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Information, Decision-Making and China's "Great Cultural Revolution"

A paper delivered at the
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The men and women of the CCP who in 1949 had forced Chiang Kai-shek to, in Mao Zedong's words, "bugger off to those little islands out in the ocean," were painfully aware of how dependent the success of their revolutionary endeavour would always be on timely, substantial, relevant, and reliable *information*.¹ In his 1938 essay *On Protracted War*, Mao had admitted as much when he characterized as "scientific truth" the famous dictum by Sun Zi (A. D. 551–479) "Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat."² Zhou Enlai echoed the same understanding on April Fool's Day 1950 when he observed that "even after the disappearance of class society... intelligence work will still have to go on."³ As the CCP set about consolidating its rule over the Chinese mainland, what you *knew* meant more than what you were—information proved to be a political currency harder than "class." "We all know," so a textbook used in PRC police academies explained, "that special informants (*teqing ren yuan*) are people whom we have secretly recruited among all social strata: they include party and youth league members, members of the revolutionary masses, backward elements, as well as elements and special agents (*tewu*) of the hostile classes."⁴ Some members of the CCP elite developed what seemed like an obsession with "staying on top of the latest developments (*zhangwo zuixin dongtai*) at all times." Children growing up in Zhongnanhai in the 1950s still remember that the CCP Chairman, rather than ask—as cultural convention would have dictated—whether they had eaten or not, always used to

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¹ "Mao Zedong gei Jiang Qing de xin" (Mao Zedong's letter to Jiang Qing) (8 July 1966), in Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue dangshi dangjian zhengong jiaoyanshi, ed., "*Wenhua dageming*" yanjiu ziliao (*Research materials on the "Great Cultural Revolution"*), 3 vols. (Beijing, 1988), Vol. 1, p. 56.

² *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), Vol. 2, p. 164.

³ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Zhou Enlai nianpu 1949–1976* (*Chronology of the life of Zhou Enlai 1949–1976*), 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 1, p. 30.

⁴ *Teqing gongzuo jiangyi* (*Teaching materials on special informant's work*) (Beijing: Zhongyang renmin gongan xueyuan, 1957), p. 8.

greet their parents by asking “Any news?” (*you shenme xinwen?*) and that his senior political secretary would do the same.⁵

Given past experience and their indisputable skill at collecting, interpreting, estimating the value of, and so far successfully exploiting information to further their political aims, it must therefore be regarded as remarkable that by the mid-1960s, Mao and his closest comrades-in-arms managed all the same to make what their successors charged in a historic 1981 Central Committee resolution was “an *entirely erroneous appraisal* of the prevailing class relations and political situation in the party and state.”⁶ Liu Shaoqi had spelled out the essentials of that appraisal in 1966, when he claimed that “anti-party” forces had been uncovered who sought “to alter the fundamental line and fundamental policies of our party and state, to have things done according to own their line, to remould the party and remould all of China in their own image, to realize *revisionist* policies—in other words, to revive capitalist policies.”⁷ In order to pre-empt the designs of these revisionists, the Politburo in May 1966 launched the “Great Cultural Revolution”—a purge directed at what Liu Shaoqi described as “persons in power inside the party who are opposed to the party (*dangnei de fandang*), opposed to the centre, opposed to Chairman Mao and opposed to Mao Zedong Thought.”⁸

In 1969 and again in 1973, two consecutive National Congresses of the CCP asserted that the Cultural Revolution had been “absolutely necessary and most timely for consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat, preventing capitalist restoration and building socialism.”⁹ But not long after the death of Mao, upbeat characterizations like this one vanished from the party press. Members of the post-Mao party leadership admitted that the Cultural Revolution may have mobilized the entire nation, but only in a misguided effort to deal with a “revisionist” danger that nobody, not even Mao, had ever actually been able to verify *existed*: “Who, in the end, were the enemies? How many of them were there? Where were they?... Not even Chairman Mao himself had figured that out, yet set a revolution in motion all the same. This shows just how absurd it all was.”¹⁰ The Cultural Revolution had been for China a disastrous civil war of choice

⁵ Wang Fan and Dong Ping, *Hongqiang tonghua: wo jia zhu zai Zhongnanhai* (*Red Wall children's stories: My family lives in Zhongnanhai*) (Beijing: Zuo jia chubanshe, 2003), p. 257.

⁶ “Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi” (Resolution on certain questions in the history of the CCP since the founding of the People’s Republic of China) in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Sanzhong quanhai yilai zhongyao wenxian huibian* (*Collected important documents since the third plenum of the central committee*), 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), Vol. 2, p. 1117.

⁷ Liu Shaoqi, “Zai Zhonggong zhongyang zhaoji de minzhu renshi zuotanhui shang de jianghua” (Speech at an informal conference of democratic personages called by the CCP Centre), in Zhengxie quanguo weiyuanhui jiguan Weidong geming zhandoutui, Dongfanghong zhandoutuan, Hongweibing zaofanpai, ed., *Chedi cuibui shiqi nian lai zhengxie gongzuo zhong de Liu, Deng fangeming xiuzhengzhu yi luxian* (*Thoroughly destroy the counter-revolutionary revisionist line of Liu and Deng in the past seventeen years of Political Consultative Conference work*) (N. p., 1967), p. 67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹ Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue, “Wenhua dageming” yanjiu ziliao, Vol. 2, p. 311; Vol. 3, p. 29.

¹⁰ Hu Qiaomu, “‘Lishi jueyi’ zhong dui ‘Wenhua dageming’ de jige lunduan” (Some arguments concerning the “Great Cultural Revolution” made in the “History resolution”), in *Hu Qiaomu tan Zhonggong dangshi* (*Hu Qiaomu on CCP history*) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), p. 116.

against an “-ism” and its corresponding “-ists” that ended up, in the words of Deng Xiaoping, “*wasting* a generation—actually, not just one generation.”¹¹ As one of the communist party’s own historians put it in the early 1980s: “The ‘Great Cultural Revolution’ had absolutely no positive meaning, and there was nothing correct about it whatsoever... We have really made an effort to discover what was correct about it, but have not been able to.”¹²

Harsh verdicts like these from senior and junior members of the CCP elite provoked awkward questions. *If* there had, as party central now insisted, been an “entirely erroneous appraisal” of the state of the realm on which its launch in 1966 and subsequent “development in depth and scope”—as the Cultural Revolutionary media would have it¹³—had been premised, then *by whom?* Where in the vast machinery built to serve the information and intelligence needs of China’s leaders had the “error(s)” occurred? Was information making its way up the system fatally flawed already by the time it reached those who made the ultimate decisions, men like the CCP Chairman and Liu Shaoqi (in the words of a contemporary US biographer “the Chinese Communist Party’s foremost expert on the theory and practice of organization and party structure”), Zhou Enlai (“Peking’s leading diplomat”), Deng Xiaoping (“the chief executive officer of the CCP”), and Lin Biao (“prominent marshal” and “authoritative interpreter of Mao Zedong’s doctrines”)?¹⁴ Had an “entirely erroneous appraisal” of what needed to be known by men like these occurred already at lower and/or intermediate levels? Or was information about “the prevailing class relations and political situation in the Party and state” ending up on their desks essentially correct but totally misread? If the latter was true, why this sudden fatally diminished capacity on the part of the PRC founders (n.b. Mao Zedong) to “seek truth from facts”?

The claim made by his official biographers is that by the mid-1960s, Mao was mainly letting himself be guided in his work by information from three major channels.¹⁵ The same was almost certainly true of his Politburo colleagues, though the relative weight each person attached to a specific channel may well have been different. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the questions posed in the preceding paragraph by throwing some critical light on these channels of information and on how Mao and his colleagues viewed and assessed them. The paper looks first at the intra-

¹¹ Deng Xiaoping, “Dui qicao ‘Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi’ de yijian” (Some views on the drafting of the “Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic), in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Sanzhong quanbui yilai zhongyao wenxian huibian*, Vol. 1, p. 551.

¹² Zhonggong Zhejiang shengwei dangxiao dangshi jiaoyanshi, ed., *‘Wenbua dageming’ shiqi ziliao xuanji* (Selected materials concerning the ‘Great Cultural Revolution’ era) (Hangzhou, 1984), p. 301.

¹³ See Huazhong shifan xueyuan geming weiyuanhui, waiyuxi geming weiyuanhui, eds., *The May 7 collection of terms & expressions (Chinese-English)* (Wuhan, 1968), p. 448.

¹⁴ Howard Boorman, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, 4 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967–1970).

¹⁵ Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji, *Mao Zedong zhuan 1949–1976* (Biography of Mao Zedong 1949–1976), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003), Vol. 2, p. 1499.

bureaucratic so-called system of reports (*baogao zhidu*) which the CCP had established in 1948 and which called on subordinate units to “provide the centre with timely information so that it can help all areas, either before or after the event, to avoid mistakes or commit fewer mistakes and win even greater victories...”¹⁶ It then goes on to look at a separate structure of dedicated information providers (many of them concurrently serving in a public capacity as reporters for the ordinary party press) who contributed to classified publications with names like *Internal Reference* and *Rapid Reports*. Finally, the paper looks at some of the disparate semi-private and extra-bureaucratic sources of information for which Mao had a particular fondness.

INTRA-BUREAUCRATIC REPORTS

The system of reports was meant to keep each successive higher level in the communist party, government, and military hierarchies informed of what subordinate levels were doing. Ultimately, by incorporating information from all the way “down there” in a society with which those at the lowest level of the stratified state interacted daily, and by reaching all the way up to the very apex of political power, the system was designed to allow a Beijing leadership to stay on top of what the entire country was doing. Assuming it operated as intended, it would have allowed for reasonably informed decisions on the part of people like, for example, the CCP Chairman and the Premier of the State Council.

A problem, not surprisingly, was that no small measure of disinformation permeated the system. In this respect, the PRC was no different from its so-called “elder brother”—the Soviet Union. In a study published in 1985, a former deputy director of the Czechoslovakian Disinformation Department highlighted the extent to which disinformation was endemic to the Soviet state. Reports, he maintained, “are politically slanted to insure approval of party leaders in Moscow... By spreading disinformation through their channels of domestic communication, the Soviets contaminate their own environment.”¹⁷ Had the situation in China been significantly better, there would have been no need for Mao’s political secretary to remind local officials that: “We must seek truth from facts and do things the proletarian way, not the bourgeois way. The bourgeois way is to produce bogus intelligence, bogus documentation. The proletarian way is, to put it simply, to tell the truth.”¹⁸

It is unlikely there ever was a golden age when the system of reports functioned as intended and provided the Politburo leadership with an altogether “true

¹⁶ “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jianli baogao zhidu de zhishi” (CCP Centre directive on setting up a system of reports) (7 January 1948), in Zhonggong zhongyang zhengce yanjiushi, ed., *1948 nian yilai zhengce buibian* (Collected policies since 1948) (N. p.: Zhonggong zhongyang Huabei ju, 1949), p. 485.

¹⁷ Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington D. C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1985), pp. 76–77.

¹⁸ “Zhongyang shouzhang di 3 ci jiejian Tianjin daibiao” (Central leaders meet Tianjin delegates for the 3rd time) (19 August 1967), Qinghua Jingtangshan zuozhanbu di 3 dongtaizu, *Dongtai* (Current intelligence), No. 128, 20 August 1967.

picture.” Already in the fall of 1948, before the PRC had even been established, party central accused selected subordinate-level entities (civilian and military) of perverting it.¹⁹ In early 1957, Mao complained bitterly to a national conference of propaganda cadres about how at the very bottom of the system, the solicitation of reliable information was proving highly problematic: “The workers and peasants... go on and chit-chat with you, but they don’t tell you what’s really going on.”²⁰ Whatever their motives, the simple truth was that the “workers and peasants” were reluctant to talk—as were intellectuals, students, religious leaders, non-communist notables and so-called “democratic personages.” That their behaviour was perfectly rational under the prevailing political circumstances is born out by the tragic fate of those who agreed to speak, only to be told, once they had, that they were “bourgeois rightists” and that the CCP would “not tolerate incitement to counter-revolution”...

In the early 1960s, quite a few senior party leaders no longer hesitated to give voice to their loss of faith in the “system of reports.”²¹ In 1964, a frustrated Liu Shaoqi explained to government officials who may still have believed otherwise, that it most definitely no longer provided decision-makers like himself with reliable information:

Some people claim they know the true situation (*Jiaojie shiji*): the provincial Party Committee, they say *they* know the true situation; the prefectural Party Committee, they say *they* know the true situation; the country Party Committee, they say *they* know the true situation; the commune, they say *they* know the true situation. You get to the production brigade and it’s time for the Party Branch secretary to deliver a report on the true situation whereupon he, too, says *he* knows the true situation and you don’t. You’re from Beijing: he knows the true situation—you don’t! Whatever you do, don’t believe him. Whatever you do, don’t trust the provincial committee, the prefectural committee, or the county committee to know about the true situation. Even the commune doesn’t know the true situation. The [brigade] Party Branch knows it, the grass-roots organization knows it. But they will not tell you. A lot of things, they will not tell you. You will not hear it from them. What you hear will be fabrications (*jiade*).²²

¹⁹ “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu zai quandang quanjun zhankai dui zhixing baogao zhidu zhi jiantao de zhishi” (CCP Centre directive on embarking on party-wide and army-wide self-criticisms concerning the implementation of the system of reports) (4 September 1948), in Zhonggong zhongyang zhengce yanjiushi, *1948 nian yilai zhengce huibian*, p. 509.

²⁰ Mao Zedong, “Zai quanguo xuanchuan gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua (sujigao)” (Talk at national propaganda work conference (stenographic record)) (2 March 1957), in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui (Long live Mao Zedong Thought)* (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue “Renda sanhong,” 1967), p. 73.

²¹ Viz. Mao’s complaints in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Mao Zedong’s manuscripts since the founding of the nation)*, 13 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990–98), Vol. 10, pp. 135–136.

²² Liu Shaoqi, “Guanyu ‘sijing,’ ‘wufan’ dundian wenti de baogao” (Report on the issue of spot-squatting in the “Four cleanups” and “Five antis”) (16 September 1964), in Renmin chubanshe ziliaoishi, ed., *Pipan ziliao—Zhongguo Heluxiaofu Liu Shaoqi fangeming xiuzhengzhuyi yanlun ji (1923.8–1967.7) (Materials for criticism:*

When they ratified, in 1981, the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the PRC”—in which praise and blame for most everything of import that had occurred on Mao’s watch was apportioned—the members of the Central Committee stood by this pessimistic assessment and dared anyone to challenge its basic validity. Sealed away in the archives was the proof that would, should it ever become necessary, show precisely what kind of input from below had prompted what kind of policies from above. In the words of Mao’s one-time ghost-writer Hu Qiaomu, referring back to the years of the Great Leap Forward disaster and the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution: “Those assessments that the Centre made were based on what it was being told by quite a number of localities, this is an objective fact. Those reports from the localities have been preserved, to this very day, in the Central Archive; they cannot to be revised, their existence cannot be denied. It was a matter of mutual causality, mutual reinforcement.”²³

Of all the many lesser aims of the Cultural Revolution—the aims that in their totality were expected to eliminate or, barring that, neutralize the revisionist threat for seven, eight years, maybe longer—few were as concrete yet in the end as hard to realize as that of bringing the reality of the system of reports closer in line with the ideal. In 1967, Mao’s newly constituted grass-roots allies certainly did their bit, as exemplified by the Manchurian “Beacon-Fire Television” Red Guards who exposed the reports submitted to the CCP Centre by members of the Liaoning provincial CCP secretariat as false and who went on to insist that “Anyone making a premeditated attempt to deceive the Centre will certainly come to no good end!”²⁴ But charges like these did nothing to intimidate the many “revisionists” who tried all the same. They did, after all, if Liu Shaoqi’s 1964 characterization of them is to be believed, have “a better grasp of our policies than have our own Communist Party members” and “use our slogans, our policies, our Communist Party members’ own tricks, and a cadre’s guise, to seize or hold on to leadership power”²⁵

In the Cultural Revolution, senior leaders insisted that progress was being made. “Last year,” Zhou Enlai remarked in September 1967, “the reports that were sent in by party committees were in many instances not truthful (*bu zhenshi*),” but “this year, of course, it’s different.”²⁶ It is doubtful whether this was indeed the case. Zhou had himself only a few months earlier been involved in unravelling no small number of highly dubious

Collected counter-revolutionary revisionist utterances by China’s Khrushchev Liu Shaoqi (August 1923–July 1967), 3 vols. (Beijing: 1967–1968), Vol. 3, p. 593.

²³ Hu Qiaomu, “Dui ‘lishi jueyi’ xuexi zhong suo tichu wenti de huida” (Replies to questions raised during study of “History resolution”), in *Hu Qiaomu tan Zhonggong dangshi*, p. 156.

²⁴ Liaoning wuchanjieji gemingpai lianluozhan, *Fei shuo bu ke (It has to be said)*, No. 18, 30 August 1967.

²⁵ Liu Shaoqi, “Guanyu shehuizhuyi jiaoyu wenti he liangzhong laodong zhidu, liangzhong jiaoyu zhidu wenti de baogao” (Report on issues concerning socialist education and the two kinds of labour and two kinds of education systems) (1 August 1964), in *Renmin chubanshe ziliao*, *Pipan ziliao*, Vol. 3, pp. 409–

410.

²⁶ Li Jinchuan, “Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan” (Remembering the Central Cultural Revolution Group’s journalist’s station), *Bainian chao (Tide of the century)*, No. 5, 2002, p. 17.

reports that had proven to be anything but “truthful.” In March, he had spoken as follows at an inquiry into a massacre of civilian protesters who had occupied a newspaper office in the provincial capital of Qinghai province:

[The deputy commander of the Qinghai Military District] Zhao Yongfu deceived the Centre by submitting a false report about the military situation. He himself made the phoney claim that the “18 August” [Red Guard] organization was in the possession of rifles (these were his words). We have conducted an investigation... and found that they had no rifles at all. It’s been proven that [Zhao’s] claim was entirely unfounded. Even he himself is unable to come up with a credible explanation. In his reports to the Centre, he insisted they had rifles. He deceived the Centre and the masses. He said he too sent people to investigate and the Lanzhou Military Region also sent people to investigate. But nobody has been able to discover any rifles.²⁷

As they reclaimed the newspaper offices, the soldiers under Zhao’s command killed 169 and wounded 178 of the occupants. Prompted by a letter from a survivor, it was Mao himself who called on the Central Cultural Revolution Group to launch an investigation that led to a total vindication of the, as it turned out, unarmed members of the “18 August” organization.²⁸

In their well-founded suspicions of what the system of reports was telling them, the members of the Politburo all had something in common. But there was one point on which Mao’s suspicions differed from those of his colleagues—perhaps because of a personality trait, perhaps because of his position, perhaps both. In any case, it was to affect both the launch and the evolution of the Cultural Revolution. While Liu et al. seem to have been prepared to believe that amongst themselves, at least, it was possible to work on the assumption that no-one was systematically and successfully keeping the others in the dark, this was a notion that Mao never subscribed to. (In private, in 1971, a group of PLA officers with links to Lin Biao went so far as to characterize Mao as “*pathologically* suspicious.”²⁹) The story of Liu’s fall from grace is too well known to warrant retelling here; Deng Xiaoping’s too, like Liu’s, was partly motivated by a suspicion on Mao’s part that information was being withheld from him. In October 1966, Mao claimed that: “The Secretariat may be told about some things, but it is [in turn] not

²⁷ “Zhongyang shouzhang di 4 ci jiejian Qinghai 8.18 geming zaofanpai ji yuan Shoudu sansi zhu-Qing lianluozhan he waidi fu-Qing hongweibing jiyao” (Minutes of the 4th meeting of central leaders and Qinghai 18 August revolutionary rebels, members of the original Capital 3rd HQ Support Qinghai Liaison Station and Red Guards from elsewhere who had been in Qinghai) (24–25 March 1967), in Beijing boli zongchang hongweibing lianluozhan, ed., *Zhongyang shouzhang jianghua* (Central leaders’ speeches), 4 vols. (Beijing, 1967), Vol. 3, p. 215.

²⁸ “Qi Benyu tongzhi di 5 ci jiejian waidi hongweibing ji Qinghai gemingpai fu-Jing daibiao de jianghua” (Comrade Qi Benyu meets for the 5th time with representatives of provincial Red Guards and the Qinghai revolutionary faction visiting Beijing) (25 March 1967), in Beijing boli zongchang hongweibing lianluozhan, *Zhongyang shouzhang jianghua*, Vol. 3, p. 219.

²⁹ Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue, “*Wenbua dageming*” yanjiu ziliao, Vol. 2, p. 657.

telling me. Deng Xiaoping always stays at a polite distance from me.”³⁰ If the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group who were present when Mao said this believed that this charge levelled at the “second party person in power taking the capitalist road” was simply *ad hominem* and that they themselves would never come in for similar criticism, they were very much mistaken. A mere four months later, Mao directed a similar accusation at the group, which by then had replaced the Secretariat. Turning to Lin Biao in the middle of a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee in February 1967, Mao grumbled: “I’d say it’s still no different from what it used to be: I don’t get reports and I’m being kept in the dark. The only exception is the Premier. In important matters, he always reports to me.”³¹

And if either Lin or the Premier believed that they would manage not to provoke—sooner or later—the same reaction in Mao, they too were in turn mistaken. Lin, of course, was to be vilified posthumously as the most wicked conspiring double-dealer the CCP had ever seen; but even Zhou by the time he passed away no longer personified in Mao’s view “the only exception.” In 1973, in conversation with two other members of the Politburo, Mao claimed that in the field of foreign policy-making, he was being fed nothing but “a constant stream of trivialities” and that if nothing were to be done about this, “revision [-ism] is bound to develop.” “When that happens,” Mao added, “don’t say I didn’t tell you.”³² As everyone familiar with the inner workings of the leadership knew, and as one of his Chinese biographers has pointed out, the accusation was directed squarely at Zhou.³³

JOURNALIST’S REPORTS

In a development that mirrored in part Mao’s growing mistrust in the information coming to him through regular intra-bureaucratic channels, the years leading up to the start of the Cultural Revolution saw him becoming more and more suspicious of the system that once had been designed specifically to complement it. On 22 September 1949, the day after he had announced that “the Chinese”—a “quarter of humanity”—had now “stood up,” the Xinhua News Agency published the first issue of *Internal Reference*, a highly classified news bulletin for senior decision-makers. It was designed specifically to tell the latter about “how the party’s short- and long-term policies are carried out in various localities and problems that arise in this process, especially the kinds of

³⁰ Mao Zedong, “Zai huibao huiyi shang de jianghua” (Talk at the report-back meeting) (24 October 1966), in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui 1949–1967* (*Long live Mao Zedong Thought 1949–1967*), 3 vols. (N.p., 1968), Vol. 3, p. 173.

³¹ Wang Li fansi lu (*Wang Li’s reflections*), 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Star North Books, 2001), Vol. 2, p. 974.

³² Pang and Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan 1949–1976*, Vol. 2, p. 1656.

³³ Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* (*Zhou Enlai in his later years*) (Carle Place: Mirror Books, 2003), p. 454.

difficulties, erroneous tendencies, errors, and shortcomings encountered, knowledge of which might be of reference value for the work of leading organs.”³⁴

In the early years of the PRC, the Politburo leadership remained positive about *Internal Reference* and other publications like it. When asked in January 1953, Mao declared the material produced by the Xinhua News Agency for leaders like himself to be “most useful.”³⁵ When provincial officials accused the agency’s journalists of misleading the Party Centre about the “actual situation,” Mao spoke up, insisting that: “the task given the journalists by the Centre is to truthfully reflect the situation. When they do this, they are simply carrying out their professional duty, and it does not matter if the provincial or municipal Party Committees like it or don’t like it. How the Centre assesses what they report is the Centre’s business.”³⁶ But by 1957–58, Mao and some of his closest colleagues had developed misgivings about what they were being told by the Xinhua News Agency and some of its most important sister agencies (e.g. the publishers of the *People’s Daily*). In early 1959, Mao was telling provincial and municipal cadres that “what is being written in *Internal Reference* is history: you have to read it, but you mustn’t read too much of it. In the end, rather than to trust entirely what’s in the history books, it may be better to dispense with them altogether.”³⁷ A year earlier, Deng Xiaoping had argued that “*Internal Reference* is like big-character posters. What’s in them counts, and then again doesn’t. You may trust what’s reported in *Internal Reference*, but you don’t have to.”³⁸

Mao’s growing mistrust was not so much one in individual journalists and the work they were doing, as one in the editors who made the day-to-day decisions about content.³⁹ Increasingly, his concern was with the way in which they sought to influence certain decisions by slanting what was being reported in a particular way with which he himself disagreed. In 1962, he had criticized them for what he called their lack of “direction”; in late 1964, he was suggesting to his colleagues that *Internal Reference* was turning into a forum for rather less than well-received “fiction of accusation” (*qianze xiaoshuo*).⁴⁰ Once he started, as he did in 1965, to talk more and more about the danger of

³⁴ Cf. Michael Schoenhals, “Elite Information in China,” *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 34, September–October 1985, pp. 65–71.

³⁵ “Neibu cankao cailiao shenwei youyi” (Internal reference material is very beneficial), in *Mao zhuxi Lin fuzhuxi guanyu baokan xuanchuan de zhibi: Mao zhuxi de zhibi* (Chairman Mao’s and Vice-Chairman Lin’s instructions on the press and propaganda: Chairman Mao’s instructions) (N.p., 1970), p. 70.

³⁶ “Jizhe fanying qingkuang shi zhixing ziji de zhize” (Journalists reflecting the situation are carrying out their duties), in *ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁷ “Neibu cankao buke jinjin” (*Internal Reference* should be taken with a grain of salt), in *ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁸ “Zhongyang shujichu dui gaijin Neibu cankao gongzuo de yijian” (Opinions of the Central Secretariat on improving the work of *Internal Reference*) (24 February 1958), in Xinhua she xinwen yanjiusuo, ed., *Xinhua she wenjian ziliao xuanbian* (Selected Xinhua agency documents and materials), 4 vols. (Beijing, [1987]), Vol. 4, p. 183.

³⁹ “Dui xu he shi de wenti yao you zhengque de kanfa” (One has to adopt a correct view in the matter of the abstract and the concrete), in *Mao zhuxi Lin fuzhuxi guanyu baokan xuanchuan de zhibi: Mao zhuxi de zhibi*, pp. 202–206.

⁴⁰ “Ban Neican yao you fangxiang” (*Internal Reference* has to have direction), in *ibid.*, p. 262; “Buyao ba Neibu cankao bancheng ‘qianze xiaoshuo’” (Don’t turn *Internal Reference* into “fiction of accusation”), in *ibid.*, p. 295.

revisionism, Mao ranked representatives of the media as second—after members of the Central Committee—among the categories of people most susceptible to it.⁴¹ And some of the characterizations of “revisionists” produced by those who were *au fait* with Mao’s thinking show just *how* central the issues of sharing, withholding, and/or distorting information had become when the Cultural Revolution started. In the words of an editorial in the *Liberation Army Daily* from June 1966:

They are double-dealers—complying in the open while opposing in the dark. They do one thing in public and the very opposite in private. They may look like people, but in actuality, they are sinister monsters. To your face, they may sound quite human, but what they say behind your back is all a pack of lies... [Peddling their] revisionist wares, these enemies waving a bogus red banner are ten times more vicious than enemies waving a white banner.⁴²

The PLA general who was the immediate superior of the editorialists who penned this particular passage described the Cultural Revolution as “*us* using an all-round ‘civil war’ to counter-attack *them*.”⁴³ The system of classified journalist’s reports was to be deeply affected.

Shortly after he had launched the Cultural Revolution, Mao assembled a new and different constituency on which to rely for the information needs of what came to be known as his “proletarian HQ”—the politically correct designation of a national leadership purged of “persons in power inside the party who are opposed to the party,” to use once more Liu Shaoqi’s poignant phrase. Not that Mao saw dispensing with his journalists as a viable solution to the “revisionist” problem. But one of the very first tasks given the Central Cultural Revolution Group in the summer of 1966 was the creation of a new, alternative domestic intelligence collection unit, designed to be more responsive to his perceived needs. Its name was the Journalist’s Station (*Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan*) and it was in existence between September 1966 and May 1969. Recent retrospectives claim that it supervised the work of no less than 200 “journalists” nationwide.⁴⁴ Lest this figure should appear remarkably *small* given China’s size and the enormity of the task it confronted, it has to be added that claims made during the Cultural Revolution by well-placed individuals suggest that the real number may have been far bigger. So for instance, the wife of a deputy editor of *Red Flag* announced on one occasion that “the Central Cultural Revolution Group sent close to a thousand people to every corner of the country in order to stay on top of developments,” and on another asked the rhetorical

⁴¹ Wang Li, “Zai Yafei xinwen gongzuozhe xiehui shujichu di 5 ci quanti huiyi chengyuan zuotanhui shang de jianghua” (Speech at meeting with participants in 5th plenary session of the secretariat of the Asian-African Journalists’ Association) (14 June 1967), in *Wuchanjiuji wenhua dageming ziliao 6* (*Materials on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: June [1967]*), 2 vols. (N.p., 1967), Vol. 2, p. 3.

⁴² *Jiefangjun bao* (*Liberation Army Daily*), 7 June 1966.

⁴³ Xiao Hua, “Zai junji ganbu huiyi shang de jianghua” (Speech at meeting of cadres above the corps level) (17 March 1967) in *Xuexi wenjian* (*Study documents*) (N.p., 1967), p. 91.

⁴⁴ Li, “Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan,” pp. 12; 14.

question “When the Centre sent close to a thousand people to every corner of the country, wasn’t it precisely in order to collect intelligence (*qingbao*)?”⁴⁵

The most important medium, by far, to which the men and women working for the Journalist’s Station contributed were the so-called *Rapid Reports*. These were distributed sometimes averaging one or more an hour to Mao and the members of his “Proletarian HQ”—Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, and a handful of other senior figures. The first *Rapid Report* appeared on 25 August 1966 and contained an account of Red Guards ransacking the offices of China’s small so-called “democratic” political parties the day before. *Rapid Report* No.19, appearing the next day, reported that those same political parties had, for now, “suspended activities.” The time-lag between the occurrence of an event and its being reported was usually no more than a few hours, allowing for some variation depending on where it had occurred—the favoured means of communication between journalists in the field and their home office being the secure telephone.⁴⁶ A secretary who worked for Lin Biao from 1966 to 1970 recalled many years later that Lin would regularly read two kinds of intelligence reports originating with the Journalist’s Station: one was the *Rapid Reports*, the other the *Cultural Revolution Bulletin*, a slightly less “instantaneous” daily serial.⁴⁷

Two things in particular are noteworthy about the Journalist’s Station, the first being the close organizational links between it and the PLA, and the second the fact that a large number of the men and women it employed lacked all but the most rudimentary journalistic training. Why this latter fact should, as it appears, have been seen in a positive light by Mao can only be explained against the backdrop of his deep-seated anti-professionalism. As he once put it in the context of what kind of successors his mass mobilization against the “revisionist threat” was meant to foster, Mao preferred “staunch people who are young, who don’t have much formal education, whose stand is firm, and who have some political experience.”⁴⁸

The PLA-connection is a sign of just how deep Mao’s mistrust of the civilian CCP establishment had become. In August 1966, he had spoken to the acting editor-in-chief of the *Liberation Army Daily* and one of his deputies and hinted at what irked him by accusing a former editor-in-chief of the *People’s Daily* and a former head of the Xinhua News Agency of not “obeying” him, and by going on to ask: “Will you? You’re from the

⁴⁵ Wang X X, “Zhuyao huodong dashiji (2 gao) (1966.7–1967.9)” (Record of main activities from July 1966 to September 1967 (2nd draft)), p. 39; “1971.3.26 pidou dahui qian gongbu Wang X X cailiao digao: di 3 bufen, yinmou dianfu [Beijing] shi geweihui jinxing fangeming duoquan de bufen zuixing” (Handwritten draft of materials concerning Wang X X made public prior to denunciation and struggle rally on 26 March 1971, pt. 3: Some criminal evidence of conspiracy to topple the municipal Revolutionary Committee and carry out counter-revolutionary power seizure), p. 6. Unpublished archive materials.

⁴⁶ Li, “Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan,” p. 13.

⁴⁷ Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan jishi: Lin Biao misbu huiyilu* (Factual Record of Maojiawan: Lin Biao’s Secretary Remembers) (Beijing: Chunqiu chubanshe, 1988), p. 86.

⁴⁸ Mao Zedong, “Zai Zhongyang zhengzhiju kuoda huiyi shang de jianghua” (Speech at enlarged session of the Politburo) (20 March 1966), in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui 1949–1967*, Vol. 3, p. 160.

armed forces, perhaps you'll be better..."⁴⁹ Examples of what the connection involved in practical terms include the fact that initially, the men and women operating out of the Journalist's Station were all routinely outfitted with ID cards identifying them as *Liberation Army Daily* journalists. Only when this turned out, in some circumstances, to be more of an obstacle than a door-opener, were a limited number of journalists outfitted with ID cards that identified them as civilian *Red Flag* or *People's Daily* journalists. In actuality, their real affiliation remained unchanged. In the words of Zhou Enlai, "they are all dispatched by the Central Cultural Revolution Group and are all part of the same outfit." Soon it was an open secret among, for example, Red Guards that journalists from one of the national media, almost regardless of what else they might themselves claim, were "really" working for the group. When travelling outside Beijing, the infrastructure they required in the form of accommodation, transportation, offices, telephones, etc. was for the most part provided by the PLA.⁵⁰

Though the men and women who worked for the Journalist's Station were all referred to as journalists, only a handful of them had been trained as such. In actuality, according to a reliable PLA source, "an overwhelming majority were not journalists (*jizhe*) from the armed forces, but PLA officers (*ganbu*), including a large contingent from military academies."⁵¹ What seems clear is that the station was the hub of a network consisting of people whose credentials were political, first and foremost. In the parlance of the times, they were meant to be *both* "red and expert," but rarely were. Inexperienced first-timers, many were very unsure of what was expected of them and fearful of making mistakes, while at the same time only too eager to please their political masters:

[W]e had a very poor grasp of what the movement was like locally [in the civilian sector]. Our minds were full of question marks, and our understanding of the nature, aims, and methods of the movement did not go beyond what was being said in the Central Documents and in the newspapers. My feeling was that the understanding of the two senior officials who briefed us [about our new assignment] was not much better either and seemed to be missing the point... [At the end of the briefing] I agonized and felt that the investigation and research task we had been given was if anything arduous and hard to perform. Other journalists also appeared to be laden with anxiety.⁵²

⁴⁹ Yuan Ding, "Xiao Li yu *Jiefangjun bao* duoquan fengbao" (Xiao Li and the storm surrounding the power seizure at the *Liberation Army Daily*), *Bainian chao*, No. 2, 1999, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Li, "Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan," pp. 13; 17; Zhou Enlai, "Jiejian *Hongqi*, *Renmin ribao*, *Jiefangjun bao*, *Xinhuashe* zhu waidi jizhe de jianghua" (Speech at reception for journalists from *Red Flag*, *People's Daily*, *Liberation Army Daily*, and the Xinhua News Agency stationed across China) (21 April 1967), in Beijing boli zongchang hongweibing lianluozhan, *Zhongyang shouzhang jianghua*, Vol. 4, p. 195.

⁵¹ Wang Nianyi, *Da dongluan de niandai* (*Years of great turmoil*) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988), p. 102.

⁵² Li, "Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan," p. 13.

Those who worked for the Journalist's Station were continuously up-dated on the latest changes in central policy. When meetings were scheduled between members of Mao's "Proletarian HQ" on the one hand and civilian and military leaders and representatives of "organizations of the revolutionary masses" from a particular locality on the other, journalists normally assigned to cover that locality were sometimes asked to be present. On such occasions, they would not only brief the central leadership, but also themselves be made aware of impending changes in policy vis-à-vis "their" locality. Worth noting is that journalists, as a rule, were not themselves given access to copies of the *Rapid Reports*.⁵³

Individual journalists whose reporting ended up playing a crucial role were sometimes singled out for special rewards. In a letter leaked to Red Guard organizations in Beijing, Central Cultural Revolution Group member Qi Benyu on 14 July 1967 wrote as follows about five journalists (whose names he made a point of listing) stationed in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province:

At dawn on 29 June, they submitted an extremely timely and accurate report about a serious incident in which Jiangxi's reactionary faction had shot at and suppressed the rebel faction. This report of theirs informed the Centre's understanding and resolution of the situation in Jiangxi. I propose that the [Xinhua News Agency] Party Committee and Journalists' Station issue a general announcement praising them.⁵⁴

The "serious incident" to which Qi referred had been an exceptionally bloody clash between two competing armed organizations of the "revolutionary masses," a clash that resulted in hundreds of dead and wounded.⁵⁵

Given the high stakes involved, it would have been strange if there had *not* been an element of tension involved in the relationship between local authorities—military and civilian—and journalists serving the central authorities. In Inner Mongolia in February 1967, two resident Beijing journalists suffered dearly at the hands of the local PLA authorities when they, as one of their colleagues recalled many years later, reported home about how "the Inner Mongolia Military Region supported one faction while suppressing another, and opened fire and shot at the masses." The journalists "were thrown in jail and beaten up by the Inner Mongolia Military Region."⁵⁶ In April 1967, after having secured their release, this is what an infuriated Zhou Enlai had to say:

At the time, the sympathies of these two journalists lay with the revolutionary faction, the Huhehot 3rd HQ. So they too were arrested. They had been sent [to Inner Mongolia] by the Central Cultural Revolution

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁴ "Qi Benyu tongzhi de yi feng xin" (Letter from comrade Qi Benyu), Qinghua Jinggangshan, *Dongtai*, No. 118, 9 August 1967.

⁵⁵ *Dangdai Jiangxi jianshi* (*Short history of contemporary Jiangxi*) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2002), pp. 273–74.

⁵⁶ Li, "Huiyi Zhongyang wenge jizhe zhan," p. 16.

Group as journalists with *Red Flag* magazine and the *Liberation Army Daily*. The [Inner Mongolia] Military Region did not care about the fact that they were journalists sent by the Centre but had them arrested all the same and also confiscated all of their notebooks and diaries. When the Centre telephoned and ordered their release, the Military Region had them escorted back to Beijing under armed guard.⁵⁷

Though it undoubtedly was far from the only reason, the incident contributed directly to the Centre's decision to punish the Inner Mongolia Military Region by purging its leadership and downgrading it to a Military District subordinate to the Beijing Military Region in May 1967.

On 10 August 1967, Central Cultural Revolution Group member Wang Li told the leadership of the Xinhua News Agency that it would be a good idea to give formal recognition to the many journalists who over the past months had “been thrown in jail or been attacked for having at the crucial moment reported on important occurrences—outstanding journalists with an exemplary attitude.”⁵⁸ In a separate note to the rest of the group, Wang and his colleague Guan Feng proposed that a public reception be organized for those whom they described as having “stood firmly on the side of Chairman Mao's proletarian revolutionary line and the leftist masses and who have gone through fire and water—been abducted and thrown in jail—for keeping the Centre informed of the true situation.”⁵⁹ In response to the note, a meeting was held in Beijing, though what if anything became of the reception is not known. The altogether 52 journalists who were given special recognition included ones posted in 19 of China's provinces, autonomous regions and central municipalities as well as ones posted permanently with the PLA in Tibet and Inner Mongolia.⁶⁰ It was a sign of the times that their coming together ended in confusion when, in the midst of it (and for reasons unrelated to it), the two initiators Wang Li and Guan Feng were purged. And on 13 September, 42 of the “outstanding journalists” announced in a big character-poster that they were “rising up in rebellion” against the meeting and the “tiny handful of persons with ulterior motives” who had organized it.⁶¹

⁵⁷ “Zhongyang shouzhang jiejian Neimeng qunzhong shi jianghua” (Central leaders speak at reception for the masses from Inner Mongolia) (27 April 1967), in Beijing boli zongchang hongweibing lianluozhan, *Zhongyang shouzhang jianghua*, Vol. 4, p. 253.

⁵⁸ “Wang Li tongzhi 8 yue 10 ri zhishi” (Comrade Wang Li's 10 August instructions), Qinghua Jinggongshan, *Dongtai*, No. 121, 12 August 1967.

⁵⁹ “Wang Li, Guan Feng tongzhi jiu Xinhua zongshe qingshi baogao gei Boda, Kang Sheng, Jiang Qing, Benyu, Wen yuan tongzhi de xin” (Letter from comrades Wang Li and Guan Feng to comrades Chen Boda, Kang Sheng, Jiang Qing, Qi Benyu, and Yao Wen yuan occasioned by a report with request for instructions from the Xinhua News Agency), Qinghua Jinggongshan, *Dongtai*, No. 137, 31 August 1967.

⁶⁰ “Chuxi Xinhuashe guonei fenshe wuchanjejiji xinwen zhanshi jingyan jiaoliuhui mingdan” (List of domestic proletarian press fighters attending experience exchange-meeting called by Xinhua News Agency), Qinghua Jinggongshan, *Dongtai*, No. 144, 8 September 1967.

⁶¹ “42 ming youxiu jizhe fabiao zaofan shengming (zhaiyao)” (Statement of rebellion signed by forty-two outstanding journalists (extracts)), Qinghua Jinggongshan, *Dongtai*, No. 152, 17 September 1967.

It may be an exaggeration to say that the degree of obstruction from local authorities that they encountered while doing their job was an indicator of how effectively the journalists performed their assigned tasks. But, on the other hand, it was not far from the truth. An *Important Notification* issued jointly by the CCP Centre, State Council, Central Military Commission, and Central Cultural Revolution Group on 11 December 1967 raised a number of issues affecting their working conditions and stressed that it was imperative that they be “guaranteed the normal freedom to carry out interviews and not forced to serve the propagation of the views of but one particular faction. The illegal detention or body search of journalists is absolutely forbidden.”⁶² Implicit in all of this was of course that journalists were *not* always accorded “normal freedom.” And that the issue at stake was serious and that it would take more than a single high-powered announcement to resolve it is clear from the fact that a second, more explicit one had to be issued in due course. On 4 March 1969, a *Notification* issued jointly by the CCP Centre and Cultural Revolution Group revealed that “recently, in some parts of the country, certain comrades have been blocking journalists from the Xinhua News Agency from sending reports to the Centre. In some instances, Xinhua News Agency journalists have even had to put up with having their *Internal Reference* manuscripts intended for the Centre forcibly rummaged through.” Commenting on such action by the unnamed “certain comrades,” the *Notification* called it “erroneous” and explained that “if there is a divergence of opinion, one may write a report to the Centre and Central Cultural Revolution Group, but not block the journalists from reporting to the Centre. Nobody has the right to keep the Centre in the dark.”⁶³

By 1969, the year the Journalist’s Station was dissolved, Mao had begun to speak of the mission of the Cultural Revolution as all but accomplished.⁶⁴ But only in 1977 did the CCP at its 11th National Congress finally announce in clear and unambiguous terms that it had been “victoriously concluded.” By then the first investigations into alleged “errors” committed by journalists in the course of it had long since been conducted, *not*—it seems—by the central authorities, but locally, where they had been posted. In July 1974, the Central Committee General Office had issued a circular that spelled out a “policy for dealing with journalists with the Journalist’s Station who committed errors,” presumably as a way of exercising some degree of control over where such investigations would lead.⁶⁵ One of the strongest criticisms levelled at the journalists

⁶² “Zhonggong zhongyang, Guowuyuan, Zhongyang junwei, Zhongyang wenhua geming xiaozu de zhongyao tongzhi” (Important notification of the CCP Centre, State Council, Central Military Commission, and Central Cultural Revolution Group), in *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming wenjian huibian* (Collected documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), 2 vols. (Kunming: Yunnan sheng geming weiyuanhui, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 707–709.

⁶³ “Tongzhi” (Notification), in *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 1327–28.

⁶⁴ Pang and Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan 1949–1976*, Vol. 2, p. 1547.

⁶⁵ Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting, “Dui Zhongyang wenge jizhezhan fan cuowu jizhe de zhengce wenti de tongzhi (*Zhongban* [1974] 12 hao wenjian)” (Notification concerning policy for dealing with journalists with the Central Cultural Revolution Group’s Journalist’s Station who committed errors (Central Committee General Office Document No. 12, 1974)). I have been unable to locate a copy of this document.

was that they, despite being on paper forbidden from doing so, had actively “involved themselves in” the movement at the local level. Such criticism (to be reiterated even more forcefully after 1976) was almost certainly valid, even though what in the eyes of critics counted as “involvement” at times appears to have been little more than the occasional clarification to a particular audience of precisely what it was that Mao’s “proletarian HQ” wanted to know more about and why. One of the more serious cases involved a journalist stationed in Guangxi who had provided Beijing with an alternative window on local politics. Years later, he was however accused by the regional authorities of having “meddled” in local affairs and of having been instrumental in “creating chaos in the Guangxi Party Committee.”⁶⁶

OTHER CHANNELS, OTHER SOURCES

“The opinions and experiences of the masses certainly must constitute a basis of our policies,” Mao had told an American journalist in 1944. In the Cultural Revolution, two and a half decades later, this statement was quoted to illustrate Mao’s way of making revolution and to distinguish it from the erroneous ways of his revisionist foes.⁶⁷ On top of regularly consulting the information and intelligence prepared for them by their subordinates and their agencies of dedicated professionals, Mao and the rest of the Politburo also sought to hear what the “voices” of ordinary people, loosely defined, might have to tell them.

Mao in particular, it seems, liked to believe that what he read in “letters from the people” or heard in the course of a quiet conversation with a bodyguard, nurse, or nephew at times reflected better than any bureaucratic or journalistic text what was really “going on out there.” His wife and family, the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group—they all knew the Chairman’s weakness in this respect. At a Peking University rally on 26 July 1966, Jiang Qing told students eager to know whether or not her husband might show up himself on campus to read their big character-posters: “I have been so busy from dusk ‘til dawn reading documents and meeting people, I actually haven’t seen him yet! I understand he hasn’t come here, but every one of the notes you give me and the opinions you express will reach him. Look here, haven’t I been stuffing them all into this bag?”⁶⁸ The lengths to which some local officials would go to make sure that Jiang Qing got “the right impression” on occasions like these is quite astonishing. A little more than a week earlier, she had been in Shanghai where one day she had let it be

⁶⁶ *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao (Chronology of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi)* (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 16. For an alternative, positive assessment of the role of journalists stationed in the provinces (e.g. Yunnan) during the Cultural Revolution, see *Renmin ribao buiyilu (People’s Daily recollections)* (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1988), p. 108.

⁶⁷ *Zuigao zhisbi (Supreme Instructions)* (Beijing, 1970), pp. 291–92.

⁶⁸ “Zhongyang wenge xiaozu tongzhi zai Beijing daxue de jianghua” (Speeches at Peking University by comrades from the Central Cultural Revolution Group) (26 July 1966), in Beijing shi huaxue gongyeju jiguan hongse xuanchuanzhan, ed., *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming ziliao (Materials on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution)* 4 vols. (Beijing, 1966), Vol. 1, p. 41.

known that she planned to visit the municipal Bureau of Public Security to read big-character posters. When the news reached the bureau leadership it prompted a flurry of nervous activity, the “sanitation” of existing posters, the production—through the night, by a specially assembled group of officers—of new posters that “pointed the spearhead of struggle” away from key members of the bureau leadership, and the relocation of all posters deemed suitable for high-level viewing to a special area. “For the crime of deceiving comrade Jiang Qing and deceiving the proletarian HQ,” an 1967 exposé of Jiang’s visit concluded, the leadership responsible “deserves to die ten thousand deaths!”⁶⁹

History records a number of illuminating examples of how Mao in the course of the Cultural Revolution went about tapping into the “opinions and experiences of the masses” and what happened as a result. In August 1966, for example, he had his and Jiang Qing’s 26-year old daughter Li Na establish informal ties to the leadership of the East is Red Commune, a recently founded Red Guard organization in the Beijing Geological Institute. As Li Na told them, her father was impressed with what they had achieved so far and wanted to know more about it. In September, Li Na and the East is Red Commune leadership were engaged by the Central Cultural Revolution Group to help organize four days of closed hearings about the progress of the Cultural Revolution, at which some twenty student radicals from a number of universities in Beijing were given a platform from which to speak. From 17 to 20 September 1966, they gave impassioned accounts of their experiences in the course of the Cultural Revolution as well as opine on what, if anything, needed to be done in order to secure what they understood to be the goals of the movement. The actual minutes of the hearings (destined ultimately for the CCP Chairman) have never been made public, but decades later some key participants claimed to have proposed that the party leadership make high-level disagreements over the movement known and understandable to wide segments of the public and not just to a privileged minority. Otherwise, there could be no talk of the Cultural Revolution ever becoming a genuine “mass movement.” Also, the student radicals had proposed lifting restrictions on the rights of persons from so-called “bad class backgrounds” to participate in the movement. Eventually, the views enunciated at the hearings influenced Mao’s decision, first publicized in an editorial in issue No. 13 of *Red Flag*, to brand Liu Shaoqi’s leadership of the Cultural Revolution during the summer of 1966 a “bourgeois reactionary line.”⁷⁰

As he prepared crucial policy decisions, Mao would solicit information from a wide range of human sources, some quasi-private, some official. While visiting Shanghai

⁶⁹ *Dadao litong waiguode fangeming xiuzhengzhuyi fenzi Wang Jian (Down with the counter-revolutionary revisionist element Wang Jian who maintains illicit contacts with foreign countries)* (Shanghai: Shanghai shi gonganju bangongshi zhengzhibu nongbaochu geming zaofandui, 1967), pp. 37–38.

⁷⁰ See Yin Hongbiao, “Pipan zichanjieji fandong luxian: zaofan yundong de xingqi” (The critique of the Bourgeois Reactionary Line: the rise of the rebel movement), *Ersbiyi shiji (Twenty-First Century)*, No. 31 (1995), pp. 61–68.

on 18 August 1967, Mao had General Xu Shiyou, commander of the Nanjing Military Region, fly in from his HQ in the Dabie Mountains, five hundred kilometres to the west, to brief him for three hours that afternoon.⁷¹ A full record of what Xu told his supreme commander may never surface, but the gist of it seems to have been that many PLA officers and men were profoundly unhappy with the way in which the Cultural Revolution was unfolding.⁷² Evidence was rapidly mounting that Mao's most recent policy decision to "arm the left" (n.b. the *civilian* "left") had provoked alarming tensions within the PLA, not to mention prompted an unprecedented increase in the lethality of the armed conflicts between competing organizations of the "revolutionary masses" already raging in parts of the country.

In view of what it implied, it is not surprising that Mao would have wanted to corroborate what Xu told him with what informants from a very different background might have to say. One may speculate about his precise motives, but in any case, after seeing Xu off, Mao arranged for a second briefing, this one by two young members of the Zhejiang provincial Folk Dance Troupe. During his frequent visits to Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang, Mao had grown fond of the girls, one of whom was on sufficiently intimate terms with the CCP Chairman to know from personal experience that he snored...⁷³ Earlier that same summer, the girls had sent Mao a letter and told him of how chaotic the situation was in their home province and what they thought about it. Years later, one of them recalled:

Around 20 August [1967], the Chairman sent someone to pick us up. We were taken to Shanghai where, he received us. At the time, we were tremendously excited. Greeting us, the Chairman said "Your letter made me want to see you"... He then asked us to tell him truthfully about the situation down below. So we told him everything about what we ourselves had seen and heard (about the big character-posters in the streets and the factional battles in society)... We just went on and on, and the more we told him the more excited we became, getting up and re-enacting some of the movements and things we had seen, such as what it was like when people were being struggled. When Chairman Mao saw these things, he frowned and began looking uneasy, and for quite some time did not say anything. Only later did he say: "Thank you, you two; thank you for letting me hear about the true situation down below!"⁷⁴

⁷¹ Li Wenqing, *Jinkan Xu Shiyou 1967-1985 (Xu Shiyou up close 1967-1985)* (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2002), pp. 79-83.

⁷² Ibid.; "Mao zhuxi zai Hu jiejian Xu Shiyou" (Chairman Mao receives Xu Shiyou in Shanghai), *Qinghua Jingtangshan doupigai zhantuan, Xuexi ziliao*, No. 48, 21 November 1967.

⁷³ *Mao Zedong yu Zhejiang (Mao Zedong and Zhejiang)* (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1993), pp. 199-200.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 201-202.

Having had it confirmed by what such extraordinarily naïve “sources” as these two young dancing partners ended up telling him, Mao apparently forced himself to accept the overall thrust of the information and domestic intelligence proper he received from other quarters and decided to abandon the policy of “arming the left.” By 25 August 1967, he was shifting his position, insisting on a clarification of the parameters under which it was to be implemented; by the time he returned to Beijing in late September, he had reversed it altogether.⁷⁵

In addition to seeking out and speaking to the odd representative of the “revolutionary masses,” Mao also read tabloids and other publications produced in abundance by Red Guards at this time.⁷⁶ A Shanghai garrison officer responsible for Mao’s local security detail has described how “every day, Chairman Mao read vast amounts. Very carefully, he would read his way through the Shanghai papers, local papers, and all sorts of ‘little papers’ put out by Red Guards.”⁷⁷ Earlier in the summer, Mao had impressed a visiting childhood friend and schoolmate from Hunan with his knowledge of what was happening in their home province, explaining to him smiling how “after all, I’m the Chairman of the Party Centre: I’m receive briefings all the time. Furthermore, can’t you see that large pile of ‘little papers’ on my desk? Some things I know from reading about them in the [Red Guard] ‘little papers’.”⁷⁸

Finally, there were the so-called “letters from the people” of which the State Council alone received in excess of 40,000/month at the height of the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁹ Already prior to 1966, Mao had called on his Politburo colleagues to reconsider, modify, or at the least pay particular attention to certain policies and practices by citing “letters from the people” reproduced/excerpted in what the CCP Central Committee General Office called *Feedback from the Masses* (*Qunzhong fanying*).⁸⁰ As the movement picked up speed, Mao continued in the same vein, often requesting action of one kind or another in brief cover notes. At times, Mao might even sum up what he saw as the essential point made in a whole slew of letters passing across his desk and push for action accordingly, as on 1 February 1967 when he wrote as follows to Zhou Enlai:

Comrade Enlai,

⁷⁵ See Michael Schoenhals, “Why Don’t We Arm the Left?” paper presented at the conference “Mao Re-Evaluated” at the John K. Fairbank Center, Harvard University, 5–7 December 2003.

⁷⁶ See Yin Hongbiao, “‘Wenge’ zhong de qunzhong zuzhi xiaobao” (The tabloids of the organizations of the masses in the “Cultural Revolution”), in *Xinwen yanjiu ziliao* (*Press research materials*), Vol. 56, 1993, pp. 146–62.

⁷⁷ *Weida de jiaodao guanghui de zhenli: Mao zhuxi shicha Huabei, Zhongnan he Huadong diqu* (*Great teachings and brilliant truths: Chairman Mao inspects the north, central-south, and east China regions*) (Nanchang: *Jiangxi ribao* she Jinggangshan Hongqi Huojia, 1967), p. 10.

⁷⁸ Zhou Yanyu and Wu Meichao, “Mao Zedong ye kan Hongweibing xiaobao” (Mao Zedong also read Red Guard tabloids), *Mao Zedong sixiang yanjiu* (*Mao Zedong Thought research*), No. 4, 1994, p. 63.

⁷⁹ Wang and Dong, *Hongqiang tonghua: wo jia zhu zai Zhongnanhai*, pp. 146–50; Diao Jiecheng, “Zhou Enlai yu ‘Wenge’ zhong de xinfang gongzuo” (Zhou Enlai and the handling of letters and visits from petitioners in the “Cultural Revolution”), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* (*Contemporary China history research*), No. 2, 1998, p. 74.

⁸⁰ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, Vol. 11, pp. 34; 172, 305; 425.

Recently, no small number of revolutionary teachers and students visiting Beijing and members of the revolutionary masses have written and asked me if it counts as struggle by force to put dunce caps on and paint the faces of persons in power taking the capitalist road and ox-monsters and snake-demons, and then parade them through the streets? I am of the opinion that this has to count as a form of struggle by force and that it is no good....

Please inform the revolutionary teachers and students visiting Beijing and the revolutionary masses.⁸¹

Zhou, as one would have expected, responded promptly to Mao's request, raising the topic in a speech later the same day.⁸² Over the next couple of weeks, other members of the central leadership also drove home Mao's point, their speeches widely disseminated by Red Guard organizations. Eventually, the full text of Mao's original letter was itself leaked and reproduced in compilations meant to illustrate the wisdom of his thinking.

Of the "letters from the people" that reached Mao during the Cultural Revolution, one in particular deserves to be mentioned for the simple reason that it had major policy repercussions, possibly prompting—certainly being *cited as* prompting—a full reappraisal of the policy of sending educated urban youths "up the mountains and down to the villages." It was a genuinely moving letter from a school teacher in rural Fujian, telling Mao of the desperate plight of his son who upon graduating from junior middle school had been sent to a remote mountain village to live and labour with the "poor and lower-middle peasants."⁸³ Mao's official biographers claimed many years later that Mao "was deeply moved by the letter and cried upon reading it." In Mao's own words, "I kept it here [on my desk] for months, often looking at it. I read it three times before [finally] deciding [how] to reply."⁸⁴ In April 1973, Mao sent 300 Yuan to the father as a way of acknowledging personally (in his cover-note he cited the second half of a popular proverb) that "one can't make bricks without straw and even the cleverest housewife can't cook a meal without rice." Since this was, so Mao acknowledged, not an isolated case, but one of which there were many across China, a comprehensive solution would have to be devised.⁸⁵ To this day, former "sent down youths" still remember the improvement in their overall conditions that followed in the wake of the State Council sponsored conference that met to discuss the points raised by Mao.

⁸¹ Mao Zedong, "Haozhao jianchi wudou, fandui wudou de yifeng xin" (A letter calling for struggle with reason and opposing struggle with force) (1 February 1967), in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui 1949-1967*, Vol. 3, p. 183.

⁸² Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Zhou Enlai nianpu 1949-1976*, Vol. 3, p. 121.

⁸³ See Yunnan sheng geming weiyuanhui zhishi qingnian shangshan xiixiang gongzuo bangongshi, ed., *Zhishi qingnian shangshan xiixiang gongzuo wenjian xuanbian* (Selected documents on educated youths going up to the mountains and down to the countryside) (Kunming, 1975), pp. 1-9.

⁸⁴ Pang and Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan 1949-1976*, Vol. 2, p. 1658.

⁸⁵ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, Vol. 13, p. 349.

Only a fraction of the total number of “letters from the people” actually ended up being read by the national leadership to whom they were addressed. Large numbers disappeared into a bureaucratic black hole, never to be seen again. Some are known to have been intercepted en route, opened up and then—for reasons having to do with their content—been designated counter-revolutionary letters prompting criminal investigations. A letter of this latter kind was addressed to the “Party Centre, State Council, and Central Cultural Revolution Group” and sent from a mailbox in the Yangpu city district in Shanghai by an anonymous addressee who identified him- or herself on the envelope as a member of “Shanghai’s broad revolutionary masses.” (How the letter came to be intercepted we do not know, but it is worth noting that its envelope bears the stamp “Postage due...”) Photographs of the letter were circulated by the Yangpu public security and legal authorities in early 1972 as part of a drive to have the “masses” expose and ferret out “hidden class enemies.” The handwriting was legible but ugly, the grammar intelligible but poor, the vocabulary a mixture of plain speech and Cultural Revolutionary jargon. Starting out “Dear Central Leaders and Comrades on the Central Cultural Revolution Group,” the letter went on to tell of how “as of late, the class struggle in Shanghai has been extremely intense” as ordinary people were made to suffer bestial treatment at the hands of a small handful of “rotten eggs” in positions of power: “When this gang of rotten eggs found out that some people had attempted inform the higher authorities about what is going on, they subjected those people to the most brutal torture and beatings and accused them of being old rightists merely looking for an excuse to reverse the correct verdicts passed on them. This is now a paradise for ruffians and rotten eggs. We the revolutionary masses are being suppressed and *there is no room for us to make our voices heard.*”⁸⁶ The interception of the letter by the Shanghai authorities seemed to prove the author right...

CONCLUSION

When Mao made his first behind-the-scenes moves to set the “Great Cultural Revolution” in motion, the CCP’s system of intra-party reports had long since become dysfunctional. Verification, intuition, and plain common sense all pointed in the same direction: “Achievements are exaggerated, difficulties are exaggerated. The cue is taken from the way in which the leadership reacts, from what it likes to hear... This is a very widespread phenomenon, one that is with us today and will be tomorrow as well.”⁸⁷ When Liu Shaoqi voiced concerns like these, he was making an essentially *accurate* appraisal, concluding that reports arriving in Beijing in effect did *not* truthfully represent

⁸⁶ Yangpu qu gongjianfa lingdao xiaozu, *Tongzhi (Notification)* (Shanghai: March 1972), pp. 5–6.

⁸⁷ Liu Shaoqi, “Dui zhongyang jiguan xiafang ganbu de baogao (jilu)” (Report to sent-down cadres from central departments (record)) (18 July 1962), in Zhonggong Shanghai shiwei bangongting geming zaofandui, ed., *Liu Shaoqi zai gedi sanbu de xiuzhengbuyi yanlun huibian (Collected Revisionist Utterances Spread in Various Localities by Liu Shaoqi)* (Shanghai, 1967), p. 173.

the “prevailing class relations and political situation in the party and state.” The fundamental problem facing him and any Politburo colleague contemplating any kind of political action—save for Daoist “action through inaction”⁸⁸—was, however, that knowing full well what isn’t the case is not the same as knowing what is.

Internal Reference did manage to paint—as we are today in a position to confirm by consulting declassified runs—an alternative picture of China. But it did not produce the evidence needed to back Mao’s arguments for a pre-emptive strike against the supposedly gathering threat of revisionism. According to Liu Shaoqi, whose basic instinct was to insist that the evidence was there, this was because those who were tasked with finding it were allowing themselves to be “duped.” Liu at one point cautioned a group of Beijing journalists by saying “In a majority of units, as soon as you arrive to investigate, they go on high alert. They block access to the true situation and in some cases even prepare an entire fabricated story for you.”⁸⁹

That his audience really needed to hear warnings like these is unlikely: they were themselves already fully cognizant of the problem. Also producing, as they did, propaganda for public consumption, they were masters in the art of strategic misrepresentation and knew well how to tell hard evidence from lies and deceit. The same Xinhua News Agency that in a May 1960 propaganda piece had described the situation in one west China county as “the peasants have begun to understand science and trust in science, and their old customs and habits have changed quickly; people enjoy ease of mind, their spirits filled with enthusiasm” had only a month earlier revealed to *Internal Reference*’s readership how *in that very same county* “the barbaric custom of ‘cannibalism’” was still alive and well and that one resident peasant when asked admitted to having “eaten human flesh in her mother’s home and to knowing for some time that ‘human flesh is tasty’ (*renrou xiang*).”⁹⁰ Xinhua’s current information for the Politburo on what was happening locally across China was, with the occasional exception proving the rule, as accurate and adequate as one would have had a right to expect in any political system. In discounting it and by implying that it was fatally flawed and/or tainted by what today would be called spin, members of the Politburo were not only being unfair—they were also doing themselves a great disfavor.

In a very different state and society, Mao’s idea of tapping straight into the “wisdom of the people” through letters, family, old friends, and intimate encounters, just might have worked. But if this third major channel of information was meant to serve as a corrective to what his impersonal agencies were telling him, it presumed, among other

⁸⁸ For a selection of CCRG member Guan Feng’s extensive writings on this topic, see Michael Schoenhals, ed., *Guan Feng is Back! Recent Writings on Lao Zi’s Political Philosophy*, published as *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 26, Nos. 1–2, Fall–Winter 1994–95.

⁸⁹ Liu Shaoqi, “Guanyu baozhi xuanchuan gongzuo de jianghua” (Speech on newspaper propaganda work) (28 April 1961), in *Renmin chubanshe ziliao*, *Pipan ziliao*, Vol. 3, p. 155.

⁹⁰ *Nongcun renmin gongshe diaocha buibian* (*Collected Surveys of Rural People’s Communes*), 2 vols. (Beijing: Xinhua tongxun she, 1960), Vol. 1, pp. 222–32; *Neibu cankao* (*Internal Reference*), No. 3032, 14 April 1960, pp. 25–26.

things, that when talking to the CCP Chairman, individuals were in a position to actually give voice to their assessment of what was going on. And this they were not. In the words of one Chinese philosopher, real socialism had so far not managed to do away with *alienation*, but merely altered the forms of its manifestation; and in the Cultural Revolution it had reached a point where “humanity in the abstract became the god, whereas real people were made into material and turned into a sacrifice for the gods.”⁹¹ The party media called on ordinary Chinese everywhere to adopt “faith (*zhong*) in Chairman Mao” as the “supreme criterion for telling right from wrong” (*bianbie shifei de zuigao biao zhun*).⁹² A widely cited *Liberation Army Daily* editorial insisted that: “Chairman Mao’s leadership is correct a thousand times over, correct ten thousand times over. If we don’t understand it, then that’s because there’s a problem with our own stand, our viewpoint, or our method. The more that is the case, the more we must firmly and unyieldingly believe, steadfastly adhere, and resolutely comply.”⁹³

Relentless persuasion and propaganda along these lines had a devastating effect, as the post-Cultural Revolutionary testimony of a grass-roots level CCP cadre illustrates:

[In the winter of 1975–76] I had come to notice the mood of dissatisfaction among the masses. I could sense it: what I saw and heard and came in contact with myself was nothing like what the papers were saying, about a wind to reverse correct verdicts blowing everywhere. And yet I had no faith in my own judgement, or in what the masses were sensing. On the contrary, I was convinced that the masses, just like myself, failed to understand what was happening up there (*shangmian*), failed to understand what was happening across the country, failed to understand the true situation. Therefore, I said to myself, [my own judgement] cannot be trusted: it’s safer to go by what the people up there are saying.⁹⁴

“Up there,” in turn, as this ordinary CCP cadre was in no position to know, the pressure was even greater to commit to a perverse notion of blind “faith” in Mao rather than trust in one’s own accumulated life-long experience of revolutionary politics. When the Cultural Revolution began, an expanded session of the Politburo chaired by Liu Shaoqi was told by Zhou Enlai that “With a single stroke of the pen, all your past achievements will be cancelled out, should you fail the final test of loyalty.”⁹⁵ With friends like Zhou, Mao did not even *need* enemies in order to be able to fatally misinterpret and

⁹¹ See Michael Schoenhals, ed., *Gao Ertai—The Alienated Aesthete*, published as *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Fall 1993, p. 7.

⁹² *Beijing ribao* (*Beijing Daily*), 15 January 1968.

⁹³ *Jiefangjun bao*, 21 August 1967.

⁹⁴ Liu Keqiang, “Zai pipan suowei youqing fan’anfeng zhong de liangdian jiaoxun” (Two lessons learnt in the course of the critique of the so-called “right deviationist wind to reverse correct verdicts”), in *Zhonggong Shanghai shiwei dangxiao, Xuexi dongtai* (*Study trends*), No. 64, 12 July 1979, pp. 4–5.

⁹⁵ “Zhou zongli de jianghua” (Premier Zhou’s speech) (21 May 1966), in *Xi’an yejin jianzhu xueyuan geming weiyuanhui xuanchuanbu*, ed., *Lin Biao wenxuan* (*Selected Writings by Lin Biao*), 2 vols. (Xi’an, 1967), Vol. 2, p. 264.

misrepresent to himself what he heard and read about “the prevailing class relations and political situation in the party and state.”

A moderately ambitious solution to the problem of information and decision-making that the members of the Politburo knew they faced could have involved a piece-meal approach, one of addressing its complex, numerous and messy causes one by one, and in the meantime simply “muddling along.” Such an approach is likely to have come naturally to those leaders who like Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun liked to speak of their common revolutionary endeavour metaphorically in terms of “crossing the river by feeling the stones.” But Mao’s preference was for something much more radical, ambitious and awe-inspiring, in line with his preferred metaphorical claim that “our task is to cross a river, [but] we cannot cross it without a bridge or a boat.”⁹⁶ Mao clearly believed—and his colleagues were without exception prepared to defer to him in what they saw as a matter of political high theory grounded in Chinese realities, “Mao Zedong Thought” in short—that he had identified in “anti-revisionism” a *single* key link (*gang*) the grasping of which would produce superior results. This notion of Mao’s found expression in a claim he made in 1963 that “one single [correct] formulation, and the whole nation will flourish; one single [incorrect] formulation, and the whole nation will decline. What is referred to here is the transformation of the spiritual into the material.”⁹⁷ The Cultural Revolution was thus in the end based not so much on an “entirely erroneous” appraisal of Chinese realities as on dangerous wishful thinking that downgraded the relative importance of *reality as such*—not merely information and intelligence presumed to represent it—to the level of “for internal reference” (*jin gong neibu cankao*). Under these circumstances, even an essentially accurate appraisal would probably have failed to prevent the cataclysm that would negate so much of the victory that had brought the CCP to power.

⁹⁶ *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 1, p. 150.

⁹⁷ Mao Zedong, “Zai Hangzhou huiyi shang de jianghua” (Speech at the Hangzhou meeting) (May 1963), in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui 1949–1967*, Vol. 3, p. 56. Mao was quoting *The Analects* (Book XIII, ch. 15) where Confucius, it is important to note, went on to maintain that “such an effect *cannot* be expected from a single formulation.” Mao however argued that “Marx had his formulation, that what’s needed is a proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Wasn’t that [precisely] a single formulation that allows the whole nation to flourish? And Khrushchev also has one of not wanting class struggle, not wanting revolution. Isn’t that a single formulation that causes the whole nation to decline?”