

Research Note

Cultural Revolution Conflict in the Villages*

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During the “high tide” of the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1968, almost every urban school and work unit erupted in dissension and factionalism, very often spiralling into violence. Amidst exaggerated charges, a great many basic-level leaders were toppled from below and humiliated—or worse. In every city, so-called Rebel and Conservative factions emerged from the melee and fought each other in the streets.

In the villages, in sharp contrast, there were far more divergent scenarios.¹ A great many villages did not directly experience any turmoil at all during this period, whereas in some rural districts the ferocity of the violence surpassed even the urban upheavals. In some cases the violence flared up from below, as groups of villagers tried to oust the village leadership. In others, any violence that occurred was entirely orchestrated from above by local county, commune and village authorities, sometimes even in circumstances where there was no challenge to them from below. In short, the causes and incidence of violence varied considerably from village to village and the violence played itself out in quite different ways in different parts of the countryside.

As shown below, this rural violence sometimes reflected animosities that were traditional, as exemplified by feuding between historically antagonistic lineages or villages. But an equally important cause of conflict lay in the animosities that had been deliberately manufactured by the Party and government in the years since Liberation. One of the purposes of this article is to delineate how the types of hostilities that were grounded in tradition and those engendered by the state intersected and played off each other in ways that extended and exacerbated conflicts.

Research Materials

The article draws upon interviews with 31 former rural residents that contained discussions about what had occurred in their communities during the Cultural Revolution years of 1966–68. Close to half of these interviews were carried out in Hong Kong during the last half of the 1970s,² and

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¹ A paper by Andrew Walder describes what occurred in urban state factories (“The Chinese Cultural Revolution in the factories: Party-state structures and patterns of conflict,” in Elizabeth J. Perry (ed.), *Putting Class in Its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (Berkeley: China Research Monograph 48, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 167–198). From the accounts of 24 interviewees and Cultural Revolution-era worker faction newsletters, Walder has been able to delineate a common scenario for the urban state factories even though these were spread across China. As shall be seen, this is not conceivable for the villages.

² This series of interviews was conducted collaboratively with Anita Chan, and I am indebted to her for allowing me to utilize the transcripts for this article.

the others were conducted intermittently during the 1980s and 1990s in Hong Kong as well as in several Western countries. Eighteen of the interviewees were from the countryside of Guangdong province, and the remaining 13 came from nine different provinces extending from Guangxi in the far south to Hebei in the north, and as far inland as Yunnan.³ These extensive interview materials provide the main basis for my findings, but the article will also draw upon the descriptions contained in eight book-length village studies that have been undertaken by Western scholars during the past decade and a half,⁴ plus a book written by a former villager,⁵ two memoirs of village leaders recorded by Western scholars,⁶ and the available Chinese-language publications of the past two decades.

It should be emphasized that my focus is on what occurred in farming villages, not on the tumultuous events that wracked large numbers of rural county capitals and towns. The residents of such towns had a different type of residence permit (*hukou*) from the peasants, and this provided them with a different set of opportunities.⁷ Among other things, many of them worked in urban-like work units that paid regular salaries, not in agricultural “brigades” and “production teams” that shared out harvest yields. In many respects—economically, socially and politically—their life more closely resembled that of urban residents rather than peasants. It is not altogether surprising, thus, that the conflicts that embroiled many of the rural county capitals during the Cultural Revolution seem to have closely followed the same chronology of events as the cities, and often the same type of factionalism arose there.⁸ Of course what occurred in these county

³ These nine provinces are Anhui (two interviewees), Fujian, Guangxi (three), Hebei, Hunan, Jiangsu (two), Jiangxi, Shandong and Yunnan.

⁴ The village studies whose information on the Cultural Revolution have been taken into account are: Stephen Endicott, *Red Earth: Revolution in a Sichuan Village* (Toronto: NC Press, 1989), pp. 114–120; Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Revolution, Resistance and Reform in Village China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming), chs. 3–4; William Hinton, *Shenfan: The Continuing Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 493–664; Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 130–31 (additional information on the same village’s Cultural Revolution experience is contained in Philip Huang, “Rural class struggle in the Chinese Revolution,” *Modern China*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 1995), esp. pp. 130–31); Sulamith Hems Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China’s Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 83–90; Gregory A. Ruf, *Cadres and Kin: Power, Authority, and Corporatism in a West China Village, 1937–1991* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming), ch. 7; Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 204–208. Also taken into account was a village study in whose authorship I played a part: Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), chs. 2–5; the Cultural Revolution in this same village is also discussed in Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), ch. 6.

⁵ Mobo Gao, an Australian-based academic who was active in the Cultural Revolution in the village of his birth in Jiangxi Province, has written a book manuscript, *Gao Village: Rural Life in China since the Revolution* (London: Hurst & Co., forthcoming), recounting the recent history of this village, which he has kindly provided to me.

⁶ These are Huang Shu-min, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village Through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 89–98; and Peter J. Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse: Portrait of a Village Leader in China, 1923–1995* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 65–72.

⁷ A recent study notes this important distinction: “The essential difference between these two groups was their different relationship to the state: the peasants were basically dependent for their livelihood on their own labour and on fluctuating harvests, while the holders of urban registrations were taken care of by the state in almost every aspect of their lives ... *Hukou* status was inherited from one’s mother, and it was virtually impossible to change an agricultural *hukou* to an urban one.” Hein Mallee, “Introduction to ‘Reform of the *Hukou* System’,” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Fall 1996), p. 6.

⁸ This observation is based in part on a separate set of interviews that I conducted with several former residents of county towns and in part on the descriptions of the Cultural Revolution in such towns that have been published in a large number of county gazetteers in China over the past decade.

capitals and towns sometimes affected the countryside, and this is taken into account. But the article will concentrate on the activities of the overwhelming bulk of the Chinese population who lived in villages.⁹

An earlier, excellent study by Richard Baum was published in 1971 about the Cultural Revolution in the countryside. It was based upon Cultural Revolution-period Chinese newspapers and provincial radio broadcasts that briefly touched upon events in approximately 300 different communes and villages.¹⁰ Baum explored the roles of Red Guards, the actions of local officials to ward off, co-opt or repress their activities, the dispatch of army corps into the countryside in 1967 and their subsequent withdrawal, and the final restoration of order during 1968 after directives from Beijing to enforce the establishment of so-called “revolutionary committees” in each locale. By carefully piecing together where and when various types of incidents were reported to have occurred, Baum was able to draw up an interesting chronological account of how the Cultural Revolution developed in the countryside. His documentary evidence suggested that most of the Chinese countryside was largely untouched by the Cultural Revolution, that the great bulk of the commune towns and rural villages which experienced upheaval lay relatively close to cities, railway lines, major roads or ports and that, generally, the closer they were, the earlier they experienced turmoil.

Since Baum’s article, published more than a quarter of a century ago, surprisingly little additional Chinese documentation about what occurred in the villages has become available despite the outpouring of new materials on many other aspects of the Cultural Revolution. A vast national project during the 1980s and 1990s has produced thick gazetteers for almost every county in China, and these sometimes include accounts of the Cultural Revolution, but they chronicle the combat in county towns and almost invariably stop short of the villages. A relatively small number of them contain scattered sentences on what occurred within particular villages, but that is all. Nor do other Chinese authors who have turned their attention to the Cultural Revolution normally examine what occurred in villages. Practically all of them (with the notable exception of the novelist Zheng Yi, who has done considerable research on rural massacres in Guangxi province)¹¹ have focused instead on the urban scene in which they themselves had participated. The consequence is that the information emanating from China about the Cultural Revolution in the villages has not moved much beyond what was available to

⁹ This article also does not examine what occurred in the rural districts occupied by China’s ethnic-minority populations. The available evidence strongly suggests that during the Cultural Revolution period of 1966–68 Han officials interpreted non-conformity to the Han way of life as deviations from Chairman Mao’s teachings, and efforts were often made in these rural regions by both officials and mobs to impose Han mores by destroying local religious sites and enforcing Han social practices. On the pressures exerted in the part of China that contained the largest number of ethnic-minority peoples, see Jonathan Unger, “Not quite Han: the ethnic minorities of China’s Southwest,” *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn 1997), pp. 67–78. The worst reported repression of any ethnic minority during the Cultural Revolution occurred in Inner Mongolia, where Mongols were accused of conspiring to betray China in favour of Mongolia. Hundreds of thousands of Mongols were arrested in a witch hunt, many of them from the countryside, and tens of thousands reportedly died while in detention. On this see, e.g. William R. Jankowiak, “The last hurrah? Political protest in Inner Mongolia,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 19–20 (January–July 1988), pp. 273–288; also W. Woody, *The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia* (Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asia Studies at Stockholm University, Occasional Paper 20, 1993); also Zheng Yi, *Hongce jinian bei (The Red Memorial Plinth)* (Taipei: Huashi wenhua gongsi, 1993), pp. 285–292.

¹⁰ Richard Baum, “The Cultural Revolution in the countryside: anatomy of a limited rebellion,” in Thomas W. Robinson (ed.) *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 367–476.

¹¹ Zheng Yi, *The Red Memorial Plinth*. A greatly abridged version of the book has been published in English as *Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

Richard Baum in 1971.

This article does not try to retrace Richard Baum's efforts. The memories of informants from rural China are not particularly clear as to the months in which events occurred; nor can the information from several dozen interviewees provide any definitive data for China regarding the differential participation of villages that were close to or distant from transport routes and cities. Instead, by focusing on the very different type of information from my own interviews, the article explores aspects of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside that Baum's study could not adequately examine through documentation. It aims to try to explain the "deeper" causes of dissension and violence that underlay the observable political events. But there will be no attempt to impose a single overarching conceptualization upon the materials; indeed, one of the conclusions of the article is that too many different complex scenarios were played out in different communities to allow this to be done. Instead, the article moves through several different themes to explain what occurred in different districts, in order to reflect and do justice to the variegated mosaic of local disturbances that appear in the interviews.

We must, for a start, account for the fact that no disturbances at all occurred in some villages. In order to comprehend why some rural communities experienced violent dissension, it is necessary to consider why some did not.

Villages Unaffected by Turmoil

Interviews suggest that the Cultural Revolution affected far more of the countryside than the documentation available to Richard Baum had indicated. Only slightly more than a third of the villages of interviewees—eleven, to be exact—got through the Cultural Revolution without any serious eruptions from below.¹² When compared to the near-ubiquity of the turmoil in the cities, however, the very fact that a sizeable proportion of rural communities were entirely unaffected by upheaval merits attention.

Some of these villages were effectively sealed off from the Cultural Revolution by their remoteness from the urban and county town-centred turmoil. An extreme illustration of this was provided by an interviewee from an Anhui county town who had romantically ventured far from town into a mountain district. He and his friends had hoped to arouse farmers' interest in the Cultural Revolution, only to discover a Hobbesian world of desperately poor and illiterate peasants who cared only about securing sufficient food to last the winter. They were scattered in tiny hamlets and so little affected by the past decade-and-a-half's sweep of political events that they still knew only the old Republican-era calendar. "Most of the stuff concerning the People's Republic stopped at the commune town. Mail and communications from above only irregularly reached even that far," he recalls.

Such remote districts stood at one edge of a broad spectrum. Most of rural China had been penetrated to a considerable extent by Party control and Party teachings and by periodic political campaigns. But even so, there was a decided reluctance among many Chinese farmers to do anything that might stir up disturbances within their communities. An interviewee from northern Guangdong observed, "there was just a bit of conflict in our village, because we peasants are pragmatic and know that we have to eat," and another from Guangdong Province

¹² When I write that a third of the villages did not experience Cultural Revolution turmoil from below, I am referring only to efforts to topple village-level leaders or conflicts between different groups in these communities, as in inter-lineage struggles. I am not including persecutions mounted from above by officials, nor orchestrated movements to "struggle against" and physically abuse bad-class people. This latter form of discrimination occurred almost everywhere, and was not confined to the Cultural Revolution of 1966–68: interviews show that such persecutions were commonplace throughout most of the period of Mao's rule.

commented, “No matter whether the peasants wanted to rebel or not, they had to work.”

As much to the point, most farmers had no desire to “rebel.” According to the interviewees, during the decade before the Cultural Revolution many villagers had reluctantly put up with having to participate in political campaigns that often inspired fear. Their habitual inclination in such circumstances was to make themselves inconspicuous by conforming to whatever actions others took, rather than take the initiative. Even if a farmer harboured a strong personal grievance, he or she knew that to defy village authority in this new Cultural Revolution campaign would only invite vengeance later from above. An interviewee from rural Guangxi province remembers that “a lot of the farmers in my village felt that the rebels were foolish. They’d remark: ‘Such people are foolhardy to attack officials, since officials always have a net of mutual protection. Even if you feel you’ve got a chance to struggle successfully against the brigade Party secretary, how can you hope to struggle against the county leaders? If only one official doesn’t fall, you’ll be in trouble.’” Many of those who, despite this, did rise up in the Cultural Revolution against their village leadership would ultimately discover the truth of that observation, to their great regret.

Tolerance among peasants for the local officials’ shortcomings also served as a stabilizing factor. This was another of the reasons the urban Red Guard youths who descended on some of the villages found it more difficult to stir up dissension than they had anticipated. One of these outside agitators, who subsequently left China and has written a book about his Cultural Revolution experiences in Guangxi, relates that after he had unsuccessfully made an impassioned speech to rouse peasants to attack their village’s cadres for corruption, a farmer came up to him to explain that “of course the cadres take some advantages; otherwise who’d accept such posts.” The peasants of this village were altogether unimpressed by these urban Red Guards’ espousal of Cultural Revolution doctrine. When the arriving Red Guards denounced Liu Shaoqi and, implicitly, local cadres as “reactionaries” for putting production first and also for having earlier allowed enlarged private plots and free markets, the villagers recoiled in the realization that the new campaign went against their own interests.¹³

The Opening Act: The Catalysts of Turmoil

The question, thus, is why, in light of all of the above factors, upheavals from below nevertheless did occur in many villages. The evidence points to four specific types of “political” catalysts that helped push some villages past the threshold at which broad-based intra-village conflict would erupt.

Agitation by local students. Relatively few village children continued their education into a secondary school at the commune headquarters town, but the numbers tended to be somewhat higher in China’s more prosperous rural districts. When Mao gave orders in the spring of 1966 that schooling should be disrupted so that students could show support for his new Cultural Revolution, the students at some of the commune-town schools, eager to exhibit their “political activism,” excitedly followed the lead of the urban schools. This often constituted the initial event of the Cultural Revolution in such communes. In the summer and autumn of 1966, many of these secondary-school students returned to their villages to play out the “destroy the four olds” mini-campaign that they had heard was spilling out of urban schools. They stormed into peasants’ homes and destroyed items that smacked to them of tradition. They especially ransacked the houses of people who had been landlords or rich peasants.¹⁴ In some cases it was

¹³ See Hua Linshan, *Les Années Rouges* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987), pp. 200–202.

¹⁴ As just one example, an interviewee from Guangdong recalls that in mid-1966, “A whole group of secondary-

these young people, and they alone, who initially responded positively to the Red Guards who came out from the cities seeking acolytes and allies.¹⁵ Their activities sometimes also provided the seed for later intra-village disturbances.

Spill-over of turmoil from the county and commune towns. The documentary evidence that has become available in the new county gazetteers of the 1980s and 1990s reveals that across China, from the northern hinterlands of Shaanxi province to the southern border regions of Guangxi, a great many county capitals and commune towns experienced factional turmoil.¹⁶ My interviews show that in some rural districts the disruptive activities occurred almost entirely in the county capitals and commune headquarter towns, and did not directly affect most of the surrounding villages. But interviewees relate that in others, the factional disputes in the towns spilled outwards into the countryside as contending town-based factions sought allies, and that this sometimes encouraged contests for power within villages.

Protests by sent-down urban youths. A minority of China's villages during the mid-1960s contained rusticated urban young people.¹⁷ Some of these youths had settled in the countryside because they had been unemployed in the cities; others had gone out of youthful idealism. Both types had soon discovered that they had been permanently assigned to a life of gruelling labour, and in a village where they would always be considered "outsiders." As an interviewee observed: "The peasants didn't consider us their own people, but as people of a different surname who were not wanted there." When the Cultural Revolution erupted, the majority of the "sent-down" young people grasped the opportunity to protest against their treatment, but they did so indirectly. To air their personal grievances would have left them vulnerable to charges of "selfishness." Instead, they often resorted to the highly charged political rhetoric of the new Cultural Revolution to lay accusations against the local political leadership for not being close enough followers of Chairman Mao's Thought. Most of the disgruntled youth eventually tired of this and returned to their urban homes for the duration of the turmoil, forming their own Red Guard groups in the cities to inveigh against "Liu Shaoqi's rustication policy."¹⁸ But in the

school students marched into our village and held a rally next to the ancestral ball. They proclaimed they were going to 'destroy the Four Olds,' and some of them smashed and burned the ancestral tablets in the hall, and then climbed onto the hall's roof and wrecked all the figurines that were up there. Because it was a new political campaign, the peasants who were watching were hesitant to stop them." On the following days, this group of local students chopped off the braids of young women as "feudal" and went through peasant houses ripping down pictures of kitchen gods and of dragons and other "superstitious" artefacts. More ominously, they proceeded to smash up the homes of former rich peasants and landlords, searching for KMT flags or books, and when they could not find any they boisterously beat up a few of the old people.

¹⁵ In addition to my interviews, examples of urban Red Guards entering the countryside and, in some cases, trying to link up with such rural student Red Guards are contained in Baum, "The Cultural Revolution in the countryside," pp. 278–283.

¹⁶ This new material poses a picture of the Cultural Revolution as having been much more widespread than previously presumed by foreign scholars, whose information from documentary sources until recent years was limited largely to the urban areas and to the rural districts closest to cities. My interviews are in accord with the new documentary material, revealing that even at a considerable distance from the cities, in some of the towns that housed commune headquarters disgruntled junior commune-level cadres rose up against their superiors. In one of the commune towns in my interview sample, even the commune clerks organized their own Rebel group. In such communes, dissident groups of village youths that were too weak in their own community to cause any commotion could instead walk into the commune town to join in on one side or the other in the factional agitation.

¹⁷ Between 1956 and 1966 inclusive, some 1.2 million urban young people were sent to live in the countryside. After the Cultural Revolution fighting, between late 1968 and 1976, an additional 14 million were dispatched. Jonathan Unger, *Education Under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 262, n. 36.

¹⁸ In addition to my interviews, the frustrating circumstances of sent-down youth during these months is described in

months before their departure from the villages, they stirred up a cauldron of charges and countercharges, and sometimes succeeded in enlisting support from among some of the village's excited secondary-school students and those sectors of the local population who had their own reasons for feeling disgruntled. The dissension that they ignited sometimes outlasted their departure.¹⁹

Legacy of the Four Clean-ups campaign. A final type of catalyst for village turmoil lay in a campaign that had been under way in the countryside immediately before the Cultural Revolution. The Four Clean-ups had deeply affected the villages in which it was employed, with "struggle sessions," purges of local officials and Mao study programmes—though it had not yet reached some of China's villages by the time the Cultural Revolution erupted in mid-1966. The campaign had principally involved an attack against village cadres for corruption and back-sliding. It was then, not in the Cultural Revolution, that villagers first witnessed the public humiliation of village officials, and learned the nature of the officially sanctioned charges and political rhetoric that could, when opportunities arose, be utilized in future.

For their part, those village officials who had just been ousted in the Four Clean-ups nursed fresh grievances against those in the village who had turned against them, and against those who had been put into power in their stead. As the Four Clean-ups campaign collapsed into the Cultural Revolution in the spring and summer of 1966, some of these ousted village power-holders perceived opportunities to recoup their positions, while those who had succeeded them in the seats of village power were equally determined to retain their new posts. As the provincial and county levels of Party and government authority teetered and fell in the autumn and winter of 1966–67, the institutions of the state were no longer in any position to serve as the final arbiters in determining who held sway in these villages.²⁰

In some other villages, the Four Clean-ups workteams had overseen vitriolic attacks against village officials only to restore them to office in the last phase of the campaign. Those villagers whom the workteams had only recently aroused to lay charges against the officials were thus left vulnerable to retaliation. In two of the villages of interviewees, pre-emptive attacks relatively early in the Cultural Revolution were launched against the newly restored officials by groups of people who were fearful of their own futures if they could not re-oust them.

In short, four different types of catalysts of rural unrest had opened up opportunities for grievances and rivalries to pour out, but these tended largely to be grievances of a particular order. That is, what first found expression in the rural Cultural Revolution were tensions that were specifically tied to the workings of politically related institutions, whether within the new government school system, within local Party and government bureaucracies, or emanating from the government's ideologically-inspired programme to dispatch young urban people to the countryside and the unsettled legacy of the Four Clean-ups political campaign. The majority of the villages where upheavals occurred had initially experienced one of these four types of catalyst. The interviews suggest, too, that discontent was likely to remain dormant and suppressed where such catalysts were not present.²¹

Thomas P. Bemstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 264–68.

¹⁹ An example of this scenario is described in detail in Chan, Madsen and Unger, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, ch. 4.

²⁰ See *Ibid.* ch. 4. A good example is described in Huang Shu-min, *The Spiral Road*, pp. 91–93; See also brief discussions in Baum, "The Cultural Revolution in the countryside," pp. 376–77, 396–97.

²¹ In only two of the villages discussed by interviewees did attacks to oust a local leader simply well up spontaneously in a disorganized fashion among the peasants. In the more dramatic of these two cases, the leader of a

Traditional Struggles for Dominance

To say that rural conflict was normally sparked off by tensions engendered by the political system should not imply that these tensions necessarily dominated the ensuing strife. Once the floodgates had been opened, different reasons for conflict that were more meaningful to many peasants frequently burst through. Interviews reveal that the tussles often overlaid group antagonisms and cleavages that reached back many decades. The nature of these long-festering conflicts can be illustrated by reference to several of the villages of interviewees.

One of these localities was composed of two neighbouring hamlets in Guangdong province which a decade earlier had been forced to merge into a single production brigade. Each hamlet consisted of a different lineage, and as far back as anyone could remember, they had been at loggerheads. During the Cultural Revolution, amid cries of “capitalist roading” and “revisionism,” the two hamlets/lineages came to blows and “the Leungs managed to get the Party secretary, a Chan, pulled down.”

Similarly, in a large brigade in Jiangxi province consisting of three adjoining lineage villages, the brigade Party Secretary was a Gao from Gao village, and this was resented by the biggest of the three lineages, the Xus of Xu village. “So Gao had remained in power only because the commune authorities protected him. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution, which removed protection from above, was the end of his career.”²²

A final example of lineage conflict occurred in a village in southern Jiangsu province that consisted of a large lineage, the Dings, and several smaller lineages. Here, the numerically largest branch of the Dings had allied itself in the period before the Cultural Revolution with the smaller Liu lineage to dominate the leadership posts in the brigade. In the Cultural Revolution another branch of the Ding lineage which had been excluded from posts joined forces with several small lineages to seek its share of power. The conflict escalated to the point where rifles were stockpiled by each side, but in the end violence was averted: in part, said the respondent, because the Dings on each side recognized the ties of common lineage. Generally, the evidence from the villages suggests that while lineage differences contributed to conflict, membership in the same lineage—as in a single-lineage village—ameliorated conflict and the potential for violence.²³

In all, ten of the villages in the set of interviews experienced conflicts between rival kinship and lineage groups, a third of the total. This puts the rural Cultural Revolution in a new

community named Jia village in Anhui province had had several fellow villagers beaten to death during the early 1960s, but since his lineage group, the Jias, dominated the village, he had not previously been called to account for his brutality. In the midst of the Cultural Revolution, a group of neighbours attempted to exact vengeance by drowning him in a large cesspool, but his kinsmen intervened to rescue him. In both of the cases discussed by interviewees, such eruptions against hated officials lasted only days and faded away in disorganized confusion.

²² In this brigade, early in the Cultural Revolution a Xu whom Party Secretary Gao had recently helped remove during the Four Clean-ups on charges of corruption from a post as production-team accountant in Xu village, joined forces with a Gao man furious that his wife had openly become Secretary Gao’s mistress. Together, the two men laid an unsubstantiated charge against the Party Secretary, accusing him of having been a murderously active member of an anti-Communist militia before Liberation. Secretary Gao was quickly swept aside and his place was taken by his Xu accuser, who emerged as head of the new governing Revolutionary Committee of the brigade. This information is drawn in part from personal communications with Mobo Gao, of Gao village, and in part from the draft of a forthcoming book he has authored, to which he has kindly given me access.

²³ This distinction emerges in interviews with respondents from single-lineage villages, and a similar sense pervades written sources. The Party Secretary of a village in Henan province, as just one example, confided to his biographer, Peter J. Seybolt, that “I was not severely criticized [during the Cultural Revolution] because most of us are in the same Wang family [lineage] here.” Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from his Horse*, p. 68.

and quite different light from what had been portrayed in the contemporaneous documentation from China, as described by Richard Baum.²⁴

All the villages of interviewees that experienced lineage conflict lie south of or within the Yangtze River [Changjiang] basin. However, this phenomenon was not confined to the south: similar accounts show up in post-Mao writings about the Cultural Revolution experiences of northern Chinese villages. For instance, a former member of a village in Hebei province reminisces that

there were two lineages in our village, Wang and Li ... From the very beginning, the two lineages fought each other without stopping ... Village head was a key position. Whoever took it would be able to control the other side. The Wang lineage had more people and always occupied that position, both under the Japanese and the Communist Party ... If you want to find out the roots of the Cultural Revolution, this is the longest and deepest one.²⁵

Similarly, in Long Bow, the village in Shanxi province that William Hinton has studied, two different lineages, the Lus and the Shens, predominated in the northern and southern halves of the village. The Lu lineage, in the north, “since Liberation at least, and possibly for a long time prior to that, had played an increasingly dominant role in village government ... To the ruling Lus, an uprising [during the Cultural Revolution] based on the Fourth Production Team in the south and the Sidelines Team led by Little Shen meant that southerners, instigated by Shens, were on the rampage and meant to take over.”²⁶

Even when such traditional lineage rivalries were at work, it was necessary that they be carried out within a Party-shaped political environment. One significant aspect of this was that only people who came from a sufficiently good “class background” could become involved in any Cultural Revolution activity. People from households that contained former landlords or rich peasants, for instance, had to refrain from any role whatsoever lest the whole group be politically tarred. In a study of another north China village, in Hebei province, this need shaped the very nature of the struggle between different lineages and sectors of the village: “Most active in the Cultural Revolution battles were the east end and west end of the village. The centre, home of the old Southern Li [lineage] elite, was tranquil. Indeed, only poor peasants from the centre were allowed into rebel organizations.”²⁷

Given the need to justify attacks and counter-attacks during the Cultural Revolution “ideologically”, the traditionally based rivalries and antagonisms were often clothed in socialist rhetoric and acted out in a newly “revolutionary” mode of stylized conflict. A quite extraordinary example of this, recounted by an interviewee, involved two neighbouring villages in Guangdong province which had long quarrelled, sometimes violently, over water rights. Starting in the

²⁴ Baum cites only two sources, both provincial Chinese radio broadcasts, of local instances of “clan struggle.” The emphasis in the Chinese newspapers and broadcasts of the time almost wholly centred on the surface political phenomena of factional struggles.

²⁵ “The Cultural Revolution has been under way for two thousand years,” from Feng Jici’s book of oral histories, *Yi baige ren de shinian*, translated in the collection “China’s great tenor:

new documentation on the Cultural Revolution,” edited by Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Fall 1993), pp. 13–14.

²⁶ Hinton, *Shenfan: The Continuing Revolution in a Chinese Village*, p. 527. In this and the following example, also taken from a book-length village study, the authors delineate in a few sentences the fact that inter-lineage antagonisms are at work in the village’s Cultural Revolution infighting, but then “bury” this insight in a mass of chronological detail about the Cultural Revolution turmoil, to the extent that this underlying factor gets erased in readers’ memories.

²⁷ Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Revolution, Resistance and Reform in Village China*, ch. 3 of ms., pp.18.

1950s, the local Communist administration had entirely suppressed armed conflict between the two villages. But when the Cultural Revolution erupted and young Red Guards in the cities had begun “destroying the four olds” in 1966, a group of young people from one of the villages, wearing Red Guard arm bands, had marched over to the other village and set fire to a temple there that was reputed to improve the fengshui of the village and the good fortune of its people. Their ostensible purpose was to put an end to reactionary feudal superstition (though notably, they themselves actually shared in these beliefs). A group of young Red Guards was quickly organized in the other village, and under the same slogan of combating feudal superstition they retaliated in kind by destroying an ancient tree near the other village that was believed to enhance the fertility of the brides who married into that village.²⁸

Normally, however, inter-village conflicts were of a more serious and indeed sometimes murderous nature. The clashes reported in some of the interviews appear to have been neither more nor less than *xiedou*, the armed vendettas that had traditionally repeatedly pitted lineages or villages or even whole alliances of villages against one other. In one incident, a Mai lineage village in Guangdong dispatched 30 men for some weeks to till the fields of a related Mai lineage in another commune, in order to free their distant relatives to mount a full-time battle against the hated Chens of Duanfen. In the 1940s, the Mais had similarly dispatched men to till the same set of fields while their distant Mai relatives of an earlier generation had battled the same hated Chens.²⁹

Though often originally sparked by real issues such as irrigation rights or contested land ownership, through the generations such feuds usually took on a life of their own. Bianco notes that each time a new round of armed conflict between rival lineages and rival villages was ignited, questions of honour, “the dead call for vengeance, and feelings of insecurity” took over, and the turn to arms was “then seen as aggressive by the other party, who in turn use the smallest mistake as a pretext for reaction and punishment.”³⁰ In the Cultural Revolution, such notions of uncompromising violent honour had opportunities to come to the fore. Indeed, the Mao

²⁸ Such inter-lineage attacks on, or disputes over, structures that produced lucky or baleful *fengshui* were not uncommon in the countryside. One county recorded 961 inter-lineage disputes between 1961 and 1990 involving *fengshui*. *Fazhi ribao* (Law Daily), 7 August 1985, p.1.

²⁹ This information comes from Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, who have co-authored a history of the first half of the 20th century of this Mai lineage village. A description of the 1940s *xiedou* is contained in their *Enquête Sociologique sur la Chine 1911–1949* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), ch. 8. Hua initially lived in the village during the 1970s as a sent-down youth, and he and Thireau have more recently conducted interviews on the years immediately preceding his stay there. They have related to me that during the Cultural Revolution, in addition to assisting those relatives in another commune, the Mais also made an unsuccessful attempt to wrest power from the leadership of their own brigade. Before Liberation, the Mai hamlet had been more prosperous than other nearby hamlets due to having relatives overseas, and they had paid the price during the period of collectivization in the 1950s when a poor lineage without Overseas Chinese connections gained control of the brigade leadership. During months of conflict in late 1966 and early 1967, a breakaway militia/Red Guard group that largely consisted of people from the Mai hamlet captured and beat the brigade Party secretary at a struggle meeting. But by the spring of 1968, when the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign was announced, the former brigade cadres had recovered their power. About 30 Mai villagers were placed under political supervision and received formal “bad labels, including that of counter-revolutionaries.

³⁰ Lucien Bianco, “Rural areas: vendettas are back,” *China Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1995), p. 27. See also Richard Madsen’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution violence that had erupted in William Hinton’s Long Bow village. Madsen observes how the factional loyalties there were rooted to a commitment to the past ... As the balance of power between the rival factions teetered back and forth, each faction accumulated injuries that demanded vengeful redress, deepening the spiral of violence.” Richard Madsen, “The politics of revenge in rural China during the Cultural Revolution,” in Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell(eds), *Violence in China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 187.

quotations that were being brandished everywhere during the Cultural Revolution encouraged a similarly exaggerated, uncompromising righteousness and intolerance and a recourse to violence to destroy resistance. The extreme politics of the period meant, quite realistically, that losing out in a struggle was likely to entail severe persecution and perhaps even death. Such fears contributed to mounting cycles of violence and counter-violence—in cities as well as in the countryside, among worker and student groups as well as among farmers, and among self-interested contenders for rural political power as well as among the participants of traditional *xiedou* vendettas. An interviewee observed, regarding the Cultural Revolution in her own village in Guangdong, that “seeking revenge afterwards is very common in China, and that’s why people beat their victims down so hard: because they’re afraid that if they can rise again they might take revenge. So you feel you need to totally demolish them.”

The desperate need to win a decisive victory also explains why purely local conflicts within villages and between neighbouring villages frequently became intertwined with factional alliances stretching upwards and outwards into the county capital and ultimately across whole provinces, until two vast factions battled for supremacy in the wider region. Local defeat or victory would depend upon that larger scene. If your opponent attached itself to one of the contesting alliances, your own local forces would need an equal degree of support from above to survive. Local antagonists sometimes became involved in pitched combat far removed from their village.³¹

Sometimes, too, even when there was no grassroots factionalism and when villages remained under the unchallenged control of village and commune Party leaders, contingents from the countryside became involved in this type of military engagement well outside the boundaries of their own district. They did so at the behest of their local leadership, in circumstances that will later be explained. To understand the mentality of these peasant corps, though, it becomes illuminating to examine first a different type of violence that wracked parts of the countryside—a kind of persecution and violence that grew entirely out of Party teachings.

Local “Class” Violence Organized from Above

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese populace had been encouraged through the Party’s teachings to despise and discriminate against “bad class” people. They had learned at school, through films, on radio and in village political-education meetings that the national revolutionary cause was perpetually threatened by enemy forces that lurked half hidden everywhere in China. On the surface, these hidden enemies might seem like harmless neighbours: as Mao had written; they might even “assume the guise of a beautiful young maiden.”³² But Mao had pressed the point that one must never let down one’s guard against them and indeed needed to be pitiless in suppressing them. The “bad class” people in each village were officially targeted as tangible living examples of these half-hidden enemies.

People who had been designated landlords and rich peasants during the land reform and

³¹ A good description of this for a village in Fujian province is contained in Huang Shu-min, *The Spiral Road*. There, members of the two village factions fought on opposite sides in the pitched battles of higher-level factions in and around the city of Xiamen (pp. 93–94).

³² Mao Zedong, “Carry the Revolution through to the end,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. IV (Beijing; Foreign Languages Press, 1961), p. 304. In that same essay, Mao famously declared that “the Chinese people will never take pity on these snake-like scoundrels.” One of the most popular children’s books of the 1960s, an allegory shaped from the *Monkey King* saga, carried precisely this message, even to the point of having the hero ruthlessly kill a snake demon who was artfully disguised as an innocent maiden. On this story and its violent “class struggle” message, see Unger, *Education Under Mao*, p. 88.

their descendants, comprising some 3–4 per cent of rural China, made up the great bulk of these “black” households. A smaller number had been officially dubbed “counter-revolutionaries” for having participated in the Kuomintang regime before the revolution or for having opposed one or another important aspect of the collectivization drive and Great Leap Forward of the 1950s. Others had committed criminal offences that had saddled them with the official label of a “bad element” (huai fenzi). Together, these categories of landlord, rich peasant, counter-revolutionary and bad element were entitled “the four kinds of elements” (si lei fenzi) and were treated in all respects as officially despised and distrusted outcasts.³³

Although the official rhetoric held that the children and grandchildren of these “four kinds” were politically “educable” and could be “united with,” the government also implicitly endorsed the argument that the thinking of the “bad class” children inevitably had been dangerously contaminated by their parents. In some villages, children were taught at an early age not to play with the children and patrilineal grandchildren of “four kinds.” In many villages, these households were social isolates, making it all the easier to treat them as if they were non-human.

These beliefs in “class struggle” were not even indirectly inherited from the traditional culture. Whatever the realities of pre-revolution rural life, traditional teachings had stressed intra-village harmony. And in clan villages in particular, notwithstanding the richer households’ exploitation of their poor agnates, religious and social beliefs had held that all kinsmen were equal before the common ancestors. It had only been in recent decades, under the Party’s aegis, that the contrary precepts of strict class divisions and “class struggle” had been adopted by villagers.

In the years directly preceding the Cultural Revolution, in line with Mao’s injunction in 1962 to “Never forget class struggle!” the treatment meted out to the “four kinds of elements” worsened.³⁴ During the Four Clean-ups campaign of 1963–66, large numbers of these people were beaten in the highly emotional climate of struggle sessions. The good-class peasants’ suspicions of the “black households” were, if anything, fuelled by such maltreatment. Many of the farmers reasoned that if they themselves had been so ill-treated they would want to seek vengeance. A good-class interviewee recalled that as a teenager in the mid-1960s, “I was scared of class enemies. It seemed as if they would harm us, would poison us, kill us and eat us, I took them as horrible, fierce. I dared not talk to them in case I got muddled up.”

The Four Clean-ups campaign, as noted, had caught a lot of village officials in its net on charges of having become corrupt during the preceding years. But alongside such charges were accusations that some village officials had fraternized with or acted leniently toward bad-class fellow lineage members and neighbours. Village officials learned through the Four Clean-ups campaign that if they did not always exhibit an ostentatiously firm class stand, they might leave

³³ This caste-like system, in which the bad-class households became the equivalent of untouchables, is described more fully in Jonathan Unger, “The class system in rural China,” in James L. Watson (ed.), *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 121–141.

³⁴ In 1956, in recognition of the fact that the former rural elites no longer controlled any properties and had been excluded from the networks of political power that the Party had erected, the Party leadership had declared that the period of “class struggle” was drawing to an end (see the “Political Report of the Party Central Committee” at the Party’s Eighth National Congress). Yet such a notion was reversed in 1962, as China painfully began to climb out of the terrible economic depression and starvation caused by the collapse of the Great Leap Forward. In these circumstances, Mao and Party officials strenuously began propagating the directive “Never forget class struggle.” The farmers were not to judge the government in terms of the present difficulties; through “class education” they were to bear in mind that the great divide in China was not between themselves and the leadership but between the masses and these “class enemies” who wanted to destroy the new society.

themselves open to such accusations—while vicious behaviour towards “four-kind” households could help deflect any future attacks against themselves. They were soon to be given a chance in the Cultural Revolution to practise this lesson.

As the Cultural Revolution began to seep outwards from the cities, many commune and village officials began to organize farmers to mete out severe persecution against the bad-class households. The local leaders apparently saw it as a means of self-protection to preside over such persecutions. They could see that one of the charges being levelled against urban Party leaders during the Cultural Revolution was that they had been insufficiently militant on behalf of Chairman Mao’s line, and thus rural Party officials now appeared especially anxious to demonstrate that they themselves were implacably militant in pursuit of bad-class enemies. Drumming up “class struggle” was the one convenient way they could think of to retain the initiative during the dangerous confusion of the Cultural Revolution.

Yet persecutions of “four kinds” did not occur in every village and hamlet, and where they did the farmers were not always enthusiastic about participating. Not every village had been penetrated equally by the Party teachings that encouraged “class hatred.” In the brigade of one interviewee from Guangdong, when the commune leadership ordered struggle meetings against bad-class people “as usual the four kinds were dragged out of their production teams and taken to the brigade centre to be struggled against and beaten. It wasn’t arranged to be done within the teams because everyone within a team had relations with each other and so they couldn’t be trusted to carry this out.” In a similar vein, in a rural school in Jiangxi province, when told to “struggle” against bad-class people, children from a Gao lineage village surged into the village next door to seek out a former Xu landlord to beat up, while their classmates from the Xu lineage marched into Gao village to terrorize a landlord surnamed Gao.

In quite a different scenario, an interviewee from Guangdong province recounts that the most respected man in her hamlet/production team had, in the 1940s, negotiated a live-and-let-live pact on behalf of the hamlet with a bandit gang in the nearby mountains, and the consequence was that after the revolution the Party labelled him an “historical counter-revolutionary.” As the only “four kind” in the hamlet, he repeatedly needed to be taken to the commune town under the guard of the hamlet’s armed militia to be “struggled against” in each of the campaigns before, during and after the Cultural Revolution turmoil of 1966–68. Each time, as soon as the entourage that accompanied him from the hamlet was out of sight of the commune town on the way home, he was offered apologies and cigarettes, and upon his return to the hamlet was warmly treated to dinners. In at least some places, in short, “class struggle” was merely a mock ritual acted out for Party officials from outside the immediate community.

The pressure to engage in such “class struggle” could be intense, however, in a situation where higher-level rural officials were desperate to protect themselves by exhibiting “class militancy.” As there was a conviction among many people in China that the “bad class” stain was biologically heritable, some of the rural officials demanded attacks on anyone who could be considered a close blood relation of one, with results that sometimes verged on the bizarre. For example, prior to the 1950s’ land reform, the village of an interviewee in Guangdong province had been a so-called “landlord village” that had dominated surrounding tenant villages. During the land reform period, most of the landlords had been massacred, and their young sons had been adopted and raised by good-class peasant families from the village as their own. They had, like other good-class youngsters, participated in the persecution of “four kinds” during struggle meetings, and they were astonished when during the Cultural Revolution commune-level officials ordered that they themselves be persecuted as “four kind” pariahs. In this particular

village, the anger and resistance that this order aroused among their adoptive parents and grandparents provided the only memorable events of the Cultural Revolution.

But play-acting or resistance to “class struggle” appears to have occurred in only a small minority of villages. In most cases those who bore bad-class labels were not village heroes or adopted children, as above, but rather families that had long been isolated as despised pariahs. There are numerous descriptions from both interviews and Chinese documentation in which bad-class villagers were singled out for appalling treatment during the Cultural Revolution, regardless of their lineage background or personal behaviour. An interviewee from a lineage village in Shandong province, the son of a “four-bad element,” relates what occurred to his father—treatment that seems mild compared to what occurred in many other villages:

My memory of the Cultural Revolution is that whenever there was something going on, such as a new Red Guard organization being set up or a group of outside Red Guards coming in to mobilize the villagers, we’d be horrified, because all of the factions would do the same thing to show their firm class stand—struggle four kinds. That meant my father would be brought to struggle meetings again and again. My father said that whenever a drum was heard in the village, he’d start to feel his legs shake. He would wear as much clothing as possible in preparation for being beaten. The next day, when we kids in the family went out, we were likely to be bullied by the other children.

In some districts, the psychology of hatred and of dehumanization of bad-class households led beyond struggle meetings and beatings to mass killings, as local officials and farmers channelled their frustrations, fears and aggressions into a collective hysteria. In the autumn of 1966, in one county near Beijing, all the male kin of an interviewee’s university classmate were wiped out during a mass pogrom of all local bad-class males, from the elderly to small children, and local officials and farmers proudly paraded into Beijing carrying banners proclaiming that theirs was the first rural district in China to be “purified.”³⁵

It is notable that even in parts of the countryside where systematic murder did not occur, there appears to have been a belief among farmers that they might in fact be licensed by the Party’s ideological teachings to take the lives of “four kinds of elements” with impunity. An interviewee from Guangdong province recalled that although no-one in his own village was killed, during the struggle meetings called during the Cultural Revolution and during the succeeding Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign of 1968–69, “villagers with poor and lower-middle peasant labels had the right to beat to death people whose status was worse than rich peasant.”

In some districts, as observed, nervous village officials egged on the brutal beatings of

³⁵ This interview was conducted by Anita Chan. This may or may not have been the same incident that was discussed in 1968 by Xie Fuzhi (the head of China’s public security forces, who was placed in charge of Beijing’s municipal government during the latter part of the Cultural Revolution fighting). Xie noted that in a district of Daxing county “two men seized power and called a meeting of more than ten brigade Party secretaries and ordered the total slaughter of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, and Rightists. In ten brigades, they and their children, including babies, were killed in one day ...” See *Selections from the Chinese Mainland Press*, No. 4225 (24 July 1968), pp. 12–13. Also see Gao Gao and Yan Jiaqi, *Zhongguo Wenge shinianshi (History of the Ten Years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution)*, Vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Dagongbao she, 1986), pp. 74–75. See also Zheng Yi, *The Red Memorial Plinth* for examples of mass slaughter (and cannibalism) in rural Guangxi province. Gong Xiaoxia, “Perpetual victims: persecution of the ‘bad classes’ during the Cultural Revolution,” *China Information*, Vol. 11, Nos. 2–3 (Autumn 1996), pp. 35–53, finds that the massacres of bad-class people occurred largely in areas where the local authorities had been under heavy attack by a Rebel faction in the county but had managed to hold on to power.

“four kinds” during the Cultural Revolution; but at times the inspiration and instructions came from far higher up. During the latter half of 1968, when the national leadership under Mao was at long last seeking to bring the Cultural Revolution fighting to a halt, the directives handed down from Beijing for the so-called Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign singled out bad-class people as targets alongside the local losers of Cultural Revolution conflict.³⁶ At the end of “struggle campaigns” and periods of upheaval it was a normal Party practice to “point the spear downward” towards vulnerable targets at the grassroots—so as to restore order and obedience to Party hierarchy—and bad-class people made convenient targets. It was a tactic known as “killing the chickens to scare the monkeys,” and it occurred in most of the villages of interviewees during these months. As one interviewee observed: “In the Ranks, no-one had any peace. Those controlling the campaign ‘got’ (gao) the chickens in order to warn the 95 per cent who were monkeys. While they got the S per cent they scared everybody 100 per cent.”

In light of the repeated brutal persecution of bad-class people during Mao’s rule, there was obviously nothing more dangerous to a non-bad-class person than to be depicted and denounced in bad-class terms. It therefore is not surprising that even before the period of Cleansing of Class Ranks terror, in the emotional heat of local struggles between opposing camps in the Cultural Revolution the persecution of captured or defeated enemies often employed the same type of dehumanizing rhetoric as was wielded against bad-class people. In the accounts of Zheng Yi on the murders of overthrown local officials and factional enemies in rural Guangxi, again and again they were slaughtered at the same time as and alongside “the four bad kinds of elements” in a single orgy of killing, treating them as one and the same, as if to cement this linkage in the minds of both onlookers and perpetrators.³⁷ Zheng Yi recounts, though, that sometimes participants could not bring themselves to equate the two types of victims as similarly beyond the pale of humanity and similarly easy to murder. Thus in one of the incidents in his book a few “four kinds” were first forced to kill a captured group of fallen cadres and factional enemies, lest the crowd of onlookers have the blood of non-bad class people on their own hands; and then the crowd beat the hapless “four kinds” to death.³⁸

Again it should be noted that while such organized, sanctioned mass murders occurred only in a minority of districts, they represented the extreme pole of a belief in “class hatred” that was common to most of rural China. Thus, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution fighting, the antagonists were apt to fling charges not simply about each other but also regarding the impurity of each others’ ancestors and faction members who were defeated could find the hereditary class labels of their households officially altered,³⁹ thereby permanently demonizing their entire

³⁶ A detailed description of how the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign was carried out in one village is contained in Chan, Madsen and Unger, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, ch. 5 and 6. The numbers of people persecuted during this campaign can be gauged by reference to Guangdong province as a whole. In 1974, the recently restored provincial Party secretary, Zhao Ziyang, established a group to collect figures on the scale of repression in Guangdong during the Cleansing of Class Ranks period of 1968–69. The research group’s findings were that in Guangdong province alone, close to 40,000 people were killed during the campaign and about a million had been struggled against and put under “surveillance” or thrown into local jails. See Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathan Unger (eds.), *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), pp. 7,41.

³⁷ A substantial number of such incidents are described in the first section (pp. 2–116) of Zheng Yi, *The Red Memorial Plinth*. One particularly chilling example is on p. 25.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 14.

³⁹ This occurred in at least two interviewees’ villages (during most of my other interviews, it did not occur to me to ask). My presumption is that this same mechanism was at work in two counties in Shaanxi province, as recorded in county gazetteers. In Qianyang county, during the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign of 1968–69 that put an end to

families. Fears of this became yet another of the elements that kept rural participants desperately fighting during the Cultural Revolution, no matter how good their class background. As one of the interviewees observed: “In a campaign like this, anyone might become a target. Even five generations back, if any one of your ancestors had done anything wrong it could be used against you. And of course in five generations someone must have made mistakes ... or been rich.”

Warfare Against Urban Centres

The state of mind that lent itself to the killing of bad-class people also ultimately contributed to the slaughter of urban people by rural militias during the final stages of the Cultural Revolution fighting. This, too, was a culmination of a pattern of events tied not to any traditional modes of thinking, but rather directly to the political logic of the Cultural Revolution in the countryside, and the proclivities and fears of the rural officialdom.

Both in rural communes where the status quo had won out against local opposition and in those where it had never been challenged, the authorities were apt to support the so-called Conservative-faction mass organizations of the county towns and prefectural capitals. The Conservative faction’s membership tended to come from among those people in the county towns who had been politically favoured prior to the Cultural Revolution. The faction therefore tended to uphold the pre-Cultural Revolution county and prefectural leaders. This appealed to rural Party leaders. Their loyalty to their pre-Cultural Revolution superiors often appears to have remained informally intact. In many cases, such feelings of loyalty linked the communes militia commanders,⁴⁰ the county militia headquarters, and the county’s Party and government leadership. The plight of the county-town authorities might not, in itself, have been enough to see the rural leaders and commune militia commanders become militarily involved, but in addition to their sympathy, they appear to have been fearful that a victory by the county-seat or urban-based Rebel factional alliance would jeopardize their own continued hold on power in the countryside. When the rural authorities received urgent calls to come to the aid of embattled county and prefectural leaders or flagging county-town or prefectural-city Conservative factions, the militia corps of farmers were ordered out of the villages and dispatched to do their duty.⁴¹

the Cultural Revolution fighting, 152 households were newly labelled as landlord and 130 as rich peasant, while in Shanyang County over a thousand households were re-labelled as landlords or rich peasants. *Qianyang xianzhi* (*Qianyang County Gazetteer*) (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), pp. 277–286; and *Shanyang xianzhi* (*Shanyang County Gazetteer*) (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), pp. 215–19. These documented examples were brought to my attention by Gong Xiaoxia.

⁴⁰ In a large number of counties, the power of the county and commune level militia commanders had been greatly strengthened. As provincial Party organs collapsed in early 1967, Party leaders at the county level sometimes strategically withdrew from their posts and let the militia commanders, who were protected by their military connections to the regional army command, pretend to assume authority while the county and commune Party leaders continued to control events from behind the scenes. In other cases, where the militia commanders were politically ambitious, they used the opportunity to make a play for real power at the county capital or commune. (This information derives from several interviewees. The assumption of authority by the militia heads can also be observed in the county gazetteers and Zheng Yi’s volume: again and again in these sources, the leaders in the county Revolutionary Committees and at commune level who were in a position to instruct villages to carry out massacres in 1968 are identified as militia commanders.)

⁴¹ The militiamen often received remuneration for doing so. As a Jiangsu provincial radio broadcast of 8 August 1967, complained: “In some regions they practise counter-revolutionary economism and give supplementary workpoints, money and grain to commune members to take part in fighting ... all to incite the peasants to enter the cities to fight the revolutionary mass organizations in factories, mines, administrative bureaus and schools” (quoted in *China News Analysis*, No. 679 [29 September 1967], p. 2). In two of the villages in my interview sample, ordinary villagers were paid in workpoints even for attending, in massed groups, vast struggle meetings that the

These armed attacks by the village militias against the urban Rebel organizations were often launched first at the county capital and then, when the rebellious forces there were crushed, progressively proceeded outwards and upwards towards the provincial capital. Liu Guokai, an author from Guangzhou who has written one of the best analyses of the Cultural Revolution thus far published, captures this set of shifts:

After the start of violence, Rebels of the small county towns, unable to stand the [rural militias'] repeated onslaughts, ran off to the medium-sized cities in the prefectures. When the situation there became unbearable, they retreated to the provincial capitals, thus reinforcing the numerical superiority of Rebels in the big cities. The Conservatives then resorted to a Maoist quote made some 30 years earlier, that "the countryside should encircle the cities and seize power by armed force." ... At a time when worker and student Conservatives were unable to gain the upper hand in violence, the peasants were sent to the front lines in tens of thousands by the district, county, and commune people's armed forces.⁴²

In some places, county towns and cities became almost entirely Rebel, having driven out most of the Conservative forces or having absorbed some of them into Rebel ranks once the peasant militia onslaught commenced. In such cases the warfare quite clearly took on the complexion of urbanites versus peasant armies. A striking illustration of this was provided by an interviewee from an Anhui county capital. News was received there that in an adjoining county the county Party chief, besieged by high-school Red Guards, had barricaded himself in his headquarters and had called upon thousands of rural militiamen, armed with rudimentary military equipment, hunting rifles and swords, to free him by besieging the county town. When this news reached the interviewee's county, both of the factions in the capital temporarily laid aside their conflict and joined forces, dispatching a convoy of more than 200 trucks crammed with armed young people to break the siege. Their empathy for fellow town residents took precedence over their own factional warfare.

The peasant militiamen who rallied to attack county and provincial capitals sometimes appear to have perceived the besieged urban populace as "Others," beyond the pale of compassion. This was certainly the impression of an interviewee from Guangxi province. It was as if they were transferring into a new context the Manichean Maoist teachings about good versus evil and about the virtues of pitilessness that had justified the brutal maltreatment of bad-class people. In Nanning, the provincial capital of Guangxi, in the even larger city of Chengdu in Sichuan province and in a number of other cities across China, slaughters of urban Rebels by victorious rural militiamen ensued. Bodies of victims from the Guangxi massacres floated downriver all the way to Hong Kong.

The Tale of One County

For obvious reasons of presentation, this article has treated the different types of turmoil and violence in the countryside separately. But what occurred in many locales was more complex than that, intermingling different types of violence over the course of the Cultural Revolution. A good example of this is provided by an account of the conflict that erupted in a Guangdong county, related by a former Rebel senior high school student who rose temporarily during the

commune authorities organized at the commune market town.

⁴² Liu Guokai, "A brief analysis of the Cultural Revolution," translated in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 1986-87), pp. 96-97.

Cultural Revolution into the county's governing Revolutionary Committee.⁴³ His experience ties together several of the themes raised in this article, both of a traditional and a politically-inspired nature. And it is, importantly, the story of someone whose activities moved between the world of the village and the wider conflicts of the county town and beyond, which was rare among interviewees.

The interviewee was attending school at the county capital 30 miles from home when the Cultural Revolution erupted. He quickly returned in excitement to his commune in the belief that the new campaign had granted him the liberty to show off his political activism. Naïve and not quite knowing what if anything might warrant righteous criticism, he pasted up big character posters in the commune town charging that the commune butchers were selling the best cuts of pork to relatives and officials. He also put up posters announcing that the “four bad kinds” sometimes carried shotguns to hunt birds, and that if any were sighted doing so they would be killed:

The peasants were impressed and felt, wow, those Red Guards can kill people if they like. There was actually only me, but the cadres trooped around after me as I tacked up my posters, and the peasants talked as if there must be many other Red Guards like me.

Within days, the commune authorities reacted to the obscure trouble that he posed by targeting for attack three teachers of non-good class origins at the commune's own high school: if there was to be “class struggle” the authorities would lead it. Nevertheless, some of the students there broke away from their control and joined the interviewee, in emulation of urban events, by enthusiastically posting up attacks against the commune Party secretary: “We accused him of anything—for having hidden problems in his personal history, for poor results in agricultural production, for anything.” They tried to persuade younger officials to join them in levelling these charges, but were unsuccessful; “they feared to participate.” Within the interviewee's own brigade, fewer than a dozen young men became intermittently active as a largely ineffectual Rebel group: “They felt the brigade cadres were unfair, as individuals, in their leadership styles.” But they were able to stir up just a “bit” of conflict that was easily suppressed.

What ended up troubling the brigade officials was not these ineffectual young people but rather that several of the hamlets in the brigade grasped the opportunity to take up arms against each other in disputes over local resources, reviving xiedous of the past. In particular, the interviewee's own team and the team next door, which were separate hamlets, had had a dispute over a large stand of timber and bamboo as far back as villagers could remember. Prior to the revolution, periodic brawls between the two hamlets had taken a toll in casualties; his own father had been stabbed in one. When the Great Leap Forward collapsed and the Party organization's local power had temporarily waned, fighting had re-erupted between the two hamlets, and now erupted again in the Cultural Revolution. Both sides resisted the weak efforts of the brigade to keep them from taking up arms: “Normally the county Public Security Office would have come to adjudicate and enforce an agreement. But with the county organs weakened by the Cultural Revolution chaos, our brigade government had no such backing.”

The interviewee and a handful of young followers were obliged to retreat eventually from the commune town and concentrated their energies on the county capital. During the January

⁴³ The following description is based on two interviews conducted in Hong Kong in 1978, supplemented by an article that the interviewee wrote about his village, including material on the Cultural Revolution, for a magazine that was published in Hong Kong during the late 1970s by a group of former Red Guards (*Huang He [Yellow River]*, No. 5 (March 1978).

Storm of 1967, when city governments were being overturned throughout China, the combined Rebel forces in the county capital were able to grab power there from a confused, dispirited county leadership. Disgruntled workers from the county-town factories had been enticed to join the rebels, but the bulk of the county, including most of its rural areas, remained in the hands of the Conservative faction, led by officials, that had emerged in opposition to the Rebels. Among the 12 communes in the county, only one was allied to the Rebels; and within the remaining 11, only three brigades/villages were in the Rebel camp. These Rebel locales were all ones where local Party Secretaries had been toppled. Everywhere else, the incumbent officialdom had survived, and they moved against the Rebel upstarts in the county capital.

When counties were ordered to patch together Revolutionary Committees in 1967 as the counties' new leadership organs, these rural officials controlled the majority of its membership. The county's Rebel faction desperately tried to resist lending it any authority and began organizing a pre-emptive armed coup against it. But the rural officials struck first with the rural militias, declaring the Rebels to be "counter-revolutionary" and, in one fell swoop, captured and arrested in one night all the Rebel leadership.

In mid-1968, when directives from above began to call for the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign to be implemented throughout China, delayed vengeance was exacted in this county against the defeated Rebels. The deputy head of the county Revolutionary Committee issued a set of instructions encouraging the commune militia heads to carry out executions, and in at least three communes which earlier in the Cultural Revolution had witnessed agitation from below, massacres ensued, with hundreds killed.⁴⁴

However, unlike some other provinces such as neighbouring Guangxi, in Guangdong province such locally initiated slaughters were not acceptable to the newly installed provincial power-holders. In December 1968 an army unit entered the county to take control, and it arrested the deputy head of the county Revolutionary Committee, three commune militia commanders and, in the interviewee's own commune, three of the village militia heads. A fair number of officials throughout the county, at commune level and above, who had been active among the Conservative forces were ousted by the army corns, and local veterans of the PLA replaced them in leadership positions.

To bring the Cultural Revolution disturbances to a close and to force people of all sides obediently back into line, the PLA unit turned in early 1969 to the "class struggle" tools of the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign, carrying out the campaign a second time, this time in a carefully controlled manner. Bad-class people numbered among those "struggled against" in mass meetings that were held in all the villages.

Conclusion

Similar to the experience of the above interviewee, a substantial number of informants and

⁴⁴ This was not an isolated case. As just one example, on the other side of China a parallel occurrence is recorded in the gazetteer published by Ziyang county in Shaanxi province (Xi' an: Sanqin chubanshe, pp. 521–26). During the nation-wide wave of "power seizures" in early 1967, two antagonistic factions had emerged in the county capital—"Eryipai" to which the preponderance of teachers and secondary-school students belonged, and "Erliupai," based more heavily on cadres, peasants and workers. In 1968 the factional fighting in the county escalated, and in April military and police ammunition was seized by the two factions. Members of the weaker Eryipai soon fled the county and joined their allies in neighbouring counties. Amidst rear-guard armed fighting, many of the adherents of Eryipai who remained behind were rounded up, along with their families and members of the "bad classes." Over 400 were tortured and then murdered, including 211 labelled as "bad class." By the end of 1968 a PLA unit entered the county to end the bloodshed. (I am indebted to Gong Xiaoxia for bringing this material to my attention.)

published village studies have recounted more than one type of conflict simultaneously being played out within a single village and commune town. In this respect, the Cultural Revolution in the countryside could, in some locales, be fairly complex. Significantly, too, rural grassroots conflict was more widespread in China than previously reported. The villages of two-thirds of the interviewees witnessed upheavals from below in the shape of conflicts over village leadership and/or lineage-group rivalries. If the violence of “class struggle” against bad-class villagers and other forms of persecution that were mounted from above are added, the proportion of villages that were directly involved in Cultural Revolution conflict was quite high.

Whatever the diversity in local scenarios, the Cultural Revolution violence in the villages largely shared in a common set of underlying attitudes and prejudices. In village after village, this could be seen in the lineage-group loyalties and culturally based rural norms of vendetta and vengeance and in the politically sanctioned intolerance and “class hatred.” To an extent not previously recognized, concealed beneath the veneer of the high-blown Maoist political rhetoric that opponents hurled at each other, the lineage-group conflicts occupied a central place in the Cultural Revolution in the villages—occurring in fully half of all the villages of interviewees that witnessed conflict from below. Even so, it is notable that with the exception of this lineage feuding, all the other ingredients of Cultural Revolution conflict owed heavily to Party teachings and to animosities that had been manufactured under Party rule. This can be seen in the genesis, perpetuation and intensification of orchestrated “class struggle” meetings; in the tense aftermath of the Four Clean-ups campaign; in the rural secondary-school students’ “activist” behaviour in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution; and in the Manichean beliefs in good versus evil forces and dangerous “hidden counter-revolutionaries.”

Notably, the intra-village conflicts tended to remain bottled up and repressed in those villages that did not first experience a “catalyst” from within the political arena. As has been seen, the catalyst sometimes took the shape of Red Guard agitation by students from the commune-town school, or disturbances by urban-born youths who had been “sent down” to settle in a village, or a spill-over of factional conflicts from the local commune town, or recrimination and political in-fighting in the wake of the Four Clean-ups purges. Rural China had possessed a sufficiently “tight” political system that even when latitude for village turmoil suddenly opened in the Cultural Revolution, the populace normally stood back unless such a catalyst emerged from within the political sphere.

It has been seen, too, that the ensuing hostilities, even when between rival lineage and kin groups, were often strategically garbed in Maoist political rhetoric. As a consequence, they sometimes escalated well beyond the root causes of the initial conflict. In part, it was because the participants, once entangled in “political” conflict, were fearful of the penalties that the political system would impose if they ended up on the losing side. Once opened, thus, a Pandora’s box of spiralling violence sometimes emerged. If the conflict in a village during this period had involved only a traditional-style xiedou, or only a contest for local power between rival leaders, it is unlikely that it would have gone any further than the violence that, in centuries past, had irregularly punctuated the rural scene in China. But in many villages across China, when a conflagration was sparked off in the Cultural Revolution the traditional antagonisms, local rivalries and Maoist ideological teachings flared up in combination, fanned thereafter by the intense fears of losing out politically, to create a tragedy of considerable dimension.