *piecing them together to capture the constitutive role of the politics of time* that characterizes our approach. Our goal is to unveil how examining the politics of time helps us better contextualize discourses and identify their practical purchase therein. For example, we discover below that the notion of “continuous revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” (*wuchan jieji zhuanzhengxia jixu geming*), which

concept of “guesswork” for understanding the politics of uncertainty, considering how actors—even highly placed actors—may not grasp a fraught and unfamiliar political situation. Our work here articulates these aspects while incorporating the insight from Andreas Glaeser’s *Political Epistemics* (2011), which approaches the contingencies of politics, and indeed the collapse of the East German state, as occurring through a “more or less regular or irregular thicket of crosscutting and intersecting differentiations and integrations, that is, of understandings” (118). Into Glaeser’s “hermeneutic institutionalism” (2014) we inject a distinctively performative dimension and emphasize how power dynamics in the pursuit of newness can depend on the felicitous, if temporary, resolution of the hermeneutic ambiguities, “crosscuttings,” and contradictions. We thank an anonymous reviewer for *Sociological Theory* for helping us see these connections.

the conventional literature takes to be the radical theory with which Mao launched the CCR, was in fact formulated precisely when Mao began to retreat from the Jacobin aspiration for new time.

This processually oriented interpretative approach helps us address two common (mis)perceptions of the CCR, which apparently contradict our choice of the CCR as a pertinent case to examine Jacobinism and politics of time in modern revolutions. First, it is a commonplace perception that the CCR was merely a series of Machiavellian power plays by Mao to oust his political rivals and its Jacobin, revolutionary rhetoric was simply the “Chairman’s new clothes,” as Simon Leys (1981), a former Belgian Maoist sympathizer, sarcastically put it. Second, many post-Mao Chinese reformers and intellectuals believe that there was nothing modern about the CCR due to its anti-institutional rhetoric and its cult of personality and violence. This, the argument runs, only reflected Mao’s residual “feudal despotism,” his “incorrect” ideas about Chinese socialism, and the ways he was misguided by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four (Sullivan 1990).

Let us address these two perceptions. First, undoubtedly, Mao’s motivation to hold onto power played a significant role in the politics of the CCR. Yet, his personal rivalry with colleagues like Liu Shaoqi was interwoven with discernible policy disagreements (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006), which encoded the politics of time in Chinese socialism, as we show below. Furthermore, the Jacobin desire for “a historically unprecedented revolution in human history” that both leaders and mass participants of the CCR professed is a widely noted aspect of the lived experiences in its early phases (Mittler 2016; Yang 2016). It was eventually superseded, after the demobilization of mass participation in 1968–69 (and especially after Lin Biao’s mysterious plane crash in 1971), by popular disillusionment among mass participants that they had been used by the Maoists for their personal power grab. Reducing the CCR to Mao’s personal power plays and writing off its Jacobin dimension is thus not so much a good description of the actual dynamics of the CCR as an accurate reflection of the *post*-CCR popular disillusionment, which is an outcome of it.

Similarly, the post-Mao official and intellectual verdicts on the unmodern or antimodern nature of the CCR due to its anti-institutional rhetoric, Mao’s personality cult, and violence certainly point to important aspects of the CCR. However, these verdicts hinge upon a rather narrow definition of modernity qua legal-rational order. Such verdicts are themselves a reflection of the post-Mao dominance of anti-revolutionary, gradualist understandings of politics and their attending bureaucratic and conservative orientations—orientations that are inflected by post hoc narratives of the CCR (Andreas

2009). In other words, gradualism came about largely through the Dengist *disavowal* of Cultural Revolution Jacobinism, which in turn was conditioned by Mao's own *disowning* of Jacobinism in 1968 (which we dissect below). In short, both perceptions of the CCR—as Mao's Machiavellianism or as anti-modern feudalism—derive from retrospective constructions that were the consequences of the failure of the Jacobinism of the CCR. Exactly how this Jacobinism unraveled still awaits explanation, a task that this essay takes on.

Indeed, once we have uncovered the performative politics of time in the CCR, the *suppression* of the revolution's Jacobin dimension, in part by Mao himself, and the disavowal of the CCR by post-Mao Chinese officials take on a new significance. *Only by understanding the politics of time of the CCR and the subsequent disowning and disavowal of its Jacobinism can we understand contemporary China's rejection of mass politics, its fear of uncertainty induced by mass politics, and its hegemonic discourse of gradualism and stability maintenance.*

In sum, while the Jacobin politics of time has been an important thrust in modern politics since the French Revolution, the CCR and its aftermath throw into sharp relief its essential *problematicues*. Because the CCR accentuates causal processes that are more hidden elsewhere, we take it as an “exceptional case” for theorizing temporal experiences in modern revolutions (Ermakoff 2014).

III. Data and Methods

The analysis that follows results from our consultation of a wide range of primary sources and secondary literature, collected over two decades as part of a larger research project. The primary sources include newspapers, official documents, meeting minutes, mass organization publications, memoirs, diaries, and official chronicles of key events and actors, as well as personal papers and self-printed memoirs of participants. Although there is no state archival institution on the CCR, we benefit from a large body of publicized or leaked archival materials, most of which are available in databases and source compilations compiled by overseas collectors (such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution Database). Some additional materials for this project were purchased from flea markets in Beijing and online or obtained through personal connections.

Our focus is to provide a thick description of the processual interaction between eventful dynamics and actors' speech acts. We trace how both the Jacobin aspiration for new time and its frustration by hermeneutic ambi-

guities drove political momenta and prompted actors' responses through disruptive acts and public declarations of interpreting (and justifying or condemning) those acts and how, after two distinct momentary successes (with performative felicity), the Jacobin aspiration failed.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in the following steps. First, we introduce the landscape of meaning in the politics of time in the beginning of the CCR, upon which participants made sense of their lived experience, and we identify the main hermeneutic ambiguities that they struggled with as they entered the scene. Then, we trace three timepoints that were, by most academic accounts, central to the CCR—the beginning “50 days,” the pivotal Shanghai January Storm, and the demobilization stage after the Wuhan Incident. Through fine-grained analysis of these timepoints, we illustrate how actors confronted situational ambiguity through acts of interpretation and “illocutionary force” (Austin 1962; Reed 2020, 75–79) that involved competing claims over the distinction between the three forms of time, until Mao completely disavowed the CCR's Jacobin aspiration for new time. We conclude with a discussion of how our theoretical framework of performative politics of time helps explain the post-Mao rejection of political newness, underscores the need of scholarly intervention into the intersection between temporal experiences and revolutionary politics, and reframes the sociological understanding of political modernity as that which takes place over the energy, hope, chaos, and problems for interpretation and social order created by the possibility of “new time.”

IV. The Jacobin Aspiration of the CCR and Its Attending Ambiguities

(a) Jacobinizing “Cultural Revolution”

It is a commonplace statement that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. This statement, however, as Wu (2022) contends, obscures the multiple and changing meanings of the term “cultural revolution” itself, which are crucial for understanding the politics of 1966–68 (Meisner 1999, 295).

In mid-1960s China, the terms “the cultural revolution” (*wenhua geming*) and “the great cultural revolution” (*wenhua da geming*) carried three consecutive meanings.⁴ Initially, the terms referred to literary and artistic inno-

4. A search for the phrase “cultural revolution” (*wenhua geming*) in the database of *People's Daily* finds 1,403 articles containing it from its first appearance in May 1947 to

vation that was accessible to and rooted in the experiences of the masses. Originating in the Chinese Communist wartime headquarters Yan'an in the early 1940s, it was seen as part of the ideological transformation that accompanied the Communist-led political and social revolution. While politically motivated, this notion posited the agent of the "cultural revolution" to be party-trained professionals in the literary and artistic domains. This meaning was intensified during the Great Leap Forward as the ideological accompaniment of this ambitious socioeconomic transformational project. This was the accepted meaning before 1962, which located "cultural revolution" in ordinary time.

However, in 1962–65, Mao initiated a broad offensive against "bourgeois" influence in the ideological apparatus, which Wu (2022) aptly dubs "Mao's culture war." A second meaning of "cultural revolution" thus emerged. Although this offensive was never formally launched, its crystallization can be dated to the establishment of the Cultural Revolution Small Group in July 1964 (Goldman 1973). From then on, party officials and intellectuals referred to "this cultural revolution" as an ongoing process. It was also in this sense that party officials spoke of "cultural revolution" when the ideological offensive led to major purges. This second meaning located "cultural revolution" in carnival time, as a form of periodic ideological rectification and purification.

The third meaning of "cultural revolution" was mass politics, which Mao (1969, 288) would characterize in February 1967 as "a form, a method, to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-round way and from below." This meaning only emerged in the summer of 1966 during student mobilization. It is also this third meaning that people today associate with the Cultural Revolution. Only this third meaning gestured toward a new time.⁵

June 1960 and 177 articles from July 1961 to May 1966; for "great cultural revolution" (*wenhua da geming*), the number is 21 articles in the first phase and 119 articles in the second. The pattern indicates that these two phrases differed in degree of emphasis but were often used interchangeably.

5. We differ from Yiching Wu's (2022) insightful revisiting of Maurice Meisner's (1999) notion of two "cultural revolutions," in that we believe the Cultural Revolution carried out by professionals under the guidance of the party ("ordinary time") was meaningfully different from the culture war waged by Mao since 1962 ("carnival time").

(b) Antecedent Hermeneutic Ambiguities

In the summer of 1966, actors entered a scene where they had to engage in the guesswork (Sendroiu 2022) of determining the temporal anchoring of the “cultural revolution” between the second and third meanings, between carnival time and new time. The party media that propagated the official message and the concrete party organizations in charge of interpreting it suggested mixed and conflicting guesses: The former seemed to suggest a radical break whereas the latter suggested a reiterative party rectification and purification.

On the one hand, *People’s Daily*, the party’s mouthpiece, announced on June 1, 1966, in its editorial, that the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” that they were about to embark upon was “unprecedented in human history.” Another resounding *People’s Daily* editorial on June 8 vowed to turn the Chinese people into “700 million critics” of “the old world, the old ideology and culture, and old customs and habits.” The Jacobin aspiration for radical newness was very apparent.

Meanwhile, the Party Center deployed hundreds of work teams to campuses and cultural agencies (including *People’s Daily*) to lead the Cultural Revolution, following a familiar approach used in the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 and the Four Cleans (*siqing*) Campaign in 1964. Party officials viewed the “cultural revolution” as another carnival time, based on their bureaucratic management of the dualistic distinction of time in a non-transformative context, since socialist transformation had been declared complete in 1956 and the emphasis on building socialism since the 1950s signaled a new age of peaceful mundane activities: Socialist China entered ordinary time, occasionally punctuated by carnival times of purification campaigns.

Amid these conflicting signals, the students—the masses in the cultural and educational domains—were not tabula rasa passively responding to manipulation from the media or party organizations but were predisposed to new time due to their own experiences of communist temporalities. In the years preceding the CCR, students were baffled by the contradiction between the glorification of the past communist revolution—widespread in state propaganda—and the “ordinary time” they were assigned as builders of socialism, inheriting the fruits of the earlier revolution. The glorification of past revolutions created a yearning for their own moment of heroic struggle. Yet, they were prohibited from emulating the actions of past revolutionaries and instead encouraged to follow the examples of everyday role models of socialist construction (X. Xu 2017, 228). Meanwhile, the ongoing antago-

nism with the United States and escalating tension with the USSR suggested an imminent break—possibly interpretable as a “revolutionary” break—for Chinese society. The heightened Jacobinist rhetoric of *People’s Daily* suggested to them a mission more radical than a carnival time, a chance of their own to step into a revolutionary new time and to overcome the contradiction in their experiences with communist temporalities.

The students’ yearning to break free from the “building socialism” dualistic distinction of time imposed by the party bureaucracy was best captured in the counterfeit “July 3 directive” that was widely circulated among students on the eve of the CCR. This “directive” shows the students’ intense desire to embrace “new time.” Its first half was indeed based on Mao’s actual comments from July 3, 1965, about lessening students’ workloads. Yet, it was the counterfeit second half that animated students, including the first Red Guard organization, founded at Qinghua High School. According to one of its leaders, on May 30, the day after they formed the group to combat the school’s authorities and two days before Mao announced the “historically unprecedented” aspiration of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards held an assembly to read aloud this so-called directive from Mao:

“How precious and important the next few decades will be for the future of the motherland and the fate of humanity. . . . Youth of our generation will turn our poor motherland into a great socialist country and will directly participate in the battle of burying imperialism. . . . Chinese youth with will and ambition must fight for life in order to accomplish our great historical mission.” Many present burst into tears and even out crying. (Luo 2009, 19)

The rumored but counterfeit “directive” directly blended the alleviation of students’ mundane workload and their breaking into new time.

These contending interpretative tendencies formed the texture of hermeneutic ambiguities that actors sought to unravel. The question was, *Upon which kind of temporal landscape* were the everyday protentions, life trajectories, and projects of individuals taking place (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013)? Was the task ahead for a new generation the long climb up the mountain toward socialism, a periodic recharging of socialist energy, or the braving of a new revolutionary storm?

This ambiguity, which we will expound below, bred violence (Gould 2003). Yet these disruptive acts raised more uncertainties about state power and the interpretation, contested both inside and outside the state, of the distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable violence. Ambiguities also

arose concerning the subcategorization of unjustifiable violence, the normative status of which ranged from redeemable excess to outright antirevolutionary sabotage. We examine three moments of the CCR, in which violent and disruptive events amid uncertainty prompted key performative acts by Mao and other actors to “clarify” the revolutionary situation. These performances were then subjected to extensive interpretation and reinterpretation, becoming the reference point for further performances.

The first moment—the beginning “50 days”—saw a disruptive event—the June 18 Incident—becoming the focal point of public contestation and performance, the result of which was momentary success by the students and Maoists in bringing new time into being, resolving extant hermeneutic ambiguities, and generating emergent collective effervescence. Jacobinism broke out of the party bureaucracy’s dualistic management of time. In the process, the vanguard party’s bureaucracy itself was declared unaligned with new time.

Yet this attainment of “felicity’s condition” (Goffman 1983) was precarious. Ensuing factionalism beset the Jacobin aspiration for unifying mass action. Hence, in the second moment, the Maoists, with industrial workers’ participation, attempted a second pivotal performance of Jacobinism, a strategy that succeeded in Shanghai yet caused more disastrous factional violence nationwide.

In the third and last moment, Mao and his comrades attempted to restore order by rebuilding the party. They refurbished the party’s dualistic management of time and crafted the theory of “continuous revolution,” rebranding the CCR as a continuation of the 1949 revolution (carnival time), instead of a “historically unprecedented” radical break (new time), as in Jacobinism. Yet, when even that failed to rein in factionalism, Mao directed the state apparatus to coercively repress the CCR mass movement. In this denouement, the grassroots political participation that had been key to the public interpretation of the events of 1966–68 as “revolutionary” was undone. Thus, although performative felicity was attained at two key moments during this intense period, the overall process from 1966 to 1968 turned out to be a performative failure: As Meisner (1999, 291) put it, “[I]t was an attempt that failed, and it was a failure on a grand scale, dominating and distorting the social and political life . . . and tarnishing the historical image of Mao in the process.”

The CCR, therefore, was indeed a process of unraveling new time, in the double sense that its newness was first made and eventually unmade. It is also paradigmatic for the study of the performance of new time, because of the way in which it involved dramatic successes and failures in the register of felicity.

V. Unraveling Revolutionary Time (1966–68)

(a) *The Beginning "50 Days": June–July 1966*

The first episode of rupture arrived in mid-June as the spontaneous student violence that accompanied the denunciation of "revisionist" party officials, professors, and educators who had just been purged in universities and high schools. The event that drew the most attention was the June 18 Incident at Beijing University.

On June 18, while the work team at Beijing University was in a meeting, militant students dragged out of detention centers approximately sixty members of the previous university leadership who had been disgraced and staged a struggle session against them. Modeling the session after the peasant jacqueries in 1927 that Mao described in his "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan," students accused these members of "the black gang" of carrying out a "revisionist education line," forced them to confess their crimes, and beat them. Similar incidents occurred on other campuses around the same time.

It is important to understand that these struggle sessions were a flagrant breach of the rules of political action that the party-dispatched work team followed. While some popular violence against the disgraced was allowed within the mass campaign protocol, the work teams typically had the authority to halt excessive violence and label it as "overburning" (*guohuo*). This neutral term did not require further discipline for or confession by those who committed the violence. However, if the violence was considered too excessive, work teams might step forward to punish those who were deemed culpable. In the case of the June 18 Incident, the work team branded the student violence as "anti-revolutionary" instead of "overburning," placing immense pressure on the students involved to publicly admit their wrongdoing. Both the party administration headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping and the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) composed of Mao's close associates supported this condemnation, making it a negative example nationwide. Many students confessed to being under "bad influence" when they assaulted the ousted leaders and teachers (H. Chen 2006, 37–39), accepting the interpretation imposed by the work team and CCRG. However, the most intransigent students contested being labeled as anti-revolutionary and claimed that their violence was an act of revolution. An intense debate followed.

The university became embroiled in a heated interpretive struggle over whether the June 18 Incident was revolutionary or anti-revolutionary and,

implicitly, how to fit “summer of 1966” into Chinese revolutionary temporalities (H. Chen 2006, 31, 54; Y. Li 2013; see also chapter 1). Central to this debate was whether the spontaneous tactics of the peasant jacqueries in 1927 were appropriate in 1966, given the established protocol in a socialist society under Communist leadership. Underneath this debate was the ambiguity about time. *In asking whether the June 18 Incident was revolutionary or anti-revolutionary, the students were pondering whether the present was the beginning of a great revolutionary break—a “new time”—or the continuation of party-led mass campaigns that were a cyclical part of socialist China—“carnival time.”* Whether one was on the right side, a question vital for individual students’ political standing, thus hinged on the temporal categorization of the mimetic performance on June 18.

For students who insisted that the violence of June 18 was revolutionary, the denouncing of this violence by the work team made the work team anti-revolutionary. On July 12, a big-character poster appeared, accusing the work team of “suppressing the revolutionary masses” (*yazhi geming qunzhong*) due to their condemnation of the June 18 Incident (see chapter 1). This accusation called into question the revolutionary status of the party bureaucracy embodied by the work team—it leaned on the possibility, available in Mao’s texts and elsewhere and thus part of the meaningful background of politics, that the party bureaucracy was susceptible to ossification, conservatism, and degeneration.

Upon Mao’s return to Beijing on July 18, 1966, after traveling in the provinces since November 12, 1965, he engaged in meetings with party elites to discuss recent events, especially the debate surrounding the June 18 Incident. In these meetings, Mao refrained from endorsing the work teams’ actions and demonstrated a growing appreciation for the militant students’ position (Pang et al. 2013, 5:536, 600).

On the nights of July 25 and 26, two public debates were held at Beijing University, attended by thousands of students. Mao sent his wife, Jiang Qing, and close associates in the CCRG to the debates. In the beginning of the first night, the two divergent views on the June 18 Incident were presented on relatively equal footing, and associates of Mao acted primarily as listeners. As the debate heated up, however, Jiang Qing and other CCRG personnel began to interject, signaling their disagreement with the work team’s (and their own) earlier verdict that the June 18 Incident was anti-revolutionary (Zhang 1999, 37). In the face of this quickly developing situation, in which public statements by Mao’s wife and his known close associates suggested that the students, rather than the work team, were the revolutionaries, defenders of the work team conceded that the work team

had little grasp of the situation on the ground and had made mistakes that, they suggested, were wrong in consequence but not intention. This led to a moment of high social drama.

Kang Sheng, senior adviser of the CCRG, suddenly interrupted the defenders of the work team with the utterance, “Chairman Mao had never sent any work team” (W. Bu 2008, 177). This dramatic countermove performed into public existence the guilt of the work team in “suppressing the revolutionary masses” and, by implication, the reversal of the political standing of the mimetic performance of June 18. Here, two different layers of meaning were fused together, mobilizing heightened emotions and collective attention into extraordinary illocutionary force. Specifically, the *fact* that Mao (who was in the provinces at the time) did not, in the most literal sense, authorize those particular work teams was fused with the *political position* that the work teams were devoid of revolutionary status. The constative truth of the former was mobilized to enhance the performative felicity of the latter, which in turn enacted the meaning that this was a new, revolutionary time, a time when the modus operandi of periodic party purification through work teams no longer applied.

When the meeting was reconvened on the second night, the tide had clearly shifted toward the view that the June 18 Incident was revolutionary and the work team was culpable in suppressing it. Chen Boda, head of the CCRG, openly supported this view and suggested that the work team be recalled. The meeting quickly transformed from a public debate into an improvised condemnation of the work team and its head, Zhang Chengxian. Supporters of the work team were sidelined (Y. Li 2013), and Li Xuefeng, head of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, eventually announced the work team’s recall. Jiang Qing proposed establishing a Cultural Revolution committee or congress at the university, urging students to “take the revolution in your own hands” (W. Bu 2008, 178).

This moment set off a cascade of performance. On July 27, a member of the CCRG announced the recall of all work teams in a district-wide gathering of student activists. A denunciation meeting to condemn the wrongdoings of work teams was quickly put together for the night of July 28. Toward the end of this meeting, Qinghua High School Red Guards presented Jiang Qing with copies of their three big-character posters from late June and early July, in which they articulated their theory of “rebellion is justified” (see chapter 1). On July 29, party leaders Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping admitted in a public meeting with students in the People’s Hall that they were “old revolutionaries who are running into new problems” and had much to learn from the young revolutionary students. Toward the end of the meet-

ing, while Liu was finishing his speech, Mao walked onstage, waving to the students who were enthralled by his sudden appearance. It was a dramatic show of Mao's strength (W. Bu 2008, 183).

Provincial leaders were flown in for an emergency meeting beginning on August 1, in which Mao and his associates pushed through their agenda of condemning work teams, sacking Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, revamping the central administration, and passing the Sixteen Points directive, which proclaimed: "let the masses educate themselves" and "liberate themselves" in the storm of the "Great Cultural Revolution" (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 93). Concurrently, Mao wrote a reply to the Qinghua High School Red Guards, expressing his support for their call that "rebellion is justified."

This cascade rearticulated revolutionary meanings. The preceding ambiguities were rendered into a clear categorization of events into good and evil and the affirmation of the use of violence by good against evil. The violence of June 18 at Beijing University, once the subject of a debate as to whether it was "anti-revolutionary" or merely "overburning," was now interpreted as *acts of the revolutionary masses* and an unalloyed good. The present was now clearly understood as a revolutionary break, a "new time," as the *modus operandi* of work teams were discredited. Party officials had to reinvent their revolutionary identity in new ways, against the "politics as usual" of the bureaucracy.

This clarity was, however, short-lived. As perpetrators of the violence in June had been named agents of revolution and the work teams withdrew, more violent acts were performed in the name of exercising revolutionary will. The Red Guards, composed mostly of party officials' children, began assaulting teachers, school officials, and fellow students whom they deemed reactionary or unreformed. They raided houses, destroyed properties, and beat civilians considered feudal, bourgeois, or agents of imperialism, in an effort to destroy the "Four Olds" (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits) as outlined in the Sixteen Points directive. This was known as the "Red Terror of August." Yet, soon, they were challenged by opposing factions of students who decried their entitlement via parentage—the so-called bloodline theory—as feudalistic and their violence as reactionary. They argued that the revolution should target party officials in general rather than solely focusing on educators and traditional campaign targets that the Red Guards' mimetic performances of revolution aimed at.

These challenges activated new hermeneutic ambiguities regarding the proper agents of new time in vexing form (Andreas 2009; Walder 2006,

2009; Yang 2016). The ensuing months saw increasing factionalism,⁶ first among students and then among industrial workers, that frustrated the Jacobin aspiration of unifying mass action in new time. This stalemate formed the backdrop of the Shanghai January Storm, during which the Maoists attempted another breakthrough performance.⁷

(b) *Power Seizure in the Shanghai January Storm*

By the end of 1966, industrial workers in Shanghai were divided between two contending alliances. On the one hand, “rebel” factions (*zaofan pai*) emerged, often taking the informal workforce as their base, to articulate many preexisting worker grievances (e.g., low wages, managerial abuse, informal contracts, lack of benefits). On the other hand, “loyalist” factions, known as the Scarlet Guards (*chiweidui*), were encouraged by local party officials who tried to create a protective belt of workers to defend themselves (Walder 1978, 2019; Wu 2014, 111–16). Rebel workers targeted local officials whom they deemed responsible for their unjust situation, prompting front-line party officials to concede to their economic demands. But this concession would have unintended interpretive consequences.

For these concessions spawned further ambiguities regarding political alignments and identifications. In Shanghai, the “loyalist” Scarlet Guards saw these economic concessions to rebel organizations as a betrayal at their expense and decided also to “rebel.” They stormed the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee (SMPC) administrative compound on December 27, 1966, to make their own “revolutionary” demands. They thus took advantage of the inherent precarity of “new time”—when what was and was not

6. Explaining factional formation is a classic topic in the literature on the CCR (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Lee 1980) and has been renewed recently by Joel Andreas’s (2009) and Andrew Walder’s (2006, 2009) vigorous scholarship. We introduce a different perspective by asking how the contention over the rights to step into new time both within and beyond factional struggle shaped the trajectory of the CCR.

7. The iconic Shanghai January Storm has attracted much scholarly attention, which culminates in historian Xun Li’s magnum opus (2015). In contrast to the existing literature, which focuses on networks of alliance, resource mobilization, and political opportunity, our phenomenological approach reconstructs the political semiosis through which political opportunity and mobilization were perceived and experienced and of which the struggle over new time was constitutive. Hence, it explains better the symbolic logic of political momenta, such as the public meaning making of “economism.”

“revolutionary” was open for conflicting reinterpretations. Although their occupation was quickly crushed by rebel organizations led by the Workers Revolutionary Rebels General Headquarters (WGHQ), many of the Scarlet Guards attempted to travel to Beijing to petition. This exacerbated an already confusing interpretive situation.

Moreover, the economic concessions made by frontline officials to workers made the factional struggle appear to be a matter of negotiation over material interests, which to the Maoists seemed unaligned with the new time of revolution. For economic negotiations and concessions were seen as, and seen as likely to be seen as, dissolving the revolutionary project in which the masses were unified against “capitalist roaders.” Such economic negotiations were interpreted as mundane matters that would drag revolutionary politics back into ordinary time. Materially speaking, these concessions also prompted more workers to desert their posts and join collective bargaining struggles, thus leading to widespread work stoppages. This situation exposed Mao and his associates to the criticism from pragmatic party administrators that their revolutionary project had economically paralyzed the country. Thus, an ambiguous and dangerous stalemate came into being, as the articulation of “true” revolutionary consciousness over economic concessions to workers threatened to paralyze production.

All these contradictions came to a head in the beginning of January 1967. Initially, Mao had Premier Zhou Enlai instruct Chen Pixian, head of the SMPC, to meet with leaders of workers’ organizations to gain control of the situation. To coordinate the plan, he dispatched two trusted envoys, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, who were, respectively, vice head and standing member of the CCRG, to Shanghai.

Upon Zhang and Yao’s arrival on January 4, local party officials, literati radicals, Red Guards, and rebel workers were already staging actions that Mao did not expect, suggesting a radical new way out of the interpretive stalemate. These actions helped Mao devise a breakthrough performance. They recast the economic concessions to rebel workers through the discourse of “economism” (*jingji zhuyi*) as a profane and pernicious influence stoked by party conservatives, from whom workers needed to seize power to attain the political consciousness necessary for revolutionary new time.

On January 1, Chen Pixian, upon Zhou Enlai’s instruction, convened an emergency meeting with rebel leaders to address the economic paralysis. The meeting did not begin well. Rebel leaders distrusted Chen and did not believe he had the mandate to address the issue. Eventually, they reached a compromise and issued a declaration on January 4, the “Message to All the People of Shanghai.” The “Message” called for workers to return to work to

“take firm hold of the revolution and promote production.” Yet in the “Message,” the rebel leaders insisted on holding the SMPC and Scarlet Guards solely to blame for work stoppages and economic breakdown, a demand that Chen reluctantly accepted just to move the agenda forward. Chen signed the declaration together with representatives from eleven rebel organizations and had two hundred thousand copies distributed throughout Shanghai (P. Chen 2005, 105; J. Xu 2005, 23; Wu 2014, 116).

Meanwhile, administrative breakdown had prompted some audacious rebels to fill the power vacuum. On January 3, lower-level staff at the *Wen Hui Daily*, Shanghai’s leading newspaper, took over its management. In the next day’s issue, *Wen Hui Daily* announced this takeover, prompting a chain of takeovers in the following days in other newspapers and radio stations. Then, on January 5, *Wen Hui Daily* published the “Message to All the People of Shanghai.” While its drafters saw the “Message” only as an impromptu response to economic paralysis and did not expect its immediate success (Wang Hongwen, the leader of WGHQ, even ignored it), Mao saw an opportunity for the public attribution of deep meaning and revolutionary significance. To Mao, the “Message” represented the rebel workers’ grassroots initiative to confront economic breakdown, an interpretation that was made possible when *Wen Hui Daily* conveniently left out Chen Pixian’s signature and thus his role in drafting the declaration. Moreover, by putting the blame on the SMPC and the Scarlet Guards for encouraging work stoppages (and for disobeying the chairman’s dictate to “take firm hold of the revolution and promote production”), the text offered clarity amid ambiguity and confusion. Mao saw it as the solution to his politico-interpretive dilemma. Now, the SMPC and the Scarlet Guards, instead of being the force of order, were condemned as the force of *disorder*; the rebels, in contrast, were framed as *both revolutionary and disciplined*. The literati rebels who drafted the declaration even had the political acumen to partially exonerate the Scarlet Guards, attributing their actions to deception by the SMPC’s “capitalist reactionary line” (Zhu 2014, 181). Thus, the rebels made themselves the sacred bearers of revolutionary new time.

The *Wen Hui Daily* incident suggested to Mao another breakthrough of *resignification*. While rebels called their action an administrative “takeover” (*jieguan*), Mao moved to rebrand it as “power seizure” (*duoquan*). The phrase “power seizure” had previously only referred to coordinated replacement of local leaders by work teams during party rectification campaigns. The *Wen Hui Daily* takeover, instead, occurred in a chaotic and fluid circumstance in which such coordination was impossible. Yet, for Mao, the incident was much more than administrative turnover—he imbued the very term “power

seizure” with revolutionary significance when, during a January 8 meeting with the CCRG, he enthusiastically praised the takeover and the publication of the “Message”:

The leftists in *Wen Hui Daily* have seized power; this is a step in the right direction. . . . [It] is a question of national significance. . . . This is a great revolution, a great revolution in which one class overthrows another class. If the revolutionary forces in Shanghai are united and rise to seize power and seize leadership, the prospect of the entire country will be turned around. (X. Li 2015, 607)

He then ordered the “Message” to be broadcast nationwide. Again, we see an illocutionary action of fusing a factual description with a political program (Austin 1962).

Meanwhile in Shanghai, Chen Pixian met with leaders of rebel organizations again on January 8 to address economic breakdown. They collaborated on an “Urgent Notice” aimed at curbing frontline officials’ granting of economic concessions to rebels with material grievances. The literati rebels who drafted the document blamed the SMPC for encouraging work stoppage and “economism,” characterizing “economism” as “the new form of the capitalist reactionary line that the SMPC has insistently carried out” to “sabotage the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” and “corrode the revolutionary will of the masses with material benefits” (X. Li 2015, 667). According to its drafter’s recollection, although the document again “attributed all the bad things to the SCMP and all the good things to the rebels,” Chen decided to agree with its terms (Zhu 2014, 195). However, rebel organizations consisting of large numbers of informal workers declined to sign the document, while thirty-two other organizations did. The “Urgent Notice” was published in *Wen Hui Daily* on January 9.

While many in Shanghai, including Mao’s envoys, paid little attention to the “Urgent Notice,” Mao saw it as conducive to a great performative pivot. By using the Marxist vocabulary of “economism” and scapegoating “a handful of capitalist roaders” within the SCMP while proclaiming the revolutionary unity of the masses, the “Urgent Notice” offered ideological clarity about the agents and counteragents of the revolutionary project. It rendered the existing party hierarchy bereft of revolutionary status. What remained to be done was to combine this performative pivot with a redefinition of revolutionary time, which his resignification of “takeover” into “power seizure” would accomplish.

Thus, on January 11, Mao took the unprecedented step of sending a con-

gratulatory telegraph on behalf of the Party Center to the thirty-two rebel organizations that had signed the “Urgent Notice,” praising them for seizing power and combating the economistic wind that the SMPC had supposedly stoked. Rebel workers in Shanghai were exuberant. And the Scarlet Guards immediately collapsed. Some of them put up big-character posters, “humbly apologizing to Chairman Mao” and acknowledging their mistake in opposing the rebels (X. Li 2015, 692).

This, then, spurred a further wave of power seizure across factories, schools, and party organizations in Shanghai, which spread nationwide after Mao openly voiced his support for the Shanghai rebels’ direct seizure of power from the SMPC on January 16. Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, Mao’s envoys, then coordinated rebel organizations to form a new governing power, which was pronounced with great fanfare as the “Shanghai Commune” on February 5. Hence, again, the masses seemed clearly aligned with the new time of revolution, attaining both the climax of revolutionary power seizure and resolute economic stabilization (when rebel organizations with material demands were ruthlessly crushed).

These performances and resignifications decisively overcame the earlier hermeneutic ambiguities, which, for Mao, had jeopardized the felicity of his revolutionary politics. Factional stalemate was not revolution. Indeed, it *could not be* “revolution,” as it implied indecision and disunity of the masses, contradicting the Jacobin imaginary of the people’s will. The Shanghai January Storm and its declarations offered a marked contrast to this stalemate—they were, instead, readily interpreted as an embodiment of the masses’ revolutionary will, bolstering the performative felicity to Mao himself as avatar of revolution. Hence, he decided that this clarification was not to be limited to Shanghai; it was to resolve the nationwide problem of interpretive stalemate and to prove that his revolutionary agenda had triumphed. It was, in the short term at least, a deft dance of political semiosis by Mao (Walder 1978; Wu 2014; Wagner-Pacifici 2017).

To guarantee that the ambiguities in other locations would be solved as forcefully as in Shanghai, on January 22, Mao ordered the military to “support the left” and to help create a tripartite alliance (*san jiehe*) of the revolutionary army, revolutionary cadres, and revolutionary mass organizations to form the new governing powers across China, just like the Shanghai Commune had done in Shanghai. However, Mao made a crucial terminological change, replacing “Shanghai Commune” with “Shanghai People’s Revolutionary Committee,” a shift in meaning that both retained the role of the vanguard party in the new regime (X. Li 2015, 811) and indicated that the Shanghai revolution was more than an imitation of the Paris Commune

and was an unprecedented event in its own right. After setting the stage, he ordered the revised Shanghai declaration of power seizure to be broadcast nationwide. This set off a cascade of power seizures across China, as mass organizations of various stripes maneuvered to create enough combined capacity to take the governing apparatus from incumbent party organizations and grasp the all-too-fleeting opportunity to secure their place in the new regime.

However, the result of these groups struggling to outmaneuver their rival organizations was *not* lasting clarity about what was, and was not, the revolution. Rather, a new chain of chaotic events ensued, as rival coalitions acceded to power and drove out competitors on a daily basis. Mao's instruction to the military to "support the left" and stabilize the situation only exacerbated the mayhem, as rival coalitions competed to claim the mantle of "the left," making the identification of "the left" also subject to the ambiguities that beset the experience of new time. Not only did the military have a hard time identifying "the left," but they also split into rival factions themselves, supporting competing coalitions of mass organizations. Thus, Mao's grandiose scheme to break out of hermeneutic ambiguities by a performative coup de foudre only created more factional chaos and further hermeneutic ambiguities about who were the agents of new time. The country descended into de facto civil war. Unlike in Shanghai, where leaders consolidated a revolutionary committee weeks after power seizure, most cities and towns underwent protracted and seemingly unending strife that rendered futile any efforts to consolidate a single revolutionary committee (Walder 2019).

This new cycle of hermeneutic ambiguities culminated in June–July 1967 in Wuhan, the metropolis of Central China, where two rival coalitions, each a million members strong and each with support from rival factions in local military garrisons, clashed violently. Mao himself was on an unpublicized tour in Wuhan and had to flee for safety on July 20. At this point, Mao had to devise a new way of ending the sound and the fury taking place under the signifier "revolution." Three members of the CCRG most involved in grassroots agitation were soon purged. With direct militaristic intervention, Mao began to press on demobilizing students and workers and to organize the revolutionary committees heavy-handedly, even imposing them where needed.

(c) *Unmaking New Time*

It was at this juncture that Mao told Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wen yuan, "[N]ow we are *both under the dictatorship of the proletariat and want to con-*

tinue the revolution. This question, you need to write an article to *clarify*" (Yao 1974). This resulted in their October 1967 editorial in *Red Flag* magazine, Mao's theoretical mouthpiece, propagating the formulation of "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" (*Red Flag* 1967). By rebranding the Cultural Revolution as a *continuing* revolution as opposed to an historically unprecedented one, the Maoists began to discard the Jacobin embrace of the CCR as new time and to resignify the CCR as carnival time. The formulation also indicated Mao's intent to rebuild the party bureaucracy. Thus, seen through the lens of the politics of time, the theory of "continuous revolution," which the conventional literature takes to be Mao's radical motivating idea for the CCR, was in fact formulated precisely when Mao decided to *retreat* from new time.

The editorial further proposed that to accomplish the Cultural Revolution's goal of "repudiating revisionism" (*pi xiu*), it was "essential to combat egoism" (*dou si*). Here, "egoism" referred to the recalcitrance of mass organizations against the Maoists' reining in of new time. Yet, while the doctrine of "combat egoism" seemed to use edification to discipline mass factionalism, the formulation of "continuing the revolution" inadvertently resulted in exacerbating it. Suggesting that the Cultural Revolution was a continuation of the old revolution—a life-death struggle against class enemies—lethally intensified the antagonism between mass organizations and escalated factional violence.

By early 1968, Mao began to leverage factionalism to discredit the mass movement and to deploy the military and military-organized workers' militia to restore party-centered political order. On the fateful night of July 27, 1968, after the last rebel organizations were suppressed on Beijing campuses, Mao met with rebel leaders from five universities. When they complained of a "black hand" of counterrevolutionary forces repressing their revolutionary project, Mao majestically announced: "I am the black hand" responsible for repressing their movement (1968).

I am the black hand: It was an assertion of command power, loud and clear. The hermeneutic ambiguities were hence unequivocally resolved *in the figuration of Mao as the "decider"*: The revolutionary time was over; the symbolic status of individual members of the masses and the party bureaucracy would now be determined by the (head of the) party-state rather than by the masses' own performances in the capricious torrents of the revolution.

Three weeks later, in his comments on an editorial drafted by Yao Wenyan to justify the military takeover in the name of the working class, Mao crossed out the phrase "historically unprecedented" and remarked, "Never ever mention 'historically unprecedented' again. The greatest cultural

revolutions in history are the discovery of fire, the invention of the steam engine, and the formulation of Marxist-Leninism, and not our revolution” (Pang et al. 2013, 6:186). This shift is of great significance. On the one hand, Mao implicitly admitted that the Jacobin politics of *new time* had failed. On the other hand, by diminishing the CCR compared with earlier technological and intellectual breakthroughs, he exonerated this *political* failure and *depoliticized* the concept of revolution. “Revolution” no longer meant the collective and interactive meaning making in mass politics; instead, revolution meant discoveries of a technological or philosophical nature, devoid of collective pursuits of new time.

VI. Disavowing Jacobin Newness in Post-Mao China

In the CCR, then, a radical Jacobin aspiration to create new time ended in Mao’s dramatic reversal. Claiming to speak for the masses and performing “in their name,” Mao ended the revolutionary storm—and with it, the widespread social experience and claiming of new time. The failed Jacobin politics at the heart of the CCR, we argue, is crucial for understanding the contemporary Chinese ideology of stability maintenance, because it seeded in the Chinese political elite a deep-rooted fear of mass politics and created widespread skepticism of mass struggle for political newness and change among China’s educated public.

Popular accounts often attribute this Chinese-style conservatism to an essentialized national culture or Confucianism, but this overlooks the long history of revolutions in much of twentieth-century China (Dirlik 2017). It is also insufficient to attribute this conservatism to the material interests of the post-Mao party elites seeking to consolidate their power in the wake of his death. After all, it was Mao who began to emphasize “stability and unity” (*anding tuanjie*) in his last years (Teiwes and Sun 2014). Deng Xiaoping’s reform coalition went on to use this stability discourse even more effectively and denounced their Maoist rivals for disrupting the gradual construction of socialist China. Importantly, the failed experiment of “new time” in the CCR was then retrospectively *recoded* as “bad carnival,” a carnival time that became unhinged and refused to go back to ordinary time. Concomitantly, the dualistic management of time was gradually restored.

These outcomes, in turn, shaped the dynamics of the much smaller-scale (but more televised) Tiananmen movement in 1989: While political elites reacted rather consensually as if it was a redux of Cultural Revolution turmoil that they needed to avert (Zhao 2001), students sought to distance

themselves from the stigma of mass politics, displaying an elitist attitude toward workers who tried to support and join them (Walder and Gong 1993). The tragic ending of the Tiananmen movement finally sealed public skepticism of political newness, as intellectual leaders drew the lesson of “farewell to revolution” from this tragedy (Dongen 2019).

While post-CCR Chinese politics has had many complex dynamics, one of them clearly is the ongoing performative felicity of the denial of newness. For the failure of, and disenchantment with, the radically new is itself a politics of time. The uptake of the CCR’s performative failure, we maintain, has profoundly shaped the post-Mao elite disavowal of mass politics for systemic change. As has been repeatedly pointed out (H. Wang 2011; Lee and Zhang 2013), the hegemonic discourse in contemporary China, whether for reformers within the system or for those critical of the party-state, has been the promotion of gradual and incremental change within state or civil society institutions *rather than* disruptive mass politics from below. China’s New Left, too, engages in this disavowal, by locating revolutionary energies in China’s *past*, while shunning disruptive mass politics at the present (H. Wang 2011). Perhaps a final indication of these performative dynamics can be found in Chinese state media’s denigration of democratic movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong by dubbing their participants as “green guards” or “yellow guards”: To prevent public sympathy in China for these movements, state propagandists actively invoked the “negative” legacy of the “red guards” and the “bad carnival” of the CCR.

VII. Conclusion: The Politics of Time in Modern Revolutions and Their Aftermath

Through the case of the CCR, we distinguish two kinds of unordinary time—carnival time and new time—beyond the dualistic conception of time prevalent in sociology. This framework helps us understand the dynamics of modern revolutions. The CCR demonstrates the performative challenge of Jacobinism to ground a unified revolutionary project of the masses through the experience of new time. Though Jacobinism initially overcame the party bureaucracy’s resistance to new time, Cultural Revolutionaries struggled to actualize this experience. The temporary success of the Shanghai January Storm exacerbated this challenge, eventually leading to Mao’s closing down of the possibility of newness through state power.

The politics of new time was a crucial element in the CCR’s dynamics and aftermath. Its failure to realize the Jacobin aspiration for newness

left a lasting impact on contemporary China's stability-maintenance hegemony, gradualism, and rejection of mass struggle for political newness. In fact, it is so crucial that even the popular tendency in post hoc explanations of the CCR to write off its Jacobin dimension and focus on its *realpolitik* is in part derived from the political disillusionment born of its performative failure and is itself an effect of a fraught process of performance and counter-performance that this essay recovers. Through painstakingly reading discourses and speech acts against the flows of events and vice versa and bridging the social science of *realpolitik* and the humanistic interpretation of culture and discourse, this essay highlights the revolutionary pursuit of felicity and the give-and-take of performative success and failure.

By attending to the performative politics of time, we recognize the significance of the struggle for newness—both its successes and its failures—in modern revolutions in general and in the CCR in particular. Our contribution is to develop sensitizing conceptual tools for understanding the politics of time, with potential for future research to explore its variations in revolutions. For instance, the French Revolution's experimentation with new rituals and festivals (e.g., the “festival of the Supreme Being”) can be seen as a manifestation of the politics of time, replacing the carnivalesque aspects of Catholicism (Ozouf 1975, 1991). Revolutionary politics may be illuminated as struggles over the experience and understanding of time rather than simply ideology and state structure. Robespierre's project of new time was eventually unraveled with the “Thermidorian reaction,” which was an assertion of a return to something approximating ordinary time and, thereby, a performance of “ordinary politics of rule.” Ultimately, it begs the question: How much of revolutionary struggles over ideology and even state structure involve contention over the interpretation of temporal experience?

Indeed, the theoretical distinction between ordinary time, carnival time, and new time sensitizes us to the fact that revolutionary experiments in “new time” may, in moments of widely acknowledged revolutionary failure, reaction, or counterrevolution, be *recoded* as “bad carnival.” The initially treasured experience of immense possibility and extraordinary transformation becomes, in retrospect, an intermittent period of inversion and madness that got out of hand and failed to stay within the acceptable bounds of carnival time. Hence, we would posit that the contentious struggle over the interpretation of time is one way in which revolutions, even when they are in some sense over, are “not over” (Wagner-Pacifici 2017, 122–32). Precisely insofar as the revolutionary tradition maintains an interpretation of previous moments of revolutionary rupture as the promising experience of new time, then said tradition disputes “Thermidorian” interpretation, insisting

that whatever the failures of the revolution, the opening onto newness that occurred therein cannot be disavowed. It was just such a politics of time, for example, that beset the academic and public controversies surrounding the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution in 1989.

Examining the politics of time as a constitutive dimension of revolutions is also crucial for understanding their ideological consequences. Indeed, if we generalize from Thermidor, we might note the commonplace saying that nineteenth-century European political ideologies were to some extent all responses to the French Revolution. Much of them, we suggest, grew out of the lived experiences of experimenting with new time that the French Revolution introduced and represented different approaches to cope with its possibility. Given the uncertainty that this possibility presents, what are the boundaries of the social experiences of new time? Are those who are in “new time” rabble-rousers, a magnificent founding generation of elites, or *le peuple*? Who should control the declaration of the beginning and ending of new time—the monarch, the agents of the bureaucratic state, or *le peuple* themselves? As the case of the CCR demonstrates, in revolutionary crises, the performative success and failure in reckoning with these questions can have profound consequences for the return to ordinary time once the “bad carnival” is over. Thus, the perspective of the politics of time can help us understand the social purchase of political ideologies, because it reveals ideology as the pragmatist hermeneutics of the social usage of time (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische 2009; Abbott 2016).

The Great Separation

From Mao to Market, 1967 to 2023

On December 26, 1966, during widespread worker mobilization, Maoist leaders met with representatives of the All-China Red Workers Rebel Corps (ACRWRC), an independent labor union of contract and temporary workers demanding better employment conditions and benefits. The Maoist leaders proclaimed to the workers, “Chairman Mao has your back!” Condemning the “capitalistic” and “reactionary” employment system, they praised the ACRWRC for occupying the Ministry of Labor and challenging the official trade unions. Here, citizens’ economic interests and political participation were clearly intertwined.

Fast-forward to Hong Kong’s 2019 protests, when Chinese state media vehemently denounced the protesters for jeopardizing the city’s economic fortunes. It portrayed the protests as a pathological manifestation of frustration by losers in a competitive market economy. Here, citizens’ economic interests were deemed incompatible with their participation in popular politics, which needed to be suppressed for the sake of economic development. This dichotomy between economic interests and political participation has been the pillar of China’s Reform-era ideology, which prioritizes development while rejecting mass politics as a threat to economic progress.

What explains the transition between these two radically different styles of relating the political and the economic? Why did economic interests, closely aligned with political participation during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR), become incompatible with it in Reform China? How has this shift contributed to China’s transition from Maoism to marketization

and depoliticization over the years? Finally, what does this interplay between the economic and the political say about China's remarkable transformation from a hotbed of revolutionary politics in the 1960s to a thriving powerhouse of neoliberal globalization?

With this essay I address these questions by approaching China's transition as a hegemonic transformation, whose outcome is the depoliticized economism of post-Tiananmen China that I call *ordoeconomism*. Ordoeconomism combines popular economism, societal depoliticization, and continued authoritarian state rule. As the Hong Kong episode above illustrates, ordoeconomism is premised on symbolically separating *the economic* (economic development) from *the political* (political participation), valorizing the former while rejecting the latter.

This essay closely examines the labor politics of the CCR and uncovers that this symbolic separation of *the economic* from *the political* originated in popular backlash in the late 1960s against the symbolic separation of *the political* from *the economic* that Maoists made during the Shanghai January Storm in 1967, at the height of the CCR. That Maoist separation was unprecedented in the history of state socialism, in that it aimed to overcome the capitalist separation of the economic and the political (Polanyi [1944] 2001; Wood 1981) through state control of economic resources (Trotsky [1936] 1991).

To understand the causes of Maoists' pivotal separation and its unintended consequences, I adopt William Sewell's (2005) eventful sociological approach, which examines how structures and events transform each other (see also Wagner-Pacifici 2010). Through comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including crucial primary sources that became available only recently, I reconstruct the dynamics of China's political field in the mid-1960s to provide an original account of the CCR's labor politics. I discover that the Maoist separation of the political from the economic was an unforeseen collective creation, emerging amid contingent realignments of various powerholders, when industrial workers voiced unprecedented systemic socioeconomic demands just as economic paralysis loomed. By separating the political from the economic and denouncing the workers' "economism," Maoists effectively neutralized their economic demands and stabilized the economic order. Simultaneously, they harnessed workers' mobilization energy to score a major political victory, through staging the proletariat's "power seizure" as having been done in Mao's name. This strategy helped the Maoists preempt a potential counter-coalition of provincial party generalists and pragmatic central planners.

The Maoists' attempt to extend the "power seizure" model across the

country, however, proved disastrous due to the absence of the crucial local circumstances that had facilitated its success in Shanghai. Escalating factional conflict resulted in widespread disillusionment with mass politics and a simmering popular economism. These two developments eventually led to Maoism's downfall in 1978, as a political infrastructure no longer compatible with the economic base. The Dengist reform coalition capitalized on popular economism with marketization reforms, while leveraging popular disenchantment with mass politics to depoliticize Chinese society, particularly after the Tiananmen Incident. This process solidified the hegemony of ordoeconomism. The ordoeconomistic separation of *the economic* from *the political* in post-Tiananmen China, therefore, emerged as an unintended consequence of the earlier separation of *the political* from *the economic* that the Maoists made in response to unprecedented labor militancy in 1967.

Tracing the political origins of Reform China reveals underlying affinities between Chinese ordoeconomism and Western neoliberalism in terms of the separation of economy from democratic politics. This sheds light on China's ability to thrive under neoliberal globalization and the distinct path China has taken compared to communist states in Eastern Europe. It also provides insight into the predicament faced by China's elites today.

I. From High Maoism to Ordoeconomism: Toward an Eventful Sociology of Hegemonic Transformation

(a) *The Origins of Reform China: Bringing Politics (Back) In*

China's remarkable economic rise following marketization reforms has prompted extensive research in development studies, often with a focus on institutions like the local state and the family (Montinola, Qian, and Weingast 1995; Whyte 1995; White 1998; Oi 1999). However, this literature fails to adequately explain why these institutions came to matter when they did (Hung 2015).

Recent scholarship on the transition "from Mao to market" has challenged the notion of a definitive divide in 1978. Instead, it has traced the origins of Reform China to socioeconomic practices of the Maoist era, including consumption culture, grassroots entrepreneurship, trade relations with the capitalist West and Hong Kong, and labor exploitation and co-optation (Nee and Oppen 2012; Gerth 2020; Kelly 2021; Ruckus 2021; T. Zhou 2021). While examining the continuity of these practices before and after 1978 is valuable, this alone cannot explain the discontinuity and rupture that dis-

tinguish Reform China from the Maoist era. As Brenner (1977) famously points out in the “Brenner Debate,” models explaining the origins of capitalism that emphasize Western Europe’s accumulated advantages mistakenly equate quantitative growth with qualitative transformation. They overlook capitalism as a qualitatively new social formation, whose emergence was not a natural economic process but contingent on *political* struggle (Wood 2002). Likewise, to understand the origins of China’s thriving in global capitalism since 1978, we must acknowledge the *political* nature of this transformation. This requires a comprehensive exploration of the political dynamics of the CCR, a pivotal event that divides modern Chinese history into two distinct periods: the revolutionary politics preceding it and the subsequent Reform era characterized primarily by economic development.

Indeed, scholars acknowledge the 1978 Reform as a political reaction to the CCR (Tong 2011, 19–20). While recent literature on the CCR has made significant advances in comprehending the political nature of the Mao-to-market transformation, important gaps still remain unexplored. In *Rise of the Red Engineers*, Andreas (2009) describes the CCR as a clash between political capital (party officials / “reds”) and cultural capital (intellectuals / “experts”). He argues that the CCR concluded when these two elite factions formed a coalition as a bureaucratic class of “red engineers” to halt their mutual destruction. This compelling account, however, is insufficient to explain why this new class did not restore the pre-CCR system but instead swiftly introduced marketization reforms.

In *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* (2014), Wu presents the post-Mao reform as a “passive revolution” in the Gramscian sense. He argues that the CCR unleashed “unruly” political critiques and challenges that exceeded Mao’s expectation and tolerance. Efforts by Mao and the party-state elite to contain these tendencies had meager success. Under Deng Xiaoping’s reform coalition, the project of economic modernization emerged as an elite-engineered diversion to channel the masses’ energy. Wu’s fascinating interpretation, however, presupposes rather than explains the popular economic sentiments that contributed to the effectiveness of Deng’s economic diversion.

Walder’s (2009, 2019) work on CCR factionalism corrects reductionist interpretations by highlighting the political dynamics of factional formation. His account of the post-CCR transformation, by contrast, is much simpler: The CCR introduced political dynamics that were so destabilizing that by the time of Mao’s death, there was “obvious popular yearning for social and political stability and a rise in living standards” (Walder 2017, 341). It was at this juncture that China’s East Asian neighbors presented an

enticing developmentalist model. While recognizing the prevailing economic sentiments in Mao's final years that facilitated economic reforms, Walder's account presupposes a dichotomy between mass political irrationality/destabilization and economic rationality/stability—a dichotomy that emerged *politically* and calls for explanation.

To get at the political origins of Reform China, then, we must understand its hegemonic ideology, approach the Mao-to-market transformation as a hegemonic transformation, and explicate how economic rationality/stability and mass political irrationality/destabilization came to be counterposed in this process.

(b) *Ordoeconomism*

A hegemonic ideology becomes evident when it is challenged and its proponents have to defend it. A potent illustration is the 2019 anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong mentioned above. In response to this challenge, the Chinese state-sponsored social media employed three main discursive framings. First, they portrayed the Hong Kong youth as an excessively politicized group that endangered the city's economic prosperity. This cast mass politics as irrational mob behavior against economic rationality, assuming that economic development and mass politics are incompatible.

Second, Hong Kong protesters were labeled as “rubbish youth” (*feiqing*), claiming that their demand for democracy stemmed from being losers in a meritocratic system and unable to afford housing. This portrayed mass politics as a pathological manifestation of economic strain that needed to be temporarily suppressed to address the underlying economic issues.

Third, Chinese propagandists attributed the protests to the failure of neoliberal capitalism in Hong Kong. They mocked the Hong Kong youth for focusing on empty slogans of “democracy and freedom” instead of addressing the root cause of economic inequality and targeting the city's business tycoons. This framing presented the “Chinese model” as a more economic and rational alternative to neoliberalism, as the latter's residual democratic superstructure distracts people from addressing underlying economic issues.

I term this hegemonic ideology *ordoeconomism*. It champions a market society that valorizes economic development and material progress while rejecting nonstate politics as a threat to economic improvement. Ordoeconomism rests on three pillars: (1) legitimacy derived from economic growth and tangible material benefits; (2) political stability ensured by the state as a prerequisite for delivering economic growth and prosperity; and (3) an

organistic social imaginary that depoliticizes and naturalizes state-society and market-society relations, according to which society is both malleable to market discipline and manageable by the state.¹

The term “ordoeconomism” denotes, first, an emphasis on the state’s role in securing and steering market order. This is similar to “ordoliberalism”—the German variant of neoliberalism that embraces a strong state to manage the sociopolitical externalities of free markets (Bonefeld 2012). Second, ordoeconomism exclusively valorizes economic development, material benefits, and depoliticization. Unlike ordoliberalism, ordoeconomism lacks a principled commitment to market freedom, individual freedom, and the rule of law. It not only sees the state as keeper of the economic order, as does ordoliberalism; it also sees state intervention in economic *processes* as an indispensable component of its policy repertoire. In ordoeconomism, more state interventions do *not* mean fewer market mechanisms, because every economic intervention the Chinese state exercises involves market mechanisms that put this intervention into effect. As Hui Wang notes, there is no “fundamental conflict between market ideology and state practice; on the contrary, there is a *complex mutual dependence*” (2011, 32).

Ordoeconomism posits economic development and mass politics as incompatible because mass politics entails contention that could jeopardize the market order essential to economic development. State politics, by contrast, are presumed to guarantee economic progress. Deng Xiaoping (1983, 213) famously remarked, “Developing the economy . . . is our biggest politics.” Ordoeconomism considers state politics not as inherently political but as a natural and apolitical guardian and cultivator of market order and economic power. It is regarded as *policy* rather than *politics*. While the economy takes precedence, economic policymaking is shielded from the public and is depoliticized. Ordoeconomism dismisses nonstate politics, because it perceives politics as a zero-sum game whose antagonistic nature could disrupt the non-zero-sum game of market order. Furthermore, ordoeconomites advance an economistic understanding of politics, explaining it as epiphenomenal to the underlying economic interests that animate it.

This economistic understanding of politics renders the logic of ordoeconomism circular: Economic development is the foundation of legiti-

1. Shaun Breslin (2016, 43–44) identifies a similar tripartite legitimization constitution in post-socialist China, but at a lower level of abstraction than my formulation. For example, he emphasizes nationalism as a central component, yet its importance and key features, as I explicate below, need to be placed in the wider context of the organistic view of society, through which nation and international competition are rendered in familial terms.

macy; economic development requires political stability; political stability requires massive investment in the security apparatus to fend off the challenge of contentious politics;² contentious politics is fundamentally derived from economic interests. It is this economic understanding of politics that underpins “bargained authoritarianism”—the approach by which the Chinese state developed multipronged repertoires to “buy stability” when outright coercion was seen as inviable (Lee and Zhang 2013).

Like neoliberalism, ordoeconomism takes a deterministic view of market order, where staying competitive is imperative, whether as individuals, families, corporations, or nations. Just as individuals can adapt through entrepreneurial selfhood, families and nations should be similarly agentic. The Chinese state discourse of “no state, no family” (*youguo, cai youjia*) is a justification of state politics that caters to an understanding of family as natural and apolitical and extends that naturalness to the state. Ordoeconomism perceives family and nation-state as natural and spontaneous entities, making familialism and nationalism its spontaneous sociology.³

Like neoliberalism, the concept of “ordoeconomism” captures centrist and depoliticizing ideologies and practices that are hegemonic in certain parts of contemporary global capitalism. It accomplishes a goal—analysis of ideology—that concepts like “state capitalism,” which are often used to describe China’s politico-economic system, do not accomplish, just like “neoliberalism” accomplishes an analytical purpose that “free-market capitalism” does not. Ordoeconomism is also distinct from concepts like fascism and authoritarian populism, just as neoliberalism is distinct from contemporary right-wing populism, even though in both cases the latter can be a political product of the former and can also weaponize it (e.g., right-wing populism may be a consequence of neoliberalism and in turn weaponize neoliberal discourses, as Brown [2019] and Cooper [2019] point out).

2. In 2019, China spent approximately 1.39 trillion yuan on public security, a threefold increase in ten years. The expenditure includes state security, police, domestic surveillance, armed civil militia, and other measures to deal with public disturbances. Since 2010, public security has surpassed the country’s military spending, by roughly 166 million yuan in 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1049749/china-public-security-spending-by-government-level/>

3. I use “spontaneous sociology” here in the Bourdieusian sense, as an irreflexive view of the social world. Ordoeconomism’s justification of the state as an extended family departs from the social ontology of neoliberalism based on individual and family order (Cooper 2019).

(c) *The Separation of the Political and the Economic:
From Maoism to Ordoeconomism*

Ordoeconomism separates the state-led economy from the disruption of mass politics. Scholars have highlighted that ordoeconomism's rejection of mass politics draws from the metaphorical foundation of the Cultural Revolution (H. Wang 2011, 5). This is exemplified in common wordplays on the term "Red Guards" in Chinese social media—for example, in references to Hong Kong protesters as "yellow guards" and to US Black Lives Matter protesters as "black guards." The CCR, as Marx (1972, 595) might describe it, "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." This discourse portrays mass politics as an irrational mob phenomenon with empty and deceptive rhetoric, manipulated by individuals with hidden agendas, and providing no tangible benefits to participants.

An adequate explanation of the hegemonic transformation from Maoism to ordoeconomism must therefore account for (1) the origins of widespread disenchantment with mass politics, (2) popular economic sentiments on the eve of China's economic reforms, and (3) why mass politics and economic interests became seen as incompatible. In other words, it must explain how the political and the economic became separated. Formulating such an explanation requires combining cultural analysis with macro-historical analysis, an intellectual enterprise that once animated the cultural turn in the historical social sciences (e.g., Thompson 1966; Sahlin 1981; Sewell 1996). In recent decades, however, the sociology of culture has turned in more micro- and meso-level directions. The challenge at hand—understanding the ideological shift in and through the Cultural Revolution—is more macro, akin to what Weber (1946, 280) characterizes as "switchmen" of history: "[V]ery frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest." The task of the analysis is therefore dual: It needs to explain the circumstances and mechanisms through which certain "world images" are created and shift the course of history, while accounting for the staying power such "world images" have in shaping how "the dynamic of interest" propels social action.

On the latter question, one generative perspective is Margaret Somers and Fred Block's notion of "ideational embeddedness" (Somers and Block 2005). Drawing on Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Somers and Block compare two legislative episodes in US and British history, in which welfare regimes were overturned by market-driven ones, arguing that both episodes occurred because the welfare regimes were embedded in the ideology of market fundamentalism. Somers and Block contend that economy is

always embedded in ideas, which have variable power to cope with disconfirming empirical evidence.

The notion of “ideational embeddedness” testifies to the unusually insidious power that market fundamentalist “world images” (e.g., the “perversity thesis”) have in modern capitalism. This power lies in the images being the discursive resources that actors draw on in the face of high-stakes circumstances (Alexander 2004; Reed 2013). Yet, there is a tension between Somers and Block’s theoretical principle of markets always being embedded in ideas (alongside legal, political, and organizational structures) and the empirical variability of market fundamentalism’s ideational power. This tension is part of the larger tension in Polanyi’s concept of embeddedness. On the one hand, economic sociologists such as Somers and Block have used the concept to point out the inherent social nature of the market, making embeddedness a powerful tool in unmasking the self-naturalization of market fundamentalism. On the other hand, scholars of varieties of capitalism have endeavored to understand the historical variations of embedding and disembedding of market from society (Krippner 2001; Krippner and Alvarez 2007; Gemici 2008; Dale 2010).

It is in the second sense that Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* tells a story about the historical change of embeddedness. According to this interpretation, nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism disembedded the market economy from society, in which it had hitherto been embedded. In the early twentieth century, this disembedding ravaged the social fabric and led to wars, revolutions, and violence. The double movement—a reaction by society to protect itself from the ravages of markets—took the forms of either planned economies in state socialism or welfare states in capitalist democracies, which reembedded economy in society. From this perspective, the rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s is a second wave once again disembedding the economy from society, the political consequences of which we are witnessing today. This dominant interpretation of *The Great Transformation* as an embeddedness story is thus inevitably beset with this tension between the theoretical principle of the always-embedded economy and the empirical and normative commitment to understanding the historical variations of the embeddedness of market in society.⁴ This interpretation can be captured by the cover of its 1957 edition, published in Boston by Beacon Press, as seen in figure 1.

In this essay, I adopt a different and less-known interpretation of Polanyi’s

4. One way to resolve this tension is to distinguish the organic “good” society-for-itself in which the market is harnessed from the “bad” (or even degenerate) society-in-itself in which the market commodifies and undermines social relationships. This, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

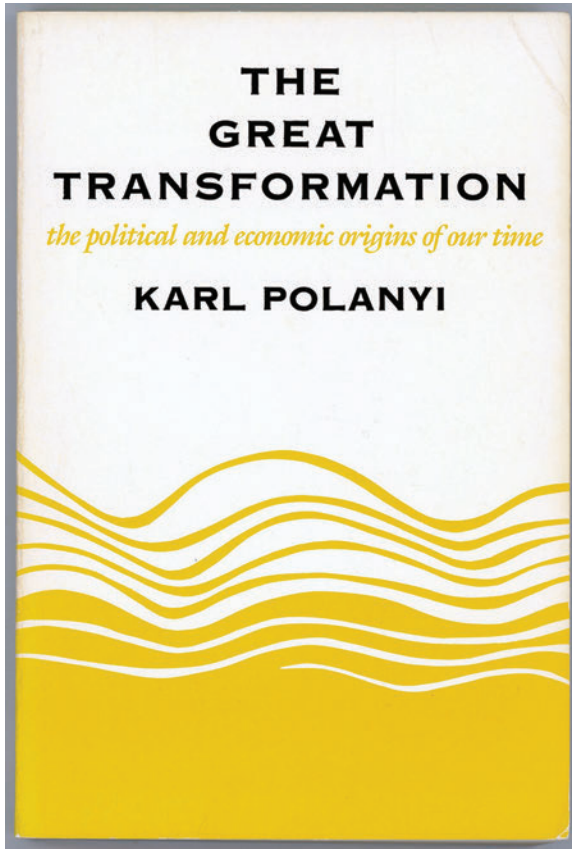


Fig. 1. Cover page of the 1957 edition of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (Beacon Press)

work, which suggests that at the heart of *The Great Transformation* is a story about the separation of the political and the economic (Krippner 2017). As Polanyi himself put it, “The history of market economy . . . was hardly more than another name for the separation of the economic from the political sphere” (Polanyi [1944] 2001, 231). From this perspective, both nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism and contemporary neoliberalism separate the market economy, which is supposed to be self-regulating, from the political sphere. This interpretation can be captured by the cover of the book’s original 1944 edition, published in New York by Farrar & Rinehart, shown in figure 2, where blue symbolizes the political and red symbolizes the economic (or the opposite in the UK, which Polanyi wrote about).

I adopt the “separation” interpretation because it offers more analytical leverage than the “embeddedness” interpretation, given its applicability to state socialist cases and experiences. First, the separation interpretation helps

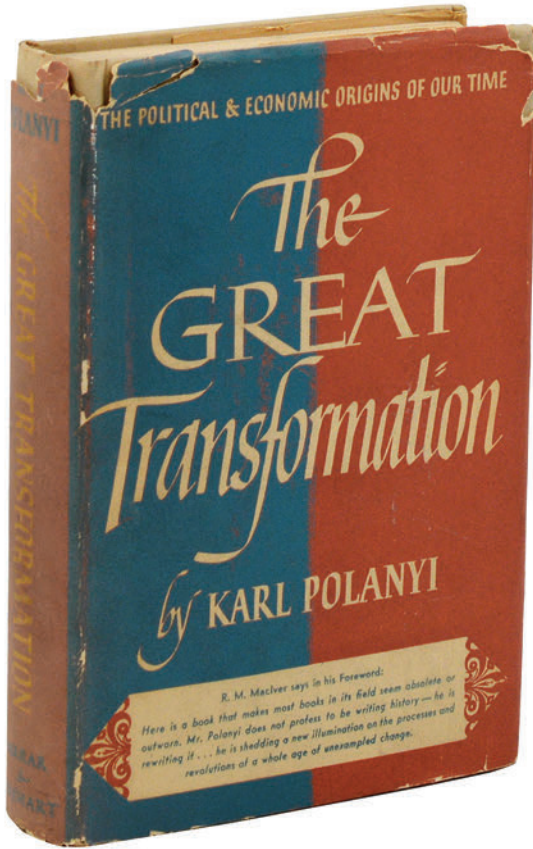


Fig. 2. Cover page of the original 1944 edition of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (Farrar & Rinehart)

resolve existing theoretical dilemmas and ambiguities about the scope of neoliberalism that have concerned scholars in the area. On the one hand, scholars characterize the contemporary era as the neoliberal era, implying that neoliberal market fundamentalism is pervasive. On the other hand, scholars encounter difficulties in including state capitalist cases like China and Singapore in the neoliberal category, since these cases, with heavy state interventions in the economy, do not strictly conform to the neoliberal doctrine of self-regulating markets. For example, in his classic *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) had to classify the Chinese case as “neoliberalism” with the qualification “with Chinese characteristics.”⁵ In actual-

5. One way to explain the neoliberal acceptance of state capitalism as its “impure” junior partner, as Quinn Slobodian (2018) has recognized, is that the neoliberal ideo-

ity, what holds neoliberalism and state capitalism in common is the separation of the economic sphere from mass democratic politics. While state capitalism and neoliberalism differ by how the state and state elites intervene in the economic sphere, they similarly insulate the economy from mass participatory political processes. The “separation” interpretation is therefore a more apt descriptor of the world political economy than neoliberalism, which only constitutes one example of that system. Indeed, the idea that the economic should be separated from mass democratic politics is what makes global capitalism a politically integral system.

Second, examining the separation of the political and the economic helps achieve this essay’s analytical task: accounting for the specific historical experiences of Marxism-inspired state-socialist projects in the twentieth century. Building on Polanyi, Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981) pointed out that the separation of the economic and the political was the question that fundamentally animated Marx. For Marx, under capitalism, bourgeois economics and its attendant commodity fetishism created the fiction that the economic sphere is a reified reality that has its own laws and is impervious to willful political action. The purpose of Marx’s political economic analysis was to reveal how, in reality, commodities and the economy at large are socially constituted, embody concrete social relationships, and can be changed through willful collective action. According to Wood, however, this capitalist separation of the economic and the political, which Marx rejected methodologically, was so insidious that even the history of Marxism was beset by a separation between economic base and political superstructure, in addition to other homologous conceptual oppositions. In this Marxist separation, the economic base was, again, reified. For Wood, this orthodox Marxist separation of the economic and the political has played into the hands of the capitalist system and run the risk of incapacitating resistance to it. While Wood is mainly concerned with Western Marxist theories, the historical variations of

logues were determined to harness strong states and build global institutions to secure the perpetual stability of the global market economy. I will discuss in the conclusion why the approach I develop here encompasses this argument. Another way in which scholars get around the analytical complication of Chinese neoliberalism’s exceptionality is to treat neoliberalism as a set of malleable governing technologies and economic practices that can be utilized and adapted to different regimes (Ong 2006). While this helps expand the empirical scope of neoliberalism by accommodating the governing technologies and practices of contemporary state capitalist regimes, this interpretation sacrifices the analytical precision that neoliberalism obtains in capitalist democracies (Brown 2017). My goal is to retain this analytical precision while dissecting the more fundamental ideological schema that makes these shared technologies and practices practical in the first place.

the separation of the political and the economic in socialist practices have remained unexamined.

Historically, as Polanyi points out in *The Great Transformation*, it was nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism that first separated the political from the economic, establishing the notion of the self-regulating market economy as insulated from politics (Krippner 2017). This separation, then, provoked sociopolitical counter-movements of various ideologies to reembed the economy within a politically mobilized society. Among them were the communists who overcame the separation through political mobilization to address economic inequalities (Wood 1981) and the vanguard party's monopolization of economic resources in communist countries (Trotsky 1991). Why, then, did the separation reemerge in Communist China? How did it shift the course of China's history?

To answer these questions, we must consider how contingent events—and cultural schemas like the separation of the political and the economic—transformed structures in, through, and out of the CCR (Wagner-Pacifici 2010). William Sewell's (2005) seminal work shows how, in the fluid situation following the storming of the Bastille, the French National Assembly articulated a notion of “revolution” as an expression of popular sovereignty through acts of popular violence to both consecrate their newly found power and assert it against unapproved popular challenges. In reconstructing China's political field during the CCR, I find that the rise of mass mobilization provided a space for workers to politically articulate their demand for economic justice and create an independent fusion of the political and the economic. Worker uprisings coincided with and exacerbated an internal rift within the political elite. In the volatile circumstances surrounding the Shanghai January Storm, Maoists arrived at an unexpected discursive pivot of separating the political from the economic; they capitalized on workers' political energy while neutralizing their economic demands and thus staved off a potential counter-coalition of other elite factions.

Yet, Maoists overlooked the contingent circumstances that shaped their success in Shanghai. Their attempts to replicate the Shanghai model nationwide caused rampant factional violence, leading to widespread disenchantment with mass politics and the emergence of a simmering popular economism. The politics-economy separation, thus, became “doxic” (Bourdieu 2000, 186) and conditioned the demise of Maoism and the development of ordoeconomism. The Maoist separation of *the political* from *the economic* in 1967 turned out to be a pivotal step toward the separation of *the economic* from *the political* under ordoeconomism. The great separation in Shanghai, thus, was not a once-and-for-all change that triggered a deterministic trajec-

tory but a momentous shift of ideational frame, or “principle of vision and division,” that conditioned how later experiences and new contingencies were accommodated (Bourdieu 2000). It became the skeleton of thought, a Weberian “world image” that shaped how subsequent experiences were articulated and made thinkable.

II. Data and Methods

My empirical analysis is divided into two parts. Section III examines the critical juncture of the Shanghai January Storm to understand the Maoist pivot to separate the political from the economic. Section IV traces the process through which the great separation in Shanghai became path dependent and led inadvertently to the fall of Maoism and the ordoeconomistic separation of the economic from the political.

To understand the Maoist move during the Shanghai January Storm and how structures of power, contingent circumstances, and discursive innovations interacted in shaping historical events, I adopt Bourdieu’s approach of painstakingly reconstructing the social space and structures of power in which actors stake their political-moral positions. Carefully contextualized reading and cross-checking of historical texts and retrospective accounts provide a granular view of these processes in which contingent circumstances and structures of power interacted and opened space for some discursive innovations (such as the Maoist pivot) but not others.

This granular analysis involves consulting a wide range of primary sources, including newspapers, official documents, meeting minutes, mass organization publications, memoirs, diaries, and official chronicles of key events and key actors, as well as personal papers and the self-printed memoirs of participants. Some of these data are available in published sources in China; most of them, however, come from databases and source compilations assembled by scholars and collectors based outside China. Lacking archival institutions devoted to the CCR, I rely heavily on these databases and compilations. Additional sources come from flea markets in Beijing; the collectors’ website kongfz.com; and personal connections with collectors, researchers, and former participants.

Section IV focuses on the late Mao period immediately following the Shanghai January Storm and critical moments in the post-Mao transformations. Drawing on sources ranging from policy debates to statistical yearbooks, as well as secondary literature, I identify how the separation of the political and the economic undergirded subsequent ideological contesta-

tions until the consolidation of ordoeconomism in the post-Tiananmen era. These later events are themselves immensely complex, and my analysis of them is sketchier, focusing on the interplay of the political and the economic through their processes.

III. The Shanghai January Storm and the Maoist Separation of the Political from the Economic

The Shanghai January Storm is, by all accounts, the most iconic event in the CCR. In the years immediately afterward, it was portrayed, following the Maoist official narrative, as millions of industrial workers, led by dozens of mass organizations headed by the Shanghai Workers Revolutionary Rebels General Headquarters (WGHQ), rising to seize power from the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee in January 1967. Mao and his comrades celebrated it as a model of bottom-up proletarian revolution for the whole country.

The characterization of the Shanghai event as a spontaneous, bottom-up uprising has been challenged and revised in later scholarly works. Scholars have emphasized the role of individuals who acted as the communicators and interpreters between Beijing and on-the-ground developments (Walder 1978), as well as the importance of local agency and the disjuncture between the dynamics of Beijing's high politics and local events (Perry and Li 1997; Wu 2014; X. Li 2015).

My analysis also pays close attention to the interactive logic between elite politics and local mobilization. Yet, my approach departs from existing accounts in that my goal is to explicitly unpack why and how the two central components of the Shanghai January Storm—workers' power seizure and the political critique of workers' "economism" (*jingji zhuyi*)—interlocked. I identify how, through the conjuncture of a series of contingently concurrent processes, these two components ended up defining the contours of the Shanghai January Storm.

Facing looming economic paralysis brought on by workers' mounting demands for economic justice and work stoppage, and the potential formation of a counter-coalition of central planners and provincial generalist leaders, Maoists developed an anti-economism discourse to suppress workers' economic demands, stabilize the economy, and reassure central planners while promoting the seizure of power to channel workers' political energy and neutralize resistance from provincial generalist leaders. But the strategy of separating the political (power seizure) from the economic (workers' eco-

conomic demands) was forged in a pattern of communications between local Maoists in Shanghai and central Maoists in Beijing, in which some crucial conditions of their actions were conveniently left out, especially Shanghai's party boss Chen Pixian's crucial role in coordinating to address the paralysis and Shanghai's rebel literati's indispensable role in framing local events in Maoist terms. This gap led Maoists to misrecognize the causes of their own success. And when they attempted to replicate the Shanghai success elsewhere, where the crucial contingent circumstances did not exist, the consequences were catastrophic.

To explain why the Maoists made their discursive pivot at this critical juncture, it is essential to understand the institutional politics within the Chinese party-state.

*(a) Institutional Politics and the Maoist Dilemma
Before the Shanghai January Storm*

Extant scholarship has identified two integrative mechanisms in China's party-state: the horizontal coordination of territorial governments at different levels of the state and the vertical line of authority between different levels within functional sectors, from central ministries to local bureaus (Lieberthal 1995). These two integrative mechanisms give rise to four categories of officials with different positions and habitus: central party generalists, local party generalists, central technocrats (planners), and local technocrats. Local technocrats, however, hardly constitute a separate power basis since they are typically subordinate to local generalists.⁶ In this context, factional politics involves building coalitions among central generalists, local generalists, and central technocrats, which, as Shih (2009) demonstrates compellingly, largely explains China's policy cycles during the Reform era.

Identifying these three types of political actors is also important for understanding the context in which the political realignments of the CCR played out. When launching the CCR to oust Liu Shaoqi's central generalist faction, Mao, as a central generalist himself, initially relied on two main forces to form the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG). One was radical Maoist propagandists like Chen Boda (Mao's ghost writer), Jiang Qing (Mao's wife), and Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan (propagandists

6. This is a significant difference from the Soviet system, where the technocrats had a deeper penetration at the local level, due to Stalin's mobilization of technocrats from below in the 1930s to oust his old Bolshevik rivals (Padgett 2012).

from Shanghai, where Mao's protégé Ke Qingshi [1902–65] had governed for over a decade), who led the assault on and took over the ideological ("soft") wing of the central ministries (Education, Culture, and Propaganda). The other was provincial generalists like Tao Zhu and Wang Renzhong, who were suddenly called to the Party Center to carve out a new space of power. On the opposing side, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping mobilized the cadres in the economic ("hard") wing of the central ministries to form hundreds of work teams that entered university and high school campuses to restrict the movement to a Stalinist-style top-down disciplinarian campaign for ideological purification (just like the Anti-Rightist Campaign that Mao, Liu, and Deng launched together in 1957).

Toward the end of July 1966, when the increasing clashes between militant students and work teams, fanned in part by the CCRG-controlled propaganda organs, reached a breaking point, Mao and his associates quickly denounced the work teams for "suppressing the mass movement." In the party plenary session in early August, Maoists were able to sack Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping and withdraw work teams from campuses, based on the support of provincial generalists and the acquiescence of central technocrats/planners, headed by Premier Zhou Enlai. In an important signal of this change, Tao Zhu, who had recently been promoted from Guangdong Province, was fast-tracked to replace Deng Xiaoping as the fourth-ranking person, after Mao, Lin Biao, the new heir apparent, and Premier Zhou Enlai, and to oversee the party's Central Secretariat, to lead the Ministry of Propaganda, and to act as vice premier and adviser of the CCRG.

This plenary session also passed the "Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (aka "Sixteen Points") on August 8, which recognized the masses' right to organize, publish, and propagate, with the acknowledgment that the masses should "emancipate themselves" and "educate themselves" through their voluntary participation in public politics.

On university and high school campuses, the breakdown of the hitherto tightly controlled Leninist chain of interpreting and evaluating social events and individual behaviors was initially enormously liberating for students. In principle, everybody could use their words and actions to change their political standing, which used to be strictly evaluated and administered by the party bureaucracy. Yet, it also brought into the open social tensions previously carefully managed by the party-state, including discrimination based on family origins and clientelist politics in education and career advancement. The public debates on these questions were emancipatory and created new solidarity. For example, students from "bad" class backgrounds forged strong bonds as victims of a system that penalized them for their

family's status (Wu 2014). But these debates also created new friction and sometimes led to violence, as official media turned a blind eye to violence against "class enemies," a label that could be arbitrarily applied. The "Red Terror" of August–September and rampant factionalism among student organizations—thanks to the social tensions brought into the open—were particularly concerning.

By November, Mao sensed that the revolution he had launched was losing legitimacy, especially among provincial/local cadres, many of whom initially supported his pushback against Liu's top-down disciplinarian approach, and central technocrats/planners, whose acquiescence in early August had now turned into frustration. Even among university students, a wave of big-character posters in early December attacked the CCRG for the division and factionalism on campuses. Mao was looking for a breakthrough and eyeing industrial workers, who he believed were more disciplined than students, to deliver a political victory for his cause. As an authoritative historian put it, "Because Mao Zedong not only wanted to thoroughly transform the societal outlook but also counted on the working class to walk onto the stage of 'the Great Cultural Revolution' to break away from the numerous contradictions [besetting him], he now placed his hope in the rebel workers" (N. Wang 1988, 133).

However, Mao's encouragement for agitation among industrial workers—manifested by his acceptance of Zhang Chunqiao's unauthorized step, in early November, to recognize the WGHQ—encountered pushback from provincial party leaders as well as vocal criticism from central technocrats. The Party Central Committee had previously agreed that industrial workers would not get involved in mass mobilization lest economic production be disrupted; and provincial leaders tacitly encouraged the formation of conservative workers' organizations, known as the Scarlet Guards (*chiweidui*), to counter the rebel workers the Maoists were instigating (Walder 1978, 2019; Wu 2014, III–16).

Criticism from provincial leaders and central technocrats was particularly vocal at the Conference on Industrial and Transportation Affairs that began on November 16 and lasted for twenty days. At the conference, the central planners and provincial leaders (including Ma Tianshui from Shanghai) vehemently opposed the "Twelve Instructions (Draft) on the Cultural Revolution in Factories," a document the CCRG drafted to encourage worker mobilization. They argued that mobilizing workers would disrupt economic production and paralyze the economy if workers, like students, engaged in factional struggle.

Li Junren, deputy director of the State Planning Commission, reported

that industrial production had already shown signs of disruption; scientific research, advanced programs, and foreign collaborations had almost all halted; and infrastructure construction had also begun to be impacted. Liu Lanbo, minister of Water Resources and Electric Power, complained that workers who remained committed to production were often accused of being “loyalists” (N. Wang 1988, 135–36). Resistance from central technocrats and provincial leaders was so strong that when Zhou Enlai joined the meeting on November 24, he was struck that participants “were almost all negative” about the “Twelve Instructions” and that “very few of the ministers and provincial leaders I talked to understood [“Twelve Instructions”]; the majority of them did not,” as he told Lin Biao (E. Zhou 1966; N. Wang 1988, 136).

On December 4, Gu Mu, chairman of the State Construction Commission (which oversaw capital investment nationwide), gave a summary report to an enlarged Party Central Committee meeting. He expressed worry that mobilizing workers would have unintended consequences because workers not only held grudges against cadres’ bureaucratism and special privileges but also resented the economic injustice they suffered. If workers raised issues about their salaries, benefits, and employment discrimination, he reasoned, it could create systemic problems that the major institutions and state finance would not be able to cope with. He argued that the party center should engage in holistic consideration before setting them loose (Zhu 2014, 154; N. Wang 1988, 137).

According to the memoirs of Wang Li (2001, 664), a key Maoist of the CCRG and a participant in that meeting, Gu Mu’s report was endorsed mainly by provincial leaders, including Ma Tianshui from Shanghai. But the Maoists attending the meeting had prepared a counterattack, having learned that Mao was angry at this opposition and insisted that “only by seizing the revolution, can we accelerate economic production.” Zhang Chunqiao from the CCRG even quarreled with Ma Tianshui, his old colleague from Shanghai. The Maoists quickly vanquished those who endorsed Gu Mu’s report.

On December 6, the Maoists accused Tao Zhu, whom they believed to be the ringleader of this alliance of central technocrats and provincial leaders, of using economic production to suppress the revolution. Tao Zhu, recently promoted from Guangdong Province to be the fourth-ranking person in the party-state, epitomized the habitus of provincial leaders who, Maoists believed, had forged a temporary alliance with central technocrats in Beijing. Tao was forced to self-criticize in the meeting. He admitted, “I have not solved my problem mentally. . . . The provinces still have strong resistance, still have not come through mentally, and still have skepticism about many

aspects. . . . [I]n this circumstance, it is good in my opinion that the Party Center uses me as an example for criticism to educate the provinces" (N. Wang 1988, 140).⁷ Central planners like Yu Qiuli and Gu Mu also yielded under pressure: "We will come through mentally no matter what. . . . [W]e of course do not stand as high and see as far as Chairman Mao. . . . [E]ven if we don't come through mentally right now, we still believe in Chairman Mao's truth" (140).

While Mao had crushed this opposition, he had yet to prove that mobilizing workers would not disrupt the economy but would lead instead to political consolidation. Only then could he prevent the formation of a counter-coalition of provincial leaders and central planners. His eyes were on Shanghai, where a workers' revolt was already in the making.

(b) Workers' Demand for Economic Justice

Just as Gu Mu had predicted, economic issues fueled worker mobilization. In the weeks to come, workers in street-level factories, temporary workers, and contract workers became the fastest growing constituents of rebel organizations in Shanghai. Some groups grew to hundreds of thousands strong, and economic grievances were their galvanizing force. They articulated not only managerial abuses but also many preexisting worker grievances about salaries, benefits, and employment status. For example, many workers in local collective enterprises wanted their factories to become state-owned enterprises because the latter meant higher pay and more stable careers. Temporary and contract workers demanded to be recognized as part of the formal workforce because of the huge gap in pay and benefits. Many workers who were laid off in previous years now demanded to return to their factories.

During the month of December, worker agitation gained traction nationally. On December 1, hundreds of contract and temporary workers, who

7. Tao was purged in January 1967 as the figurehead of provincial leaders who resisted Mao's revolution. Zhou Enlai was in fact the ultimate central technocrat, but he had learned to bend with the wind and "work toward Mao" over the years. Upon hearing the protests and complaints from central technocrats and provincial leaders at the conference on November 24, Zhou warned them by citing two proverbs: "If we don't go to hell, who will? If we don't go into the tiger's den, who will?" (N. Wang 1988, 142–43). The former refers to a Buddhist proverb that stresses self-sacrifice for humanity, whereas the latter is from a Chinese proverb—"The only way to catch tiger cubs is to go into the tiger's den," which suggests the promise of such self-sacrifice.

traveled from all over the country to Beijing, found their shared grievances and declared themselves the “All-China Red Workers Rebel Corps” (*quanguo hongse laodongzhe zaofan zongtuan*) (ACRWRC). They staged a sit-in in the compound of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). As their numbers increased, pressure on officials mounted. On December 8, aware of the Maoist triumph at the Conference on Industrial and Transportation Affairs, the ACFTU agreed to recognize contract and temporary workers’ right to rebel, to prevent them from being arbitrarily fired, and to take steps to reform the contract and temporary employment system. On December 18, in a meeting with student rebel leaders, Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife and vice head of the CCRG, declared the contract employment system capitalistic and decried its precarious labor system as “nourishing slavery” (N. Wang 1988, 155). That evening, once ACRWRC activists caught wind of this, they occupied the ACFTU headquarters and the Ministry of Labor compound.

On December 23, after the ACFTU and the Ministry of Labor repeatedly postponed a meeting with the ACRWRC that they had agreed to the day before, the workers decided to escalate action. Two days later, thousands from the Beijing chapter of the ACRWRC held a rally in Tiananmen Square and besieged the Ministry of Labor for four hours. At that point, leaders of the ACRWRC were told by liaisons of the CCRG that central leaders would grant an audience to fifteen representatives from their group.

The night of December 26, when the CCRG leaders met with the ACRWRC representatives, Jiang Qing started by proclaiming, “Chairman Mao has your back!” She again called contract employment “capitalistic” and “reactionary” and accused the Ministry of Labor and the ACFTU, whose officials she had called to the meeting, of breaking agreements with the ACRWRC. When the ACRWRC representatives reported that they had occupied the Ministry of Labor and the ACFTU since the night before, both Chen Boda and Jiang Qing praised their actions. Upon hearing of the suffering that contract and temporary workers had endured, Jiang Qing teared up, compared them to the indentured laborers before the communist revolution, and apologized for what had happened to them. She condemned the officials of the ACFTU and the Ministry of Labor, demanding that they host the workers from outside Beijing and treat them as “Chairman Mao’s guests.” She also asked them to meet the workers’ demands (Jiang and Chen 1966). The next day, the ACFTU sent cars to take ACRWRC activists to ACFTU headquarters. From then on, the ACFTU was paralyzed, effectively taken over by the ACRWRC, until the latter was outlawed in mid-February 1967, along with a dozen other unofficial national-level mass organizations (J. Yang 2016, 375–76). By then, the Maoists had already abandoned their support

for workers' demands for redress of systemic injustice and allied themselves with Zhou Enlai and the central technocrats to suppress "economism." The political logic of this realignment, I suggest, is key to understanding the Shanghai January Storm and the Cultural Revolution as a whole.

The concessions given by Maoists to worker demands in December 1966 significantly emboldened workers to action across the country, including in Shanghai. The average rebel worker targeted local cadres, who, in their view, perpetuated the unjust situation. Provincial and local leaders, having learned their lesson from the Conference on Industrial and Transportation Affairs, began to give more leeway to lower-level cadres. On December 11, Chen Pixian, the first secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee (SMPC) and a longtime protégé of Mao, announced in a SMPC meeting a directive from Tao Zhu: "We are on the defense now, and we need to be proactive and try our best to address their [rebel workers'] demands" (J. Yang 2016, 379). At this point, frontline local cadres, facing assault from rebel workers on a daily basis and worried about their political survival, conceded to workers' demands for higher wages and fuller rights and benefits. Following this success, even the formal workforce in state-owned enterprises started demanding the back pay withheld during the economic hardship of the Great Leap Forward. These concessions prompted more workers to desert their posts and join the collective bargaining struggle, leading to widespread work stoppages.

The Scarlet Guards, who were supposed to be loyal to the SMPC, saw these concessions to rebel workers as a betrayal and decided also to "rebel" and storm the SMPC administrative compound on December 27, to make their own "revolutionary" demands. Although that occupation was quickly overrun by rebel organizations led by the WGHQ, many Scarlet Guards decided, on December 31, to follow the WGHQ example from early November and hijacked a train to Beijing to petition (J. Xu 2005, 20). Around the New Year of 1967, Shanghai was a scene of rampant work stoppages, teetering on the brink of economic paralysis.

This situation left Mao and his associates politically vulnerable to criticism, from central planners and provincial generalists, that their revolutionary project had economically paralyzed the country. Already on December 29, leaders of the ACRWRC had learned that the Maoists' support for workers' economic demands had run into adamant opposition from Zhou Enlai and the technocrat-dominated State Council (B. Li 2003). Mao and his allies were now caught up in a strategic dilemma.

Mao's initial plan on January 1, 1967, was to press Chen Pixian, head of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee who had been his longtime

protégé, to meet with leaders of workers' organizations and take control of the situation. To coordinate, he sent two trusted envoys, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyan, from the CCRG back to Shanghai, their previous political base.

When Zhang and Yao arrived on January 4, local cadres, literati rebels, Red Guards, and rebel workers were already staging actions that suggested a radically new way out of the stalemate. Among these actors, a network of political virtuosi⁸ emerged, centering on literati rebels in the Shanghai Municipal Propaganda Organ, with close connections to both workers' rebel organizations and Mao's envoys. Acutely sensitive to the changing political semiosis, these political virtuosi articulated a discourse of critiquing "economism" (*jingji zhuyi*) that drew upon Lenin's polemics against trade unionists in his famous treatise *What Is to Be Done?* This discourse, together with a few spontaneous local administrative takeovers, suggested to Mao a breakthrough by separating the political from the profane contamination of the economic (Douglas 2002).

(c) Attacking "Economism" and Seizing Political Power

The discourse of critiquing economism helped the Maoists score a resounding victory for four reasons. First, it asserted the ideological "purity" of "proletarian" consciousness and criticized workers making economic demands for following the "economistic wind"—a profane and pernicious influence responsible for the dissipation of the proletariat political consciousness. This "economistic wind" was not aligned with the Cultural Revolution project, because economic matters would drag revolutionary politics back into mundane affairs. Second, the discourse assigned the blame to provincial leaders by claiming that this economistic wind was stoked by provincial/local cadres, who tried to sabotage the revolution and weaken the proletariat's revolutionary will. Third, it helped crush workers' economic demands and avert a systemic crisis while capitalizing on their political energy by insisting on their self-disciplined focus on the political question. This question, Mao "clarified," was about seizing power from party conservatives, and formulating "the political" in this way kept economic institutions intact. Finally, and probably most importantly for Mao, this discourse allayed central planners'

8. Here, I borrow the undertheorized concept of "virtuosity" from Weber (1978, 538) to highlight these symbolic dynamics, referring to this network of Maoists as "political virtuosi" instead of "political entrepreneurs" (a term that political sociologists conventionally use).

concerns about demands for systemic reforms, thus preventing them from allying with provincial leaders.

In the meantime, a few spontaneous local incidents of administrative takeover (*jieguan*) in Shanghai's cultural agencies were re-signified by Mao as "power seizures" (*duoquan*) and cast as the model for true proletarian *political* action. Thus, the anti-economism discourse and the new gospel of power seizure worked in tandem. By separating the political from the profane contamination of the economic, this network of political virtuosi and Mao were able to orchestrate power seizure from the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, crush the grassroots economic demands, and declare victory in Mao's name.

The formulation of these discourses and their political success, however, were not premeditated by Mao, by Maoists in the CCRG or Shanghai,⁹ or by any other actors; nor were they preordained by antecedent structural factors. Rather, success hinged on unique local circumstances, their contingent timing and spatial conditions, and the Maoists' strategic acumen regarding fleeting political openings. There is no doubt that Mao commanded incomparable ideological authority during this period. Yet that authority did not equip him to surmount the challenges his adversaries and doubters might have exploited. While Mao was unquestionably a master strategist, his astuteness, as well as that of the Shanghai Maoists, did not derive from a purely materialist basis—that is, from the ability to manipulate the people and resources at their disposal—but from their attunement to the meanings and possibilities of the moment. Finally, their virtuosity also varied: The literati rebels like Xu Jingxian and Zhu Yongjia framed the two crucial documents, while Mao magnified their messages and re-signified local meanings; together they played the more important role in this pivot than the envoys Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan or Wang Hongwen, leader of WGHQ.¹⁰ My reconstruction of the sequence of events in relation to the political field in 1960s China captures this interplay of contingent circumstances and political virtuosity.

On New Year's Eve of 1967, with Mao's approval, Zhou Enlai urged SMPC head Chen Pixian to call back the Scarlet Guards, whose trip to Beijing was then halted at the suburban station of Kunshan. Chen was also

9. Given the situational fluidity, "Maoists" is used here as a loose category to refer to the radical propagandists and cultural technocrats in the CCRG, as well as local and even grassroots Maoists who were ideologically "working toward" the chairman.

10. Walder's (1978) seminal work on the Shanghai January Storm assigned great import to Zhang Chunqiao's strategic cunningness. New sources emerging since then show that other local actors often played a more defining role than Zhang.

to call an emergency meeting with leaders of rebel organizations to address the ongoing economic paralysis and stabilize the social order in Shanghai. The meeting with rebel leaders on January 1 did not start well, because they distrusted Chen and did not believe he had the mandate to address the issue (which he clearly had). Eventually, they did reach a compromise and finalized a declaration on January 4, the “Message to All the People of Shanghai,” in which they called for all workers to return to work to “take firm hold of the revolution and promote production.” At rebel leaders’ insistence, the “Message” held the SMPC and Scarlet Guards solely to blame for work stoppages and economic breakdown. Chen had qualms about taking the blame but decided to cave in to move the agenda forward. He signed the declaration, together with representatives from eleven rebel organizations, and had two hundred thousand copies distributed across Shanghai (P. Chen 2005, 105; J. Xu 2005, 23; Wu 2014, 116). Had Chen refused to sign the declaration over its scapegoating of the SMPC, the meaning of the anti-economism discourse would have been very different.

Meanwhile, administrative breakdowns in Shanghai’s cultural agencies prompted audacious rebels to fill the power vacuum. The first instance took place on January 3, when lower-level staff at the *Wen Hui Daily*, Shanghai’s leading newspaper, assumed management. The next day’s issue announced the takeover, prompting a chain of similar takeovers at other newspapers and radio stations over the next few days. Then, on January 5, the *Wen Hui Daily* published the “Message to All the People of Shanghai.” Although those involved in drafting the “Message” saw it as a temporary measure to address economic paralysis and did not expect it to succeed (Wang Hongwen, leader of WGHQ, even ignored it), Mao saw it as an opportunity to break out of his dilemma, attribute new meanings to the statement, and forge political realignment. To Mao, it represented a grassroots initiative to confront economic breakdown, an interpretation made possible when the *Wen Hui Daily* conveniently left out Chen Pixian’s signature and his role in drafting the declaration. Had Mao known Chen’s central role and the literati rebels’ role in ghostwriting the “Message,” it would not have impressed him as a grassroots initiative.¹¹

11. The *Wen Hui Daily* takeover, which Mao appeared to learn about immediately in the early hours of January 4, was clearly the turning point when Mao decided to abandon his early support for workers’ economic demands. The “Message” that the *Wen Hui Daily* published on January 5 further tipped him toward articulating a new paradigm that rejected economism and promoted power seizure. I identify this sequence because on January 3, the CCRG still supported the general notice that the ACRWRC drafted to address workers’ demands and approved the distribution

Moreover, by blaming the SMPC and the Scarlet Guards for the work stoppages (and for disobeying the chairman's dictate to "take firm hold of the revolution and promote production"), the text offered political clarity amid the situational ambiguity and confusion. Condemning the SMPC and the Scarlet Guards as forces of disorder solved Mao's political dilemma; the rebels, in contrast, were presented as both revolutionary and disciplined. The literati rebels who drafted the declaration even had the political acumen to partially exonerate the Scarlet Guards, insisting that they had been deceived by the SMPC's "capitalist reactionary line" (Zhu 2014, 181). Thus, the "Message" turned rebel workers into the sacred bearers of an emergent revolutionary order.

Politically, the *Wen Hui Daily* incident suggested to Mao a breakthrough of resignification. While rebels called their action an administrative "takeover" (*jieguan*), Mao rebranded it as a "power seizure" (*duoquan*). Although the phrase "power seizure" was not unheard of, it had been hitherto used only in connection with the replacement of key leaders in a government agency coordinated by the Party Center, with enthusiastic support from the masses. The *Wen Hui Daily* takeover and subsequent actions in other cultural agencies took place in a chaotic and fluid situation in which coordination became effectively impossible. Yet, for Mao, these were much more than administrative takeovers—by using the term "power seizure" he imbued them with revolutionary significance. During a January 8 meeting with the Central Cultural Revolution Group, he enthusiastically praised the takeover and publication of the "Message":

The leftists in *Wen Hui Daily* have seized power; this is a step in the good direction. . . . [It] is a question of national significance. . . . This is a great revolution, a great revolution in which one class overthrows another class. If the revolutionary forces in Shanghai are united and rise to seize power and seize leadership, the prospect of the entire country will be turned around. (X. Li 2015, 607)

He then ordered the "Message" to be broadcast nationwide. By rebranding the *Wen Hui Daily* incident, Mao sought to redirect workers' energy from

of three hundred thousand copies of it nationwide on January 5. Yet, on January 4 at 10:00 a.m., Jiang Qing notified the ACRWRC that it should halt its release with a one-sentence explanation: "We will be cornered if we release it now." On January 5, the CCRG demanded that the ACRWRC destroy all copies of the general notice. Two leaders of the ACRWRC quietly defied the CCRG's demand and released the notice, which spread widely in southwest China. They paid a heavy price for their defiance, serving prison sentences of twenty years and ten years, respectively (B. Li 2003).

demanding economic justice to a revolutionary politics of new beginnings. With this move, he and the Maoists made a point of separating the political from the economic.

That separation is thrown into even sharper relief in a second critical document and subsequent developments. On the day Mao praised the *Wen Hui Daily* takeover, Chen Pixian and leaders of rebel organizations in Shanghai met again to address economic breakdown. They resolved to produce an “Urgent Notice” to stem the tide of frontline officials making economic concessions to rebels who had raised material grievances, believing it would help stabilize the situation. In it, the phrase “economism” was invoked for the first time.

The literati rebels who drafted the “Urgent Notice” blamed the SMPC for work stoppages and “economism,” which they characterized as a “new capitalist reactionary line that the SMPC has insistently carried out” to “sabotage the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution” and “corrode the revolutionary will of the masses with material benefits” (X. Li 2015, 667). According to its chief drafter, Zhu Yongjia, although this document again “attributed all the bad things to the SCMP and all the good things to the rebels,” Chen Pixian decided to agree with its terms (Zhu 2014, 195). Rebel organizations whose economic demands were particularly important refused to sign the document, but thirty-two other organizations did. The “Urgent Notice” published in the *Wen Hui Daily* on January 9 again conveniently left out Chen Pixian’s signature and thus dramatized it as a grassroots initiative.

While many in Shanghai, including Mao’s envoys, initially did not pay much attention to the “Urgent Notice,” Mao saw it as great material for a strategic pivot. By resorting to the notion of “economism,”¹² which has been historically loaded in the Marxist tradition since Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, and by scapegoating “a handful of capitalist roaders” within the SCMP while publicly claiming the revolutionary unity of the masses, the “Urgent Notice” suggested an ideological clarity about the agents and counteragents of the Cultural Revolution—a clarity the Maoists badly needed in a confusing and chaotic moment. Moreover, by blaming economic paralysis on provincial and local party officials, Mao allayed central planners’ concerns and drove a wedge between central planners and provincial/local generalists, preventing them from forging a counter-coalition to oppose his pivot toward a new power configuration across the country through the political program of power seizure.

Thus, on January 11, Mao took the unprecedented step of sending a con-

12. The precise wording of “economism” (*jingji zhuyi*) did not appear in the “Urgent Notice” itself but in the *Wen Hui Daily* editor’s note.

gratulatory telegraph in the name of the Party Center to the thirty-two rebel signatories to the “Urgent Notice,” praising them for seizing power and combating the economistic wind, which Mao, following local Maoists, claimed to be a SMPC scheme. Many rebel workers in Shanghai were exuberant. But workers’ organizations with strong economic demands were demoralized. Some tried to keep up with the times by readapting their message and image but lost large contingents of their rank and file. Others tried to hold onto their principles but were quickly disbanded and defeated by rebel organizations led by the WGHQ (Shen 2010, 297).¹³ The Scarlet Guards, who initially supported the SMPC, immediately went into organizational collapse. Some of them put up big-character posters, “humbly apologizing to Chairman Mao” and acknowledging their mistake in opposing the rebels (X. Li 2015, 692). In this way, workers with material demands, who had been the main driver of the mobilization weeks earlier, were gradually but ruthlessly neutralized.

Mao’s endorsement of the “Urgent Notice” spurred a further wave of power seizures across factories, schools, and party organizations in Shanghai. Then, on January 16, his open support of the Shanghai rebels taking down the SMPC accelerated and spread the wave of power seizures to the entire country. Finally, on February 5, Mao’s envoys in Shanghai, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, coordinated with rebel organizations to form a new governing power, which was announced with great fanfare as the “Shanghai Commune” in reference to the Paris Commune of 1871.

Hence, Mao portrayed the Shanghai January Storm as both the climax of revolutionary power seizure and a resolute economic stabilization. This allowed the Maoists to decisively overcome the political dilemma that they

13. At this point, Mao had left Zhou Enlai and the State Council to finish off the ACRWRC. On January 20, Zhou’s representatives asked the ACRWRC to disband, saying “Your historic mission is now over. You have inaugurated the new high tide of the Cultural Revolution in the industrial sector. This new high tide is now being used by the capitalist roaders, who are stoking the antirevolutionary economism nationwide and sabotaging Chairman Mao’s grand strategic deployment. You should know that Chairman Mao’s current strategic plan is power seizure. . . . Now there have emerged so many national organizations after you. If you seize power from the ACFTU, what power would other organizations seize? The power of the Party Center? The power of the State Council? Wouldn’t that be suicidal? Therefore, the Party Center has decided to outlaw all national organizations” (B. Li 2003). Leaders of the ACRWRC tried to hold out but were eventually dealt with violently. By early March, all major leaders had been arrested. Thus ended the greatest independent labor movement in the history of the People’s Republic of China.

faced toward the end of 1966. At the same time, recognizing this fact, Mao decided that the seizures should not be limited to Shanghai but used to resolve the problem of political stalemate nationwide and prove that his revolutionary agenda had triumphed. It was, in the short term at least, a deft dance of political maneuver by Mao.

To guarantee that the stalemate and paralysis elsewhere would be resolved as forcefully as it had been in Shanghai, on January 22 Mao ordered the military to “support the left” and help the masses create a tripartite alliance (*san jiehe*) of army officers, rehabilitatable provincial and local cadres, and mass organizations, which were to form the new governing power across China, just as the Shanghai Commune had done. Mao made a crucial terminological change to the Shanghai model, replacing “Shanghai Commune” with “Shanghai People’s Revolutionary Committee”—a change that, he pointed out, retained the role of the vanguard party in the new regime (X. Li 2015, 811). After thus setting the stage, he ordered a revised Shanghai declaration of power seizure to be broadcast nationwide. This set off a cascade of power seizures across the whole country, whose outcomes turned out very differently from what Mao had expected and were also deeply consequential in shaping the emergence of ordoeconomism in post-Mao China.

IV. The Permutations of the Great Separation: From Maoism to Ordoeconomism

How did this Maoist separation of the political from the economic condition and transform into other configurations of politics-economy separation, until they became consolidated as ordoeconomism in the post-Tiananmen era?

From the Maoist separation in 1967 Shanghai, permutations of the politics-economy separation can be divided into four phases: public disenchantment with mass politics and the rise of popular materialism/economism; conflict between Maoist ascetic paternalism and popular economism; the demise of Maoism and the rise of rudimentary ordoeconomism in the early Reform era; and the Tiananmen Incident and ordoeconomism’s consolidation. In each phase, how the relationship between the political and the economic was configured was a reaction to its antecedent form and a causal condition of its subsequent form.

(a) *Public Disenchantment with Mass Politics
and the Rise of Popular Materialism*

The first phase, public disenchantment with mass politics, was an unintended consequence of the Maoist pivot in Shanghai that gave rise to a simmering popular materialism. This development would clash with Maoism in the second phase.

The Shanghai pivot had extricated Mao from a political dilemma and scored him a major political victory. Yet, its success was conditioned by several unique local circumstances that Mao and Maoists were unaware of or did not take seriously, including miscommunications and misinterpretations about actual agents on the ground, Chen's passive acceptance of blame, and the (somewhat creative) misattribution by local Maoists of anti-economism to the "proletarian masses." Like many historical actors, Mao and the Maoists *took the social effect of their act as its cause, wrote off its contingent conditions, and projected their feat as the inevitable outcome of robust forces and heroic agency.*

Therefore, when trying to replicate the Shanghai model nationwide, the Maoists disregarded the fact that the unique conditions and the network of political virtuosi essential for their success in Shanghai were lacking elsewhere. The disastrous consequences of their attempt to replicate the Shanghai model soon became obvious.

On the one hand, political factionalism intensified as mass organizations of various stripes maneuvered to muster enough combined capacity to wrest the governing apparatus from party organizations and ride the fleeting opportunity to secure their place within the new power configuration. With bread-and-butter issues ruled out, mass struggles descended into a new chain of chaotic events, as rival coalitions took power and drove out their competitors on a daily basis.

The military intervention Mao ordered to "support the left" and stabilize the situation often only exacerbated it, as rival coalitions competed to claim the mantle that should get military support. Not only did the military have a hard time identifying "the left," but it also split into rival factions that supported competing coalitions of mass organizations. Thus, Mao's grand scheme to break out of the political dilemma by a coup de foudre only created more chaos; the country descended into de facto civil war. Unlike in Shanghai, where leaders had consolidated a revolutionary committee weeks after seizing power,¹⁴ most cities and towns underwent protracted and seem-

14. Even in Shanghai, Zhang Chunqiao and his WGHQ allies were not able to

ingly unending strife that made their efforts to consolidate a single revolutionary committee futile (Walder 2019).

On the other hand, by stripping bread-and-butter issues from mass politics, the Maoist pivot led to political disenchantment and a depoliticized form of popular materialism. With economic issues marked as untouchable, many who were galvanized by economic injustice drifted away and grew increasingly cynical and apathetic about the new politics, which they saw as simply a cover for factional power grabs. As many deserted the mass organizations for which they had once ardently fought, they retreated into popular materialism/economism in their private lives.

The new cycle of factionalism culminated in June–July 1967 in Wuhan, the metropolis of Central China. Two rival coalitions, each a million members strong and each with support from rival factions in local military garrisons, clashed violently. Mao himself had to flee the city for safety on July 20, when he was conducting an unpublicized tour of the city. By this point, Mao realized that he had to devise a way to end the sound and the fury of mass struggle. Three members of the CCRG most involved in grassroots agitation were soon purged. Sensing the growing popular ennui and antipathy toward mass politics, Mao began to press for demobilizing students and workers by direct military intervention and for reorganizing the revolutionary committees in a heavy-handed top-down manner.

By late 1967, Mao had shifted his definition of the Cultural Revolution from an unprecedented revolution to a continuation of the old revolution against the Kuomintang (*Red Flag* 1967). Since the latter was defined as a deadly struggle against enemies, this pronouncement lethally intensified the antagonisms and violence between rival factions, which Mao then used to discredit the mass movement and restore the party-centered political order. On the fateful night of July 27, 1968, after the last rebel organizations were suppressed on Beijing campuses, Mao met with rebel leaders from five universities. When they complained that a “black hand” of counterrevolutionary forces sought to repress their revolutionary project, Mao majestically announced, “I am the black hand!” (1968). This time, he invoked the popular weariness with the “great democracy,” the very experiment he had called into being: “The masses don’t like civil wars. . . . The people are unhappy, the workers are unhappy, the peasants are unhappy. Beijing residents are unhappy, the students in most schools are unhappy” (Mao 1968; Wu 2014, 198). Many rebel leaders and activists, save a select few who managed to find

contain the power-grabbing challenges of rival mass organizations until after August 1967.

new political patrons, were arrested, persecuted, and scapegoated over the next two years.

By separating the political from the economic, Mao had narrowed the scope of the new politics into which he welcomed the masses in June 1966. The result was a growing chasm between the lofty rhetoric of this new politics and the realpolitik power grab manifested in the factional struggle. In the end, the masses deserted the new politics, as the Maoist pivot to remove the economic from the political had deprived them of their say in defining the terms of the new politics. The experience of “mass politics” had turned into irrational mob actions that brought no concrete benefit to participants and whose deceptive rhetoric was stoked by manipulators with ulterior designs.¹⁵ It is through this cynical lens that the Chinese ordoeconomism of today sees mass politics wherever it is encountered. Although that cynicism was already incipient in the late 1960s, it only consolidated after the Tiananmen movement of 1989. It took three more historical phases for ordoeconomism to emerge and crystallize in its mature form.

(b) The Clash of Two Economic Visions in the Late Mao Era

What emerged in the wake of Mao’s termination of mass politics was the recuperation of the economic impulse, manifested in two competing visions. One side is what I call a simmering “popular materialism” following the disenchantment of socialist politics. Historians have documented a surging consumerist wave at the turn of the 1970s around the acquisition of consumer durables like bicycles, watches, radios, and sewing machines (Jin 2011; Gerth 2020).

Their qualitative account is borne out by retail sales data from this period, which I present in figure 3, working from data compiled by the State Statistical Bureau of China. Sales of wrist watches, bicycles, radios, and sewing machines all experienced a dramatic increase around 1968–69 and have seen persistently rapid annual growth since then. In comparison, the retail growth of staple goods like salt and grains was rather insignificant. Moreover, the scale at which these “luxury” goods were acquired in 1968–69

15. The development of cynicism toward mass politics preceded and conditioned skepticism toward Mao himself, which became suddenly widespread after Lin Biao, Mao’s heir apparent since Liu Shaoqi’s disgrace, died in a mysterious plane crash on September 13, 1971. The Lin Biao Incident reinforced cynicism toward mass politics by reducing the Cultural Revolution to a series of palace intrigues and writing off the agency of the masses in shaping its course.

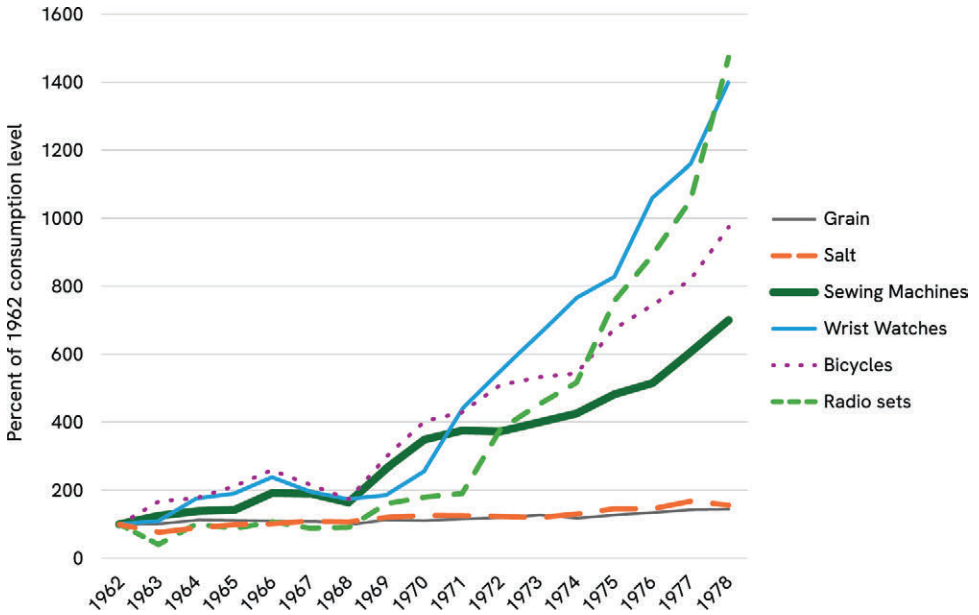


Fig. 3. Relative rise in consumer durables versus rise in staple consumption (salt and grains), 1962–78. (Source: Data from *Statistical Yearbook of China* [China 1983], 375, 379.)

went well beyond a simple recovery of their pre-1966 levels, indicating that the popular consumerism recounted by many former Cultural Revolution participants was real and strong.

Opposing this popular materialism was Maoist ascetic paternalism. In the early 1970s, Maoists began to implement a set of nominally egalitarian economic and social policies in salaries, benefits, healthcare, and education from the top down, as Mao's last-ditch effort to respond to popular material interests and salvage the tarnished image of his Cultural Revolution project.

But Maoists found themselves in a predicament. Because of their rejection of economism in 1967, they were constrained from directly answering the call to gratify popular economism by accelerating economic development. Zhang Chunqiao, whom Mao entrusted to draft political reports for the Ninth and Tenth Party Congresses (1969 and 1973), made sure to condemn in those reports any such call as “productionism” (*wei shengchanli lun*), a profane idea aimed to develop “productive forces” without politically transforming the “relations of production.” Thus, they were forced to offer ascetic egalitarianism at the expense of popular materialism. The contemporary stereotype of Maoist austerity therefore needs to be historicized in this

political context as path dependent on Maoists' earlier rejection of economism during the Shanghai January Storm.

On the other hand, the catastrophic failure of the Maoist program in 1967–68, and the ensuing popular disenchantment toward mass politics, narrowed the Maoists' policy repertoires to a top-down disciplinarian approach. Contrary to the few remaining rebel workers who called for the revival of "great democracy" to redress economic injustices, Maoists stressed the primacy of political stability and deployed the rebuilt party-state to deal harshly with attempts at bottom-up mass politics that threatened Mao's emphasis on "stability and unity" (*anding tuanjie*). They settled for a top-down enforcement of nominally egalitarian policies, as when Zhang Chunqiao argued in 1975 that "it would be necessary to implement a wide range of state policies favoring egalitarian forms of distribution, as well as to instill a proletarian consciousness among the party workers. The need to strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat—that is, to install a centralized and disciplinarian state power—was justified by the need to reduce socioeconomic inequalities" (Wu 2014, 210).

While the effects of egalitarian programs in Mao's last years—from healthcare to education—were palpable (Andreas 2019), they were predicated not on any interest in revitalizing the democratic impetus of socialism but on a paternalistic notion of ascetic indoctrination (Walder 1986). The meager gains in economic egalitarianism granted from the top came at a cost of an increasingly alienating experience with state indoctrination. Ironically, then, the Maoists were now stuck with the very top-down disciplinarian approach—Liu Shaoqi style—that they had opposed several years ago.

Moreover, this paternalistic economic egalitarianism of Mao's last years was accompanied by the stagnation of wages up to 1978, as seen in figure 4. The suppression of wages was especially onerous considering the surging popular desire to acquire consumer goods during this same period. This tension eventually paved the way for the demise of Maoism and the rise of a rudimentary ordoeconomism that shaped China's economic reforms.

(c) The Demise of Maoism and the Rise of Rudimentary Ordoeconomism: The Alchemy of the Great Separation

While the Maoists were beset by their own past success and failure, a new counter-coalition inexorably began to take shape, composed of central generalists like Deng Xiaoping, central technocrats headed by Zhou Enlai and later Chen Yun, and provincial/local generalists like Zhao Ziyang and Wan

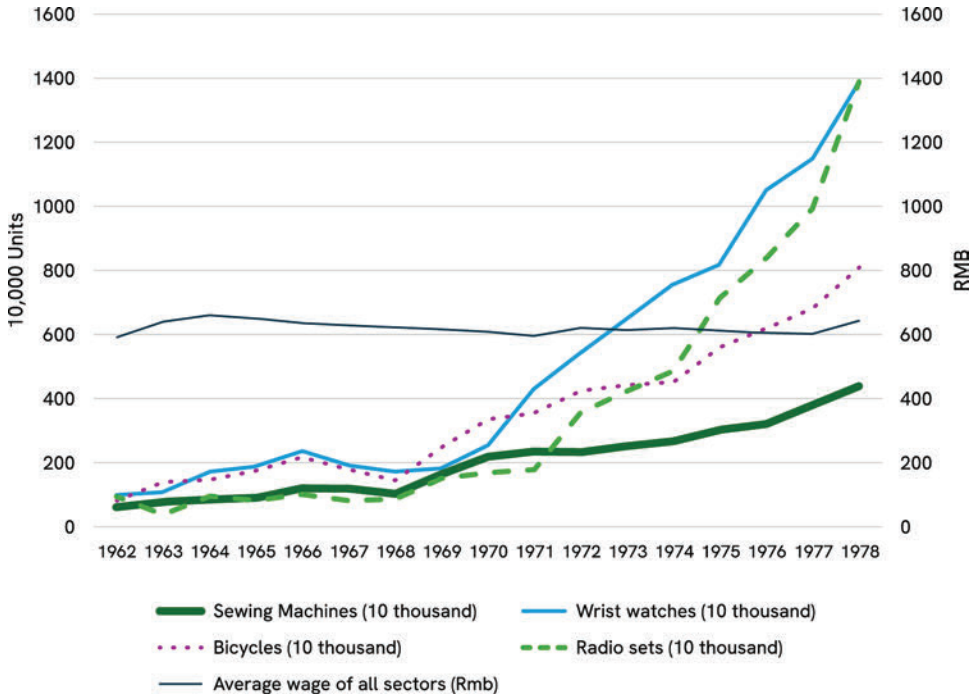


Fig. 4. Tension between rising consumerism and wage stagnation (in state-owned units). (Source: Data from *Statistical Yearbook of China* [China 1983], 375, 490).

Li. Their thinking loosely coalesced around the doctrine of “Four Modernizations” in industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense. Yet, this reform coalition could not have come into being without a political process through which the doctrine of “Four Modernizations” became opposed to Maoism. It was in this context that the emerging reform coalition was able to harness popular materialism and jettison Maoism as a political superstructure no longer in touch with its economic base. The move was popular and successful because the Maoist ascetic paternalism was experienced as a top-down imposition. Paradoxically, the ideological alchemy of separating the political and the economic that Maoists first initiated in 1967 conditioned its own demise a decade later.

The demise of Maoism was accomplished in a theoretical debate on the criterion of truth in 1978, in which ideologues drew upon Marxist vocabulary to establish the ideological grounds for economic reform. This debate took over the front pages of state media less than two years after Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four. In the debate, Maoism failed to with-

stand the argument that it was a form of superstructure that was out of touch with material practices, which should be the “only criterion of truth,” and therefore it should be thoroughly reformed. Marxist materialist discourse thus served as a halfway house for the triumph of popular materialism. Hu Yaobang, a central generalist and protégé of Deng Xiaoping who coordinated the Dengist polemics, emerged as an indispensable figure and in 1981 became the nominal leader of the party.

The momentum for reform among both political elites and the populace was unambiguously strong, yet the precise trajectory toward decentralization and marketization while maintaining the political supremacy of the party-state was shaped by a host of causes and processes. It suffices for the moment to point out three factors directly related to the pathway from Maoism to ordoeconomism. First, regarding institutional politics, the importance of provincial/local leaders in Deng’s coalition began to reverse the disciplinary and centralized approach favored by Maoists. This helped revive policy experiments that provincial/local leaders had engaged in during the early 1960s to accommodate market practices after the devastating planning failure of the Great Leap Forward famine.

Second, ideologically, because paternal egalitarianism in Mao’s later years was an attempt to co-opt popular economic impulses and was experienced by the Chinese populace as a state-imposed nuisance, its post-Mao rejection was intertwined with an embrace of economic efficiency and social inequalities as a natural and progressive move toward modernity (Rofel 2007).¹⁶ This ideological change meant the Dengist turn toward the market was more than a revival of local accommodations of the early 1960s; it was a much more profound transformation toward the total marketization of social life.

Third, the international context mattered, too. China’s diplomatic détente with the United States and Japan in 1972 paved the way for the investigation of and exposure to capitalist East Asian developmental models at the end of the 1970s, which helped to naturalize the acceptance of marketization. Between the diplomatic détente and the economic retooling were years during which popular materialism/economism triumphed over Maoism. Therefore, China’s marketization was not spontaneous and natural but conditioned by the excesses set in motion by the great separation Maoists imposed in 1967 Shanghai.

16. It is the rejection of egalitarianism at this juncture that cemented the post-Mao domination of meritocracy as the ultimate social vision, one that has found a common ground with the neoliberal social vision (Sandel 2020). This subject warrants a separate study.

The shift toward a market economy was at the same time accompanied by the continued rejection of bottom-up mass politics that Deng Xiaoping's reform coalition inherited from the Maoists.¹⁷ The so-called Beijing Spring or Democracy Wall movement of 1978–79 helped create the social climate for the ascendance and consolidation of Deng's reform coalition. Yet, once activists called for a "fifth modernization"—democracy—Deng's coalition swiftly squelched the movement, because it perceived in mass politics a threat to economic modernization. In 1980, the "four big freedoms"—speak out freely, air views fully, write big-character posters, and hold public debates (*daming, dafang, dazibao, dabianlun*)—were removed from the Chinese Constitution on the pretext that they contributed to political instability like that experienced during the Cultural Revolution.

Thus, China's reform toward a market economy and opening to global capitalism was based on the supremacy of political stability. Political elites in Deng's reform coalition connected mass politics to the factional violence and chaos of the CCR. Thus emerged the rudimentary form of ordoeconomism. These associations, which undergirded economism, persisted throughout the 1980s and were further reinforced after the Tiananmen Incident of 1989. On February 26, 1989, just seven weeks before the Tiananmen movement broke out, Deng Xiaoping told the visiting US President George H. W. Bush:

The overriding issue for China is the need for stability. Without a stable environment, [we] cannot accomplish anything and what has been accomplished will be lost. China must uphold reform and opening. This is the hope for solving China's problems. But [we] must have a stable political environment to reform. . . . China is in a process in which [we] need particularly to focus on developing the economy. If [we] pursue the formalism of democracy, the result is that [we] won't obtain democracy, nor develop the economy, but only end up in a situation of national chaos and spiritual disintegration. About this, we have profound experience, because we have experienced the Cultural Revolution and seen with our own eyes its catastrophic consequences. (1994, 284–85)

The perception of the mutual exclusiveness of mass politics and economic development, and the cognitive association of mass politics with the CCR

17. Moreover, the Dengists disavowed the Maoists precisely by denouncing them for remaining a major threat to the "stability and unity" the Maoists themselves had sworn to maintain since the early 1970s.

encapsulated in Deng's discourse, shaped how political elites reacted to the Tiananmen movement.

However, the perception and cognitive association that Deng indicated are anachronistic because neither ordoeconomism nor the popular materialism/economism that begot ordoeconomism existed before the Shanghai January Storm. Popular economism emerged only afterward, as a backlash against the catastrophic political consequences of the Maoist separation of the political from the economic. Workers' demands for economic justice on the eve of the Shanghai January Storm, which the Maoists labeled as "economism," were not premised on the mutual exclusion of mass politics and economic interests, as popular economism since 1968–69 had been. On the contrary, workers turned their economic demands into political action and infused their political action with substantive economic meanings.

(d) *The Great Separation in the Tiananmen Incident*

Ordoeconomism, which took rudimentary shape in the 1980s, became hegemonic and fully formed after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. This process was not a simple diffusion from political elites to the wider populace but was itself constrained by the interplay of the political and the economic, conditioned by the logic of the great separation. This was evident both during the popular occupation of Tiananmen Square and after the massacre that ended it.

As Zhao (2001) shows, party elites in Deng's reform coalition reacted to the Tiananmen movement rather uniformly as if it were another episode of mass political turmoil—like what they had experienced during the CCR—that they needed to avert (*People's Daily* editorial, April 26, 1989). The actual process of producing this uniformity was complicated by an intraparty succession crisis, as Su (2023) demonstrates. Invoking the negative legacy of the Cultural Revolution "turmoil" played a powerful role in cementing this uniformity among party leaders, at the expense of the outlier Zhao Ziyang.

Even though party elites in the 1980s stressed political stability and rejected mass politics as a threat to economic development, they nevertheless entertained the idea of political reform—and even of "developing socialist democracy." In the February 26 meeting with George H. W. Bush, Deng said:

We do want to develop socialist democracy, but not hastily, nor following the Western model. If the one billion of us ran in multi-party

elections now, a chaotic “all-out civil war” like the Cultural Revolution would inevitably ensue. . . . Democracy is our goal, but the state must maintain stability. (1994, 285)

Thanks to the lip service paid to “developing socialist democracy,” political reform was widely anticipated, even though democracy seemed a distant goal. The situation fueled democracy advocacy among intellectuals/students and workers. But over time the gap between these two groups widened, until they were moving in opposite directions, unlike the student-worker alliances commonly seen during the CCR. The causes of this divergence were complex. To put it simply, intellectuals and students looked forward to a liberalizing and democratizing future in which they would play a bigger political role. Workers, on the other hand, saw the early 1980s as golden years, when welfare paternalism had expanded, but without Maoist asceticism and disciplinarian political campaigns (Walder 1986) and before the introduction of urban enterprise and pricing reforms in the late 1980s, which created employment precarity, welfare, social disenfranchisement, and inflation (Andreas 2019). In short, for workers, the early 1980s brought popular materialism with protections.

This divergence shaped interaction between intellectuals/students and workers during the Tiananmen movement. Even though workers were essential to public support for the Tiananmen movement, they were often pushed aside by students, who saw their economic demands as “impure” and their defense of workers’ socialist rights as inconvenient and outdated (Walder and Gong 1993). The students’ repudiation of worker demands for full economic citizenship thus strikingly and tragically echoed the rejection of economism that the Maoist political virtuosi had fashioned in 1967. This division between students and workers contributed significantly to the tragic ending of the Tiananmen movement.

The traumatic ending of the Tiananmen movement further convinced many liberal intellectuals of the irrationality of mass politics. For them, Tiananmen demonstrated that China was not ready for democracy, due to vestiges of communist revolutionary excess, especially those of the Cultural Revolution (Li and Liu 1995, 13–23; Tsou 2000). Democracy, they surmised, requires the kind of rationality that only a market economy would be able to foster among the Chinese people.¹⁸ Like the market moralists in early

18. This set the stage for the massive popularity of Hayek’s vision of market and morality as the basis of spontaneous social order (Brown 2019) in China, in the 1990s and beyond.

modern Europe in Albert Hirschman's ([1977] 1997) classic treatise, Chinese elites and intellectuals believed that private vices were needed to rectify the excess of public virtue and that economic rationality could tame political passions.¹⁹

This view, of course, echoed and meshed with the global neoliberal discourse and the assertion that economic liberalization and marketization is the foundation of democracy and democratic resilience. Once China's marketization deepened, it would build a middle class whose members would demand a rational and stable democracy that would be in harmony with the free market. The historical irony is that marketization can undermine the very social solidarity necessary for democratization, which only comes from sustained mass participatory politics (Kadivar 2018).

Once ordoeconomism became hegemonic among political elites, intellectuals, and the new middle class, it began to constrain the political space of workers and peasants, who often bore the brunt of marketization's social impacts. While these enormous impacts have provoked widespread social protests by workers and peasants, these protests come up against the ideological hegemony of the state-market complex (Blecher 2002). In the face of this ordoeconomistic rejection of bottom-up politics and a stability-maintenance apparatus characterized by Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang (2013) as "bargained authoritarianism," workers and peasants are constrained from demanding independent political subjectivity and compelled to limit their demands to individualized economic bargains.

V. Conclusion and Discussion: The Great Separation in Comparative and Historical Perspective

This study approaches the political origins of Reform China as a question of hegemonic transformation from Maoism to ordoeconomism, an ideology that valorizes economic development, rejects mass politics as a threat to material improvement, and considers the state a natural and apolitical guard-

19. The mid-1990s saw a group of New Left intellectuals departing from this liberal camp and growing more critical of China's embrace of marketization and globalization. Yet, their social protectionist agenda was centered not on revitalizing mass politics in the present but on defending China's "socialist legacies" from the past, thus reinforcing the statist tendency within ordoeconomism. These New Left intellectuals have also been instrumental in promoting economistic solutions to the political challenges the Chinese state has faced, especially in the peripheries like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

ian of economic development. Taking an eventful sociological approach to scrutinize the interactions between elite politics and labor mobilization during the 1967 Shanghai January Storm crisis, I find that the Maoists, in the face of both worker uprisings and intra-elite pushback, devised the pivotal separation of the political from the economic to capitalize on workers' political energy while neutralizing their economic demands. This separation, however, resulted in the unintended consequence of disenchantment with mass politics and the rise of popular economism, which eventually led to an ideological shift to ordoeconomism.

Uncovering this history contributes to Connell and Dados's (2014) call to rectify the North Atlantic centrism of existing scholarship on the origins of contemporary global capitalism and neoliberalism, by integrating the historical experiences of state socialism in China, which has also been the biggest beneficiary of neoliberal globalization in the last four decades. An important payoff of recovering this history has been discovering a crucial reason for China's thriving under neoliberal globalization, namely, the strange bedfellowship between ordoeconomism and neoliberalism, thanks to their shared rejection of mass politics and shared agenda of using the economy and market to contain the political challenges from the populace (Brown 2017; Slobodian 2018). Merely two weeks after the Tiananmen Massacre, George H. W. Bush secretly sent Brent Scowcroft, his national security adviser, to visit Deng Xiaoping to "talk out . . . the difficulties between friends" (Bush 1999, 428–31). While material interests played an important role in this post-Tiananmen settlement, they were understood and justified by the common discursive logic of the economicist reductionism of politics: Marketization and free trade would render political difference increasingly irrelevant.

This bedfellowship was possible because, despite their disagreement on the state-market relationship, neoliberalism and ordoeconomism agree on the separation of the economic from the disruptive influence of the political (cf. Douglas 2002), which provides a commensurable grammar by which these two hegemonic ideologies can communicate and negotiate.

Indeed, the formation of ordoeconomism was influenced by neoliberalism, since it was consolidated only after Tiananmen, over a decade after neoliberalism captured policymaking power in Chile under Pinochet, and then in the UK and the United States, when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came into office (Harvey 2005). Yet, considered from the Polanyian perspective, the postwar era was an age of de-separation between the political and the economic in both the communist East and the capitalist West, and so the Maoist separation of the political from the economic in 1967 actually predated the neoliberal separation of the economic from the politi-

cal (Blyth 2002). And the disastrous failure of the Cultural Revolution, that last great spasm of communist politics, contributed to the global ideological climate in which neoliberalism ascended in the late 1970s.

By declaring the end of socialist mass politics and embracing market reform, ordoeconomism gave credence to neoliberals' TINA (There Is No Alternative) claim. Interestingly, ordoeconomism and neoliberalism have not only shored each other up through their commonalities; even their differences have tended to reinforce their hegemony in their respective dominions. On the one hand, for a long time, neoliberals attributed China's illiberalism to state intervention in the economy, strengthening their claim that industrial policy is a slippery slope into dictatorship. On the other hand, the neoliberal approach to democratization has separated the economy as self-regulating and thus has insulated it from democratic political participation, confirming the Chinese ordoeconomistic narrative that democratization does not bring concrete material benefits to the masses and amounts to nothing more than empty political rhetoric and factionalism, which the Chinese masses had already experienced during the CCR.

Uncovering this history also sheds new light on the divergent trajectories that China and its fellow communist states in Eastern Europe have taken in their interaction and integration with global capitalism. While the latter's pathway combined political and economic liberalization, China's was characterized by the clear separation of political continuity and economic liberalization.²⁰ The Maoist separation of the political from the economic during the Shanghai moment was unique in the history of communist politics, thanks largely to the unprecedented contingent conjunctures of elite conflicts and workers' mobilization in the CCR. This separation inadvertently led to the combination of deep-seated disenchantment with mass politics and a simmering popular economism, which conditioned the ordoeconomistic schema of economic reform without political reform.²¹ In contrast, Eastern European countries embraced the whole neoliberal package of economic marketization and political democratization (while at the same time,

20. The remaining communist-ruled states have either isolated themselves from global capitalism (North Korea and Cuba) or followed the Chinese path of integration (Vietnam).

21. Indeed, unlike Eastern European states, China did not fall into a debt trap in the 1970s and 1980s, which augmented the power of the neoliberal doctrines that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank brought to Eastern Europe (Mark et al. 2019; Bartel 2022). This fact makes a materialist explanation insufficient to account for China's economic reforms and begs for a political and culturalist explanation, which this essay provides.

true to the neoliberal spirit, setting up a market reform agenda insulated from the democratization process). In other words, in Eastern Europe, the great separation occurred in 1989 with the adoption of the neoliberal package, while in China, the great separation occurred in 1967, at the height of the CCR, and triggered a process that steered China onto a distinct ordoeconomistic path.

Internationally, as neoliberalism wanes, ordoeconomism can become an appealing alternative model for state elites in emerging economies, even though it was grounded in China's unique experience of the CCR. Its thorough rejection of mass politics, its developmentalism, and its familial social imaginaries make it a more adaptive form of governmentality than neoliberalism, which presupposes individualism, rule of law, and more robust property regimes.

Uncovering the political origins of Reform China may also help us to understand the domestic predicament confronting China's political and economic elites and new middle class—the main constituents of ordoeconomism—today. Just like the idea of a self-regulating market that Polanyi debunked (2001, 3; see also Block and Somers 2014), ordoeconomism increasingly appears as a “stark utopia.” It is utopian because it rests upon two unsustainable assumptions: First, the masses can be purely *homo economicus* and thus willingly abstain from mass political action; second, state politics is always economically rational or at least perceived to be so.

First, the marketization reform itself has brought such profound changes to the fabric of Chinese society that the masses cannot help but try to make sense of them, seeking justice and rebuilding solidarity—that is, engaging in what Polanyi calls “social protection.” While the Chinese state has consistently diverted this social protectionist tendency toward paternalistic nationalism and familial statism by cultivating jingoistic nationalist “Little Pinks,” their increasing militancy often goes too far and results in frustrating Beijing's economic policy goals. Moreover, China's youth are increasingly reluctant to respond to stimuli from the market and the government in a hypercompetitive environment, a phenomenon known as “lying flat” (*tangping*).

Second, unlike ordoeconomites who reject bottom-up politics for the sake of economic improvement, the Chinese state under Xi Jinping has increasingly prioritized preempting bottom-up politics over developing the economy.²² Moreover, to preempt bottom-up social protests against the severe

22. Xi's party congress speech in October 2022 mentioned “security” more times than “economy,” something unimaginable only a few years earlier (<https://www.>

social inequalities and labor precarity, Xi's administration has attempted to rein in the "disordered expansion of capital" by carrying out erratic policy interventions that have often resulted in depressing China's economic vitality. Thus, ordoeconomism's presumption of the economic rationality of the state is increasingly thrown into question. Ordoeconomites are now caught between their fears of the irrationality of mass politics, based on the caricature of the mass political excesses during the CCR, and their growing concern about the increasing irrationality of state politics under Xi.²³

In this context, reexamining the agency of the masses in making positive social change during the CCR, as well as the political mechanisms of its failure, as this essay does, has practical significance. My study of the historical origins of ordoeconomism in the CCR suggests that the very possibility of recovering politics and political subjectivity depends in turn on whether Chinese society can lay the spell of the CCR to the rest. That is, it is possible to visualize a future "spontaneous" social protectionist countermovement that, unlike the Tiananmen movement of 1989, would no longer be experienced under the shadow of the CCR but rather bring collective energy back to the political. Along the way, the practical experience of this countermovement might also help to bring to public light the complex political subjectivities of the CCR—which my eventful analysis endeavors to uncover here—instead of perpetuating the caricature of mass political irrationality on which ordoeconomism is predicated. At the current historical juncture, then, recovering the masses' political subjectivities is necessary to confront the increasing turn toward authoritarianism.

bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-18/xi-mentions-of-security-eclipse-economy-in-historic-shift). The gloomy predictions of China's economic prospect surfacing recently will likely reinforce this shift.

23. Unsurprisingly, this dilemma somewhat mirrors the dilemma faced by contemporary Western neoliberals.

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