

**Rise of the Red Engineers** *The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*

By Joel Andreas

PART I – BUILDING SOCIALISM 1949-1966

The formation of the political foundations of class power begin in December 1948 as Communist troops advance on Beijing and arrive at Tsinghua University. Almost immediately cadres are sent to take charge of the school. The conflict between the old elites, professors and students, and Mao's politically connected veteran soldiers involves political and cultural capital, who has it and who doesn't, who has what kind of credentials of family origin or educational status, who is a party member and not. Development of the party's bureaucratic authority is consolidated under leadership of Jiang Nanxiang, who becomes party secretary in 1956.

In 1957, at the instigation of Mao, nonparty member are urged to criticize the party hierarchy. After June 1957 vocal professors are labeled Rightist and are punished in various ways organized by Deng Xiaoping and endorsed by Mao.

Educational policies undergo several fundamental changes during this early period at Tsinghua. One approach is to train technically proficient graduates and the other competing idea is to enforce radical egalitarian policies. The meritocratic method based on the Soviet model is designed to quickly train large corps of technical experts, supporting rapid industrialization. Egalitarian methods try to eliminate class differences based on education and mental versus physical labor.

Between 1958 and 1960 the PRC attempts to redistribute cultural power. China builds hundreds of thousands of new public schools, and as much as possible rural peasant children are offered advanced and preferential enrolment while discriminating against the children of elite families.

Education and productive labor is emphasized during the Great Leap forward in the 1950s. Engineering becomes preeminent at Tsinghua. Its practical orientation can be seen in such projects as the design and construction of a major reservoir. In the 1960s, as the pendulum swings the other way, meritocracy is reinstated with the national entrance exam.

In 1958 during the first days of the Great Leap, Jiang Nanxiang's red and expert idea is to enroll elite professors into the party, the origin of the Red Engineers. Gradually a new elite entity begins to form of Tsinghua faculty and administrators, blending their political and cultural capital.

PART II – CULTURAL REVOLUTION 1966 – 1968

In June, 1966 a work team of several hundred party officials takes charge of Tsinghua and suspends all university and department level cadres. They condemn Tsinghua Party Secretary Jiang Nanxiang and the entire party committee. They mobilize students and teachers to criticize the university leaders. Mao wants student *zhandou dui* 'fighting troops' to bring down the powerful party officials.

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Party organization around the country is paralyzed and remains that way for about two years. Targets of the new campaign called 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' are old educated elite and new political elite who are sharing the top echelons of Chinese society. They are criticized and humiliated by their subordinates.

### *Mao's Goals*

Mao's goal is to enhance his personal power and advance his role of a utopian visionary pursuing the communist ideal of a classless society. Periodically Mao introduces elements from above that violently overturn the status quo. Mao's power increases during these periods of mass mobilization. The main slogans of the Cultural Revolution were 'To struggle against and overthrow those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road,' and 'To criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic authorities.' They were directed respectively at the political and cultural elites.

### *Middle School Red Guards*

In May 1966 students form their own group, mostly children of communist cadres, called the Red Guards. It is more radical than the Youth League which allows children of the old elite to join. The Red Guard movement sweeps the country by emphasizing 'bloodline theory,' if your parents are both veteran revolutionaries. At Tsinghua Middle School twenty per cent of the student bodies satisfy the bloodline criteria.

By August violent campaigns erupt against anyone identified with the old elite. Administrators, teachers and students suffer severe beatings, even suicide and home invasions looking for symbols of 'four olds' (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits).

A new group emerges to challenge the Red Guards called Jinggangshan, composed of students from intellectual families which make up the majority of the student bodies. They accuse the Red Guards of defending the capitalist roaders in the party and ally themselves with the larger student group at Tsinghua University. A massive rally in October 1966 marks the turning point in the Cultural Revolution.

Whereas children of the new political elite battle children of the old educated elite in the middle school there is little room for moderate positions. This factional alignment is similar to the old battle lines of 1957 when the same two groups were contending for power.

At Tsinghua University groups during the summer of 1968 fall into two main factions. Confrontations had escalated into armed skirmishes. Buildings are occupied in the northwest of campus by one group and buildings in the southeast by another. Students fight for control of the university buildings, resulting in twelve fatalities.

The makeup of the two factions is not easily distinguished in terms of family origin as in the middle school. Students from intellectual, revolutionary cadre, worker and peasant families could be found in each faction and principal leaders of each group are students of peasant or worker origin. The Jinggangshan group represented the most radical left positions. They proposed that entrance exams be subordinated to class quota admissions goals so that 66% of the student bodies would be from the 'masses' or of worker/peasant origin and 5% of old exploiting classes.

The April 14 moderate group thought upper level cadres should be allowed to join the Cultural Revolution and be the backbone of the movement. They argued capitalist roaders were a small minority and disagreed on tearing everything down and starting from scratch.

### PART III – INSTITUTIONALIZING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION 1968 – 1976

In July 1968 30,000 workers from around Beijing arrive at Tsinghua University to enforce directives to cease fighting, and are welcomed by moderates favoring a return to normalcy. The working class takes charge of education and supervises the university. This marks the end of the first period of Cultural Revolution throughout China.

Student activist leaders are investigated and punished. After a period of political study most students are sent to military run farms and then moved to permanent jobs in industrial enterprise. Teachers and administrators are subjected to reexamination of personal histories from before 1949 through to the Cultural Revolution. Of 6,000 Tsinghua University employees, 1228 are investigated and 78 declared ‘class enemies.’ Ten people die from persecution. Most of Tsinghua cadres, teachers and staff are sent to work in a May 7 cadre school farm in Jiangxi Province.

It is like a return to the 1952 era when CCP cadres, mostly of peasant origin, took charge of Tsinghua. Mao sends a “Workers Propaganda Team,” composed of military officers and factory workers who do not have much education, to take charge of the university. -and-†The Tsinghua cadres and teachers don’t have any direct power, although the rehabilitated staff are allowed to remain and run the day to day activities of the university.

Students participate in the management of their departments, designing curricula and solving teaching problems: theoretical versus practical curricula, how to evaluate student learning, whether or not to divide students into fast or slow groups. The students invoke a harsh inversion of the student/teacher hierarchy.

A similar process occurs at the factories. The huge gap separating intellectuals from workers is intolerable to Mao and high party officials and requires an immediate and radical solution. They think the educational system can be used to reduce class differences. This approach obtains dramatic change and also creates acute problems.

Between 1966 and 1970 most senior middle schools and colleges and universities are closed. In 1970, Tsinghua and a few other universities are reopened, but the national entrance examination is replaced by a system under which factories, villages and military units recommend “worker-peasant-soldier students.” Most universities don’t reopen until 1972. In 1973 the entrance exam is reinstated, just to be retracted. The government strives to implement universal education, rapidly building primary and middle schools in the countryside. -The goal is to have all children attend school for nine to ten years and then go to work. Mao concedes some specialists are needed, especially in science and math, so colleges and universities are re-tooled into a practical vocational orientation open to those recommended by their work units.

It comes as a shock to many red engineers, who had been trained by the university in the years before the cultural revolution along the soviet ‘engineer and expert’ model, that they have become bourgeois and require reeducation.

In the early 1970s the recommendation process for university entrance is flawed by abuses called ‘taking the back door’ or *zou houmen*, allowing family, friends and favorites of local cadres and by a lack of academic preparedness.

#### PART IV – THE NEW ERA 1976 - Present

In October 1976, less than one month after the death of Mao, troops take control of Tsinghua University, arrest the leaders and also arrest the infamous gang of four and thousands of others as the radical element of the Chinese Communist Party.

The main distinction of the post Mao era is that the party stops trying to eliminate class distinctions. In the New era, led by Deng Xiaoping, it is asserted that China can only achieve national prosperity if some people get rich and class differences are unavoidable. A technocratic class order emerges based on political and cultural capital. Under the new leadership, Tshinghua University restores the elite educational system and party organization of Jiang Nanxiang.

Radical forms of ~~political~~political participation that had characterized the Cultural Revolution, including participating in “great debates” and posting “big character posters,” which had been adopted as constitutionally guaranteed rights by the 4<sup>th</sup> National PeoplesPeople’s Congress in 1975, are rescinded in the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1980. Politics which had dominated every aspect of society is now no longer central to everyone’s lives. The obligation to participate fades away, people are free to hold their own opinions and plan for their own futures while political power retreats behind closed doors.

Suddenly the communist ideology and ideals collapse to be replaced by the overriding goal of economic development. The prestige and authority of the party had been severely damaged during the Cultural Revolution. The rise of political corruption in the post Mao period reflects the erosion of the communist ethic of public service.

In 1977 the college entrance exam is reinstated after a long debate. In 1978 the system of class designations is abolished. By the 1990s the top level of society and government is comprised of a New Class, the children of intellectuals and revolutionaries, educated and party members. Top party leaders have been trained as engineers, including the entire membership of the Political Bureau’s Standing Committee, half of whom are Tsinghua University alumni.

#### *Capitalist Transformation*

After 1992 the CCP promotes growth of a private capitalist sector. Many state owned and collective enterprises are privatized. All enterprises increasingly operate according to capitalistic principles whether they are owned by the state or not. Many Red and expert engineers transform into entrepreneurs. Children of party officials comprise a large part of the new entrepreneur class from top levels down to village party branches.

#### *Conclusion*

For the leaders of the Soviet Union in 1917 the idea is to use science to modernize Russia and at the same time eliminate class distinctions. This is followed in 1928 by a period of agricultural collectivism and rapid industrialization. Many of the features of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, such as elimination of the entrance exam and narrow majors, preparing students quickly for industrial careers, are presaged by this Soviet period. After 1931 entrance exams along with conventional teaching methods and a professional hierarchy are gradually restored. Soviet advisors in China in the 1950s are of this group, Red and expert technocrats.

Nevertheless the CCP rejects that approach and begins class-leveling, ironically adopting policies which had been tried and rejected by the Soviets years earlier. Chinese Communists, like their Soviet counterparts, convert the means of production into public property and control is centralized, inspired by Marxist and Leninist ideals. The willingness of cadres to implement radical cultural redistribution is facilitated by the fact that they were poorly educated revolutionaries with few personal assets at stake.

They are determined to tear down the advantages of the old elite. In 1957 the CCP rejects the technocratic soviet educational model in order to implement class-leveling policies. Those policies are partially reversed following the collapse of the Great Leap Forward, but revived by Mao in 1964. Radical education has many deleterious side effects while effectively accomplishing class-leveling goals. Ultimately the demise of class-leveling is political not cultural.

Communist cadres are subjected to periodic cleansing campaigns, initiated by Mao, against corruption and bureaucracy. Mao thinks party officials themselves are the main danger to class-leveling. The Cultural Revolution undermines the authority of party bureaucracy, strengthening and concentrating power at the top and bottom at the expense of party officials in the middle; Mao enjoys unprecedented power. These political and cultural experiments fail to effectively disperse the old centers of power.

China's New class emerges at the intersection of culture and politics. It is the product of reproduction and convergence of political and educated elites. After Mao's death in 1976, party officials and intellectuals discover harmony in condemning violence and egalitarianism of the Cultural Revolution.

Deng Xiaoping is acclaimed, the same person who had persecuted dissident intellectuals two decades previously. Party organization and the educational system are reestablished. Red experts move into key positions, replacing the veteran peasant revolutionaries and peasant/worker cadres. The CCP pledges to egalitarian Communist ideals without destructive class-leveling.

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His work has appeared in various publications, including the *American Sociological Review*, *theory and Society*, and *The China Journal*.

"It analyzes the contentious merger of old and new elites in China during the communist era. The book, based on a case study of Tsinghua University, focuses on conflict over the political and cultural foundations of class power." Joel Andreas

Mr Andreas joined the faculty at Johns Hopkins in 2003 after completing a doctoral degree in sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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Everyone is encouraged to get rich; and some are expected to get rich sooner. The goal of social equality is abandoned by CCP leaders. In the future, class advantages based on unequal distribution of capital--economic, political, and cultural--will continue to provoke demands for redistribution. Future developments will key off these ideas growing out of the Cultural Revolution, the culmination of twentieth century Communist class-leveling efforts.