

## REVIEW ESSAY

# INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN MAOIST CHINA

COVELL MEYSKENS

*Naval Postgraduate School, USA*

A growing body of scholarship is showing that the Chinese Communist Party did not produce an egalitarian society, as it intended. It generated a country riven by inequalities. Three recent books shed light on various ways that the party's policies induced new forms of social stratification.

This essay discusses the following works. Tan Hecheng. *The Killing Wind: A Chinese County's Descent into Madness during the Cultural Revolution*. Translated by Stacy Mosher and Jian Guo. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 505 pp. \$34.95 (cloth). | Ning Wang. *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness: Political Exile and Re-Education in Mao's China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. 283 pp. \$29.95 (paper). | Guobin Yang. *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China*. Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 262 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), \$25.00 (paper).

Keywords: Anti-Rightist campaign, China, Cultural Revolution, inequality, political violence, socialism, social stratification

Equality was a central goal of China's socialist revolution. To create an egalitarian country, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) carried out a whole slew of policies. It collectivized land. It promoted equality between the sexes. It sought to lessen regional economic divides, and it endeavored to build a social welfare state that embraced the entire nation.<sup>1</sup> A growing body of research has shown that Maoist China fell short of achieving its socialist objectives. Rather than creating a flat national society, the CCP fashioned a social tapestry that was shot through with social, political, and economic divisions.

Patronage networks favored people linked to influential leaders at both the commanding heights and in industrial enterprises and rural collectives.<sup>2</sup> The political labeling system

1 Christopher Bramall, *Chinese Economic Development* (London: Routledge, 2008).

2 Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950–65* (London: Routledge, 1993); Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

instituted splits between people with good and bad political backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> The household registration system created an invisible institutional wall between rural and urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a failed attempt to extend welfare coverage to the entire country during the Great Leap Forward, the CCP also restricted robust welfare guarantees to the small pool of workers permanently on the rolls of state-owned enterprises.<sup>5</sup> Limited social services in rural areas, in turn, left women saddled with the double burden of having to perform both remunerated labor tending fields and uncompensated work at home.<sup>6</sup> The divergence between the CCP's egalitarian aspirations and its concrete policies raises the question of why the party was not more effective at accomplishing its aims. The three books under review do not offer a definitive answer to this complex question. They tend overall though to support the view that the party's attempts at producing an egalitarian China ended up fashioning new forms of social stratification.

### THE CREATION OF A RIGHTIST UNDERCLASS

In *Banished to the Northern Wilderness*, Ning Wang chronicles the lives of Beijingers exiled to labor camps in Heilongjiang Province in the late 1950s in the wake of the Anti-Rightist campaign. Some of the people sent to China's far north had criticized the party during the Hundred Flowers campaign. They had complained that the CCP had strayed from its socialist ideals and become a privileged class that was despotic and inclined toward violence. Critics sought for the party to become closer to the people, and some proposed competitive elections as a solution. Critics were not against the socialist project. They were what Wang calls "loyal dissidents." They sought to improve socialism in China, not to do away with it.

It was, however, often not individuals' political views that landed them in bureaucratic hot water. Local officials often pegged someone as a rightist and expelled them to the north for much more mundane reasons. The Anti-Rightist campaign was supposed to target ideological enemies of the state and tighten up party control over society. Yet, when the campaign was put into practice at the grassroots, local cadres often designated people as rightists not because they had committed ideological infractions but because a cadre held a personal grudge against them or because they were in a competing faction at their school or workplace. Many times, it was because cadres had to give political labels as part of their jobs. Higher-ups issued a quota for rightists, and cadres had to satisfy government orders with some warm bodies. Otherwise, they risked acquiring negative marks in their personal dossiers due to their perceived lack of political commitment. They might even be identified as rightists.

3 Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger, "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou (Canton)," *China Quarterly* 83 (1980): 397–446.

4 Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System," *China Quarterly* 139 (1994): 644–68.

5 Nara Dillon, *Radical Inequalities: China's Revolutionary Welfare State in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

6 Gail Hershatler, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

Despite the arbitrary character of the Anti-Rightist campaign, many Beijing rightists at first viewed going to the north in a positive light. They thought that they would be gone from home for only a short time, and they treated banishment to army-run farms as an opportunity to redeem themselves through hard work. Many became demoralized when they realized that local officials were less concerned about remolding them into upstanding socialist citizens than they were about employing them as a low-cost labor force to increase the output of grain and lumber. Everyday life was exhausting for all rightists assigned to army farms. They all had to labor more than 12 hours a day, and camps were continually short of food. Certain camp managers, however, implemented more demanding work schedules, and some detainees were more adaptable to camp life.

Conditions were worse for intellectuals categorized as political offenders, since the CCP leadership considered people critical of the regime more dangerous than people convicted of nonpolitical crimes. To keep political dissidents in check, the CCP placed them under the supervision of criminals, who were used to prison life and who—like many a petty bureaucrat—lorded their modicum of authority over the people under their control. Intellectuals responded to their trying circumstances by mirroring the habits of their overseers. They gave up personal pretensions to dignity and integrity, and they stole, cheated, fought, and reported on others' bad behavior, sometimes just so that they could survive and at other times to get ahead of their fellow inmates.

During the Great Leap Forward, production targets rose rapidly and the pace of work intensified. Physical exhaustion became widespread, and starvation became quotidian. Camp administrators evinced little sympathy for worker suffering, as their top priority was raising economic output. They instead used their charge over the food supply to discipline labor, providing less grain to individuals who were defiant or misbehaved *and* granting more sustenance to people who were stronger and more productive. Camp managers also siphoned off food to their own kitchens to ensure that they had enough to eat. In the end, roughly 20% to 30% of the population had died due to famine before the CCP decided to evacuate the camps in the early 1960s.

Wang's work definitively shows that there was not a singular rightist experience of camp life. It mattered where someone went, who was in charge of their section of the camp, and what their attitude and personal politics were. Wang's book also elucidates the social consequences of the party's creation of rightists as an underclass, whose inferior social position was tied not to their economic status but to their possession of a government-imposed classification that the Chinese bureaucracy consistently treated as one of the lowest rungs of the political order until the party rehabilitated rightists in the post-Mao era.<sup>7</sup> Not all rightists were created the same, however. Whom someone knew was consequential. The writer Ding Ling, for instance, was expelled from Beijing to a camp in the north. Due to her connections with party leaders, she did not have to engage much in backbreaking labor. Nor did she have to endure famine. Quite to the contrary, she spent most of her time at the camp writing literature praising hard work. Lower down the political hierarchy, personal contacts were important as well. An inmate who cultivated better relations with a camp manager could benefit from an uptick in living standards, which at times made the difference between life and death.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Leese, "Revising Verdicts in Post-Mao China: The Case of Beijing Fengtai District," in Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 102–28.

## OF MASSACRE AND MEN

Tan Hecheng states at the start of *The Killing Wind* that his primary goal is to recount the facts surrounding the massacre of about 9,000 people in the Hunanese county of Daoxian during the Cultural Revolution. Tan's commitment to empirical depth provides the reader with a grisly blow-by-blow account of seemingly every single death, which leaves the reader with a lot of intriguing information but grasping for an overarching argument. Song Yongyi's preface provides the book with a much tighter framing. According to Song, the book shows that contrary to what the CCP claims, China's peasant revolution did not bring about a new era of social justice. The revolution's harvest was a quite different result.

The party entrusted lower and middle peasants with power in rural areas, which they exercised to oppress and kill people the party had labeled "black elements": landlords, rich peasants, collaborators, rightists, and people linked to the Guomindang (GMD). In Song's telling, the party's permissive attitude toward revolutionary violence began with Mao's 1927 Hunan Peasant Report and continued through the Daoxian massacre, when lower and middle peasants slew individuals with black labels. Echoing Ning Wang's analysis of rightists, Song contends that people with black labels were attacked not because they posed a legitimate threat to local party rule but because of rancorous interpersonal relations or because local cadres wanted something they could provide—fall guys to fill quotas in the case of Beijing rightists and material possessions in the case of black elements in Daoxian.

In some cases, lower and middle peasants liquidated black elements because they wanted to have their houses and belongings. Others laid waste to their neighbors because communes gave additional work-points for higher kill rates. Other lower and middle peasants took sadistic pleasure in committing acts of violence against black elements. The contents of Tan's book bear out Song's explanation. The Hunan Peasant Report was one of the revolution's urtexts with its belief that social surveys could correctly assess the true character of social divisions in the countryside and that mass violence against political enemies could rejuvenate the revolution.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Mao era, when the Party Center launched campaigns to reinvigorate China's revolutionary fiber, local cadres repeatedly brought out people with black political labels to criticize as the source of existing problems, even though they no longer possessed any significant political power.<sup>9</sup>

While Tan's book documents the motivations for extreme violence cited above, it also paints a more complex picture. The massacre began with a rumor that black elements had linked up with GMD agents and were about to seize power from lower and middle peasants with recently stolen weapons. The way that lower and middle peasants characterized themselves and their enemy is interesting, because it suggests that they had come to think of themselves as a sort of ruling class. They, of course, did not say that they were the new rulers of rural society. That did not prevent them from acting as such in a

8 Tong Lam, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900–1949* (Berkeley: University of California, 2011); Hans van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China: 1925–1945* (London: Routledge, 2012), 94–130.

9 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

rather ironic fashion. They organized murderous campaigns, which sent black elements running to the hills, where lower and middle peasants hunted them to death in a manner reminiscent of GMD and Japanese assaults on the CCP decades earlier.

Tan provides no evidence that the central government directly coordinated local attacks against the lower strata of society. The massacre was a case of local officials wanting to perform their job well, which in the context of the Cultural Revolution meant suppressing counterrevolutionaries. To achieve this administrative goal, county officials encouraged commune leaders to eliminate black elements. In other cases, commune leaders heard that nearby communes were executing black elements, and so they launched killing drives, which displayed their revolutionary ardor and politically inoculated themselves against criticism.

The central perpetrators of violence were the People's Armed Forces (PAF) and local militias. Under the direction of the PAF, local militias set up a system of checkpoints to ensure that no black elements escaped. In some instances, a local male cadre bore a grudge against another man who had challenged him in the past. To settle the score, cadres deployed militias to round up their rivals for a show trial and speedy execution, an act that seems to have functioned as a delayed reassertion of their masculinity. On some occasions, local militia members acted independently, though they often first telephoned their superiors for approval, sometimes to ease their moral conscience and at other times to preempt accusations of wrongdoing.

During the massacre, women were a common motive for killing. Black elements had women, and lower and middle peasant men wanted them, a situation that hints at a lingering gender imbalance. Occasionally, a lower or middle peasant would slaughter a man to marry his wife or daughter. At other times, they menaced women with death to gain their hands in marriage, and they followed through on their threats when women didn't consent. In other cases, men raped women whom they had long lusted after and who had rebuffed their advances, or whom they had lacked the courage to approach. In this regard, Tan's book confirms a known trend in Maoist China. In rural areas, military power was largely concentrated in lower-and-middle-peasant-dominated militias, which were filled with young rural men who now and then employed their coercive authority to yield personal advantages.<sup>10</sup>

## THE RED GUARD GENERATION AND THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

Like Tan Hecheng's book, Guobin Yang's focuses on the Cultural Revolution. His historical lens is the generation of urban educated youth who were born around 1949 and participated in the Red Guard movement. In line with Tan's interpretation, Yang's analysis lends support to the view that the composition of Red Guard factions tended to reflect social divisions based on political labels and that factional conflicts were often motivated by competition over scarce resources, such as jobs and college admissions.<sup>11</sup> People holding a good political label were more inclined

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*; Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*.

<sup>11</sup> Chan, Rosen, and Unger, "Students and Class Warfare."

to ally with conservative factions and try to maintain their superior status, whereas people burdened with a bad bureaucratic label frequently joined radical political groups and challenged their subordinate position.

Yang takes an additional step and pushes back against the idea that Red Guard activities were principally a matter of power politics.<sup>12</sup> Yang sides instead with studies that take political groups' practices of self-identification as not just epiphenomenal or opportunistic but as constitutive of their political identity and a driving force behind their political activities.<sup>13</sup> Like Anita Chan,<sup>14</sup> Yang traces the self-understanding of Red Guards in Chongqing to the mass culture of the 1950s and 1960s, which incessantly praised the CCP's peasant revolution and wartime guerillas. When the Cultural Revolution erupted, Red Guards envisioned the campaign as a chance to be like their revolutionary heroes and prove through battles with rival factions that they were worthy successors to the old guard. What is not clear from Yang's analysis is whether Red Guards in Chongqing engaged in acts of violence for similar materialistic reasons as militias in Daoxian. Given that the ransacking of homes was widespread elsewhere in China, it seems likely that Chongqing Red Guards seized booty from their political enemies too.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to the sent-down youth campaign, Red Guards felt that they were at the center of China's revolution. Some urban youth initially viewed rustication as an opportunity to pursue their lifelong mission of furthering the revolution. Rife rural poverty eventually caused most of them to question the revolution's accomplishments.<sup>16</sup> Their daily struggles to maintain bare subsistence also led many young people to think that their centrality to China's political history had ended. It is revealing that Red Guards assumed that urban educated youth, not rural folk, were the leaders of the revolution. It is even more indicative of their privileged urban origins that they seemingly only valued manual labor once they arrived in the countryside.

Even though some sent-down youth came to see value in manual labor, most did not envision adopting a permanent rural life. What they enjoyed the most was not working with their hands but more leisure-oriented cultural activities, such as writing, consuming underground novels, and composing letters to friends and family. Yang contends that these activities distanced sent-down youth from the Maoist project, since they turned people away from the grand political ideals of socialist revolution toward the cultivation of relationships, thoughts, and feelings of a personal nature. When sent-down youth returned to urban areas, some channeled their new, more individualistic conceptions of politics into the Democracy Wall movement and asserted that for China to fully modernize it had to democratize. The central government rejected their claims, and it conflated development with modernity.

12 Andrew Walder, "Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered," *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002): 437–71.

13 Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

14 Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (London: Palgrave, 1985).

15 Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People: The Ordeal of the Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

16 Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

Political activism was not the route most sent-down youth took when they came back to the city. Many accepted putting economic progress first and threw themselves into educational and market success. Some former sent-down youth fared better in their post-Mao academic and economic endeavors, a social fact that colored how they remembered their generational past. Those who were upwardly mobile tended to see the Mao years as a time of persecution and pain, whereas those who experienced less social mobility tended to esteem the Mao period as an era of equality and community. Either way, sent-down youth came out socioeconomically on top of rural residents, whom the party continued to regard as second-class citizens, though some evidence suggests that sent-down youth usually married lower and were less socially connected than youth who remained city folk.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taken together, the three books considered in this review shed light on a few ways that CCP policies in the Mao era induced social stratification. Wang's study traces the making of rightists as a bureaucratic underclass, whose members often acquired their accursed label because of petty disputes or bureaucratic compulsion to meet quotas, not ideological dissent. Pushed into camps, rightists came under the control of supervisors who, like their counterparts elsewhere in the country, often based their actions on arbitrary responses to often equally ad hoc directives rather than on formal rules and institutions dedicated to promoting social and economic equality.<sup>18</sup> Inmates' lives were made only more trying by central and local officials routinely prioritizing increased economic output above public welfare.

Tan's book illustrates some of the consequences of the CCP granting lower and middle peasants dominance over rural communes and subaltern black elements. Yang similarly shows the tensions fostered by the CCP materially and ideologically favoring urbanites classified as red. In both rural and urban areas, state-backed social divisions exploded in vicious factional conflicts during the Cultural Revolution, in part because political factions embraced the party's glorification of revolutionary violence, and in part because faction members sought to gratify more worldly desires. When the party rusticated Red Guards, poverty and hard labor made many young people aware of their privileged urban status. Most, however, did not want to make a life out of improving the countryside. Most yearned for city life and savored urbane cultural activities that distanced them from the Maoist project. When their dreams of returning home became real, some pushed back against the CCP's claim that development was enough to make China modern, but many more concentrated on emerging opportunities for social advancement that placed them firmly above their rural compatriots.

17 Shun Wang and Weina Zhou, "The Unintended Long-Term Consequences of Mao's Mass Send-Down Movement: Marriage, Social Network, and Happiness," *HiCN Working Paper* 213 (April 2016), <http://www.hicn.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/HiCN-WP-2131.pdf>.

18 Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Eddy U, *Disorganizing China: Counter-Bureaucracy and the Decline of Socialism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Covell Meyskens is a historian of twentieth-century China with interests in the building of industrialization, revolution, and war experiences and memories. His book manuscript—"Mao's Garrison State: Security and Development in Cold War China"—examines how the CCP industrialized inland regions to protect socialist China from American and Soviet threats. His second book project analyzes state-led efforts to transform China's Three Gorges region into a hydraulic engine to power national development. Other current projects include a history of the Third Front city of Panzhihua and an archive of images of Maoist China ([everydaylifeinmao-istchina.org](http://everydaylifeinmao-istchina.org)).

Correspondence to: Covell Meyskens. Email: [cfmeyske@nps.edu](mailto:cfmeyske@nps.edu).