

The Cultural Revolution as a Crisis of Representation

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Abstract

The May 16 Notification, which set the agenda for the Cultural Revolution, named the movement's key targets as those "representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and all spheres of culture." The ensuing uprising of students and workers, many of whom claimed to be the loyal "representatives" of revolutionary and radical forces at the grassroots of society, exposed the fulminating crisis of political representation under CCP rule. This article considers the Cultural Revolution as a manifestation of a continuing crisis of representation within revolutionary socialism that remains unresolved to the present day, as demonstrated by the tepid popular response to Jiang Zemin's "three represents" and widespread contemporary concerns about the Party's "representativeness" (*daibiaoxing* 代表性) in the wake of market reform. Although the Cultural Revolution enabled both public debate of and political experimentation with new forms of representative politics, the movement failed to resolve the crisis. The Party's lingering disquiet regarding issues of representation thus remains one legacy of the Cultural Revolution.

Keywords: political representation; Cultural Revolution; China; revolutionary committees; Red Guard congress

Although the Cultural Revolution is frequently portrayed as originating in an elite power struggle within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), its earliest salvos were replete with references to the brewing crisis of mass political representation. The ninth polemic response to the Soviet Open Letter released in 1964 lambasted the members of the "revisionist Khrushchev clique" as "the political *representatives* of the bourgeoisie" who "stand diametrically opposed to the Soviet people ... and to the great majority of the Soviet cadres and Communists."¹ Just over a year later, the May 16 Notification, hailed as a "blueprint" for the Cultural

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1 "Guanyu Heluxiaofude jia gongchanzhuyi jiqi zai shijie lishishangde jiaoxun" (On Khrushchev's phony communism and its historical lessons for the world), *Renmin ribao*, 14 July 1964, 1.

Revolution,² specifically targeted those “representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and all spheres of culture.”³ The editorial note published alongside Nie Yuanzi’s 聂元梓 “big character poster” (*dazibao* 大字报) in the *People’s Daily* took aim against representatives of a fake “and “revisionist” Communist Party that would be swept aside “by the raging tide of the Great Cultural Revolution surging forward.”⁴

Such incendiary charges raise questions about the nature of political representation during Mao’s time, as well as today. Wang Shaoguang recently proposed that contemporary China aims to be a “representational democracy” (*daibiaoxing minzhu* 代表型民主), differing in form and substance from the Western model of “representative democracy” (*daiyixing minzhu* 代议型民主).⁵ However, as Xu Jilin has pointed out, in the absence of clear and reliable mechanisms of authorization and accountability, such claims are difficult to assess.⁶ As Larry Backer acknowledges, in forwarding the “three represents,” Party claims to represent “advanced productive forces,” “advanced culture,” and the interests of “the people as whole” over those of any particular class or group, rendering representation under the CCP even more indirect and abstract.⁷ Some have gone so far as to charge that this shift has all but rendered the CCP a diluted “catch all party” (*jianrongxing zhengdang* 兼容性政党) like the German Christian Democratic Union, which aims “to represent everyone.”⁸

Yet, such charges are hardly new: similar concerns about the changing nature of the Soviet Communist Party under Khrushchev propelled Mao and his supporters into action five decades ago in an effort to prevent the CCP from degenerating into an “all people’s party” (*quanmin dang* 全民党) that effectively represents no one. Official discourse in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution was replete with worrying references about the relationship between representation and mass political participation, suggesting the existence of a brewing crisis within revolutionary socialism that could not be resolved within the Party itself. Indeed, one of the chief goals of the Cultural Revolution, according to the 11th plenary session of the eighth Party Congress in August 1966, was to have “the masses, under the leadership of the Party, educate themselves as to the best new organizational forms” (*xin zuzhi xingshi* 新组织形式) for the nation, which “like the Paris Commune, must implement a comprehensive electoral system” (*quanmiande xuanjuzhi* 全面的选举制) with universal suffrage and the right to recall those elected.⁹ This wave of political experimentation began with an

2 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 92.

3 “Tongzhi” (Notification), *Renmin ribao*, 17 May 1967, 1.

4 Renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue dangshi dangjian zhenggong jiaoyanshi 1988, 36–37. Emphasis added.

5 Wang, Shaoguang 2014, 4–12; 2012, 152–174.

6 Xu 2011.

7 Backer 2006, 32.

8 Gao 2010, 9.

9 “Xuexi shiliu tiao, shuxi shiliu tiao, yunyong shiliu tiao” (Study the 16 points, learn well the 16 points, utilize the 16 points), *Renmin ribao*, 13 August 1966, 1.

initial stage of mass criticism and an attack on the representative nature of existing organizational structures, was followed by enjoinders from the Centre that grassroots groups “link” or “join” up and form “grand alliances,” and ended with the fostering of new representative mass organizations (congresses and alliances) that were ultimately co-opted and remoulded by the central party-state. Three interlinked political experiments shed particular light on the crisis of representation during the Cultural Revolution: the rise of Red Guard and rebel factions among Beijing high school and university students, many of which later participated in the Red Guard Congress (*hongdaihui* 红代会); the mobilization of the workers in Shanghai and, later, across the country, which led to the establishment of the Workers’ Congress (*gongdaihui* 工代会); and, finally, the founding of the Shanghai Commune, and its subsequent replacement by the Revolutionary Committee, a new political form that was theoretically designed to bring together representatives of the revolutionary masses, the army and reliable cadres together in a single governing body.

None of these new political forms succeeded in resolving the crisis of representation, in part because they lacked clear means of either authorization or accountability. In the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for representing the plurality of interests below, claims for legitimacy could only come from above in the form of official recognition. Thus, potential new vehicles for representation at the social grassroots vied for recognition from the Centre, which lacked the capacity to manage the roiling competition below. Both the Red Guard and workers’ congresses quickly became sites of contestation for warring factions, and the Revolutionary Committees, most agree, focused on the restoration of order rather than on developing stable mechanisms of mass representation.

The strenuous re-imposition of Party discipline in the early post-Mao era, policed by various mopping-up campaigns such as those carried out against “three kinds of people,” likewise weakened the Party’s radical activist wings on both the left and the right without redressing the gap between the Party and those it claims to represent. Contemporary debate regarding the Party’s declining “representativeness” (*daibiaoxing* 代表性), and, perhaps most notably, Jiang Zemin’s 江泽民 “important thought” on the “three represents,” reflect the persistent irresolution of this essential dilemma. The Party’s continuing crisis of representation therefore remains one of the chief legacies of the Cultural Revolution in contemporary China.

Parliamentary Representation in Revolutionary Socialism

In Hannah Pitkin’s seminal account, formal representation involves an act of *authorization* – defined as the means by which a representative obtains his or her standing, status, position or office – and a mechanism of *accountability* through which constituents recall representatives who are unresponsive to their preferences. Legitimate forms of political representation involve a “substantive acting for others” in the sense that a representative “[promotes] the interest of the

represented.” In stable democracies, the representative is also “a professional politician in a framework of political institutions, a member of a political party who wants to get reelected, and a member of a legislature along with other representatives.” Political representation thus involves a balancing of interests on the part of the representative, and the ability of constituents to assess and hold delegates accountable over time.¹⁰

However, substantive representation also takes place beyond the sphere of institutionalized democratic practices. Although traditional views of democratic representation presume stable constituencies with interests that are endogenous to the political process, as Lisa Disch recently argued, it is also a dynamic and mobilizational process that facilitates the formation of political groups and identities.¹¹ Delegates, in both democracies and non-democracies, do not merely respond to pre-existing interests and preferences; they also play an active role “in searching out and creating them.”¹² Would-be representatives “need to be creative actors, offering portrayals and enticements to constituents and audiences,” and in so doing, can recruit supporters and even call new constituencies into being.¹³

In Marxist-Leninist thought and Maoist practice, political representation is potentially dynamic and mobilizational but imperfectly realized by the revolutionary party which serves, on the one hand, as a vehicle for mobilization by activists, and on the other, as a facilitator of “the self-emancipation of the working class.” The vanguard role assumed by the Leninist party rests upon two assumptions: first, that a single party is capable of representing the interests of the working class as a whole without a critical opposition to help remedy omissions, inaccuracies and mistakes; and, second, that the vanguard is capable of speaking in a single, united voice for those it claims to represent, in the absence of competition.¹⁴ Marx anticipated that universal suffrage would allow the majoritarian working class authentic and full representation; Lenin envisioned that a revolutionary party could provoke direct action.¹⁵ Yet, both acknowledged that although the Paris Commune conjoined universal suffrage with self-rule, the communards did not and could not represent Parisian society as a whole. The tensions between direct participation and political representation in a society composed of plural class interests, and ruled by a revolutionary party, were left unresolved.

Originally concurring with Lenin’s assessment that the way out of bourgeois parliamentarianism lay “in the conversion of the representative institutions from mere ‘talking shops’ into working bodies,”¹⁶ Mao supported the creation of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and People’s Consultative Congress.

10 Pitkin 1967, 141, 155.

11 Disch 2011.

12 Mansbridge 2003, 518.

13 Saward 2008, 274.

14 Geras 1981.

15 Bensaid 2002.

16 Lenin 1933, 35.

However, this was supplanted by the concept of “people’s democratic dictatorship,” which restricted the democratic right of representation to the ranks of “the people.”¹⁷ Beginning in 1956, Mao began to contrast “great” and “small democracy,” proposing that the former – characterized by direct participation and mass mobilization “under the leadership of the proletariat” – would be opposed both by the democratic political parties of the United Front, and those CCP cadre-bureaucrats who feared popular wrath.¹⁸

Remaining CCP support for parliamentarianism eroded during the Hundred Flowers movement, when a loose coalition of NPC deputies openly proposed that China’s “mass organizations be given a degree of control over the Party and the state.”¹⁹ The group attacked the voting system as “undemocratic,” and as a “formalistic” (*xingshizhuyi* 形式主义) and thinly “disguised [system of] appointment” (*bianxiang de renming* 变相的任命) by the Party.²⁰ Finally, in June 1957, minister of communications, Zhang Bojun 章伯钧 argued that, “The Party must be removed from its position of superiority to the NPC and the government ... and the NPC must be made an organ of genuine power.”²¹ In the backlash that followed, 54 NPC deputies were accused of being rightists, and parliamentary model of representation was abandoned. Mao later remarked that:

In China the people’s congresses included those participating as representatives of the bourgeoisie, representatives who had split off from the Nationalist Party, and representatives who were prominent democratic figures. All of them accepted the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. One group among these tried to stir up trouble, but failed.²²

As Kevin O’Brien notes, no new legislation was passed between 1957 and 1965, and NPC resolutions were increasingly seen as “secondary technical bills ... mechanically confirming reports or edits origination in some other organ.” The “crippled” body of the NPC “limped on until 1965,” and then did not convene again for another nine years, during which time its “existence became a mere formality.”²³

The Model of the Paris Commune

With the NPC discredited in the aftermath of the “anti-rightist” campaign, interest was revived in the Paris Commune as an alternative model combining mass representation and direct political action. In 1958, radical theorist Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥 praised it for ensuring that “special privileges and the official allowances” would disappear “along with the high dignitaries themselves.”²⁴ Two years later, on its 90th anniversary in 1961, another prominent editorial

17 Defined as “the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie.” Mao 1949.

18 Mao 1956.

19 Harding 1981, 122.

20 Li, Youyi 1957, 7.

21 O’Brien 1990, 38–42.

22 Mao 1961–62.

23 O’Brien 1990, 45–55.

24 Zhang 1958, 7.

lauded the Paris Commune's "great innovation" (*weida chuangju* 伟大创举), not as a "bourgeois capitalist-style parliament" but as a representative body combining "both legislative and administrative functions."²⁵

In 1966, on the Commune's 95th anniversary and on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, *Red Flag* published a substantive editorial revisiting the model of the Paris Commune. Zheng Zhiyi 郑之思, the author of the editorial, proposed that the key lesson to be drawn from the historical experience of the Commune was that it was not sufficient for revolutionaries simply to seize power from below. The significance of direct election and recall to the system of political representation in the Paris Commune, while commendable in Zheng's view, had been overemphasized by "revisionist" Soviet historians who sought to negate the importance of both direct participation and armed insurrection. Zheng took particular aim at "Khrushchov revisionists, [who] under the pretext that times have changed, publicize the deceitful myth that the proletariat can seize state power without smashing the state machine of the bourgeoisie and that socialism can be built without the dictatorship of the proletariat." The Commune was not merely "a product of a ballot by the whole people and of 'pure democracy'": the new political form was chiefly the product of revolutionary violence carried out by the masses. Although the Paris Commune and October Revolution had been "inherited and further developed" by the CCP, Zhang desecrated the fact that the Party was "struggling resolutely against all renegades who have turned their backs on the principle" of the Paris Commune. "The masses were the real masters in the Paris Commune," and it was the "revolutionary enthusiasm and initiative of the masses [that] was the source of the Commune's strength." Twenty thousand communard activists attended daily meetings, Zheng claimed, and "the masses also carefully checked up on the work of the Commune and its members."²⁶

Months later, Mao hailed Nie Yuanzi's "big character poster" as the "declaration of a Chinese Paris Commune for the sixth decade of the 20th century, the Beijing Commune."²⁷ The historical analogy appeared again in the "16 points," which hailed the organizational forms for the movement as "new and of great historical importance." According to the outline, in order to transform fledgling revolutionary grassroots organizations into permanent institutions, a system of direct election and recall, would prove key:

It is necessary to institute a system of general elections, like that of the Paris Commune, for electing members to the cultural revolution groups and committees and delegates to the cultural revolutionary congresses ... The masses are entitled at any time to criticize members of the Cultural Revolution groups and committees and delegates elected to the cultural revolutionary congresses. If these members or delegates prove incompetent, they can be replaced through election or recalled by the masses through discussion.²⁸

25 "Bali gongshe de weida chuangju" (The great undertaking of the Paris Commune, *Renmin ribao*, 18 March 1961, 1.

26 Zheng 1966.

27 Chen, Boda 1966, 116.

28 *Renmin ribao*, 9 August 1966, 1; "Bali gongshe shixing de quanmian de xuanju zhi" (The Paris Commune's implementation of a system of universal suffrage), *Renmin ribao*, 15 August 1966, 2.

Within days, a *People's Daily* editorial on 15 August, running under the title "Implementing the comprehensive electoral system of the Paris Commune," recounted the details of the Paris Commune's system of universal suffrage and election. Once elected under a scheme of proportional representation, officers were subject to supervision and recall by the voters. Quoting Marx's observation that since the majority of the officers were naturally either themselves members of the proletariat, or widely recognized as representing the working class, the author concluded that the experience of the Paris Commune, which included "its comprehensive electoral system, constitutes an extremely precious legacy for the worldwide working class movement."²⁹

In early November, Marshall Lin Biao 林彪 linked the model of representation employed by the Paris Commune to Mao's notion of mass participation in the form of "great democracy," exclaiming to a national audience of revolutionary teachers and students that, "in accordance with the principles of the Paris Commune, [we must] fully implement people's democratic rights. Without this type of great democracy (*da minzhu* 大民主), it is not possible to launch a genuine proletariat cultural revolution."³⁰ The popular right of recall and replacement for members of political organizations leading the Cultural Revolution was repeatedly stressed in the *People's Daily*: Cultural Revolution committees in factories, mining and other productive enterprises must not be:

appointed from above or controlled from behind [the scenes], but must, in accordance with the principles of the Paris Commune, implement a comprehensive electoral system and pass through the masses' complete inspections (*chongfen yunnian* 充分酝酿), repeated discussions, genuine [competitive] elections, and moreover be subject to re-election, dismissal and recall at any time.³¹

Yet, notwithstanding such admonitions, the organizational experiments launched during the Cultural Revolution bore little resemblance to the Paris Commune. Mechanisms linking delegation, mass supervision and recall were never established, and practices of authorization and accountability were never institutionalized. Instead, a generation of self-authorizing activists sprang into the breach claiming to represent constituencies and political viewpoints, with tenuous, if any, mechanisms of accountability. The early failure to resolve the brewing crisis of representation arguably generated more contention as various self-declared representatives vied to mobilize constituencies to support their claims.

The Attack on Representatives of Enemy Classes: Red Guards

When the capital's student population began mobilizing in earnest in June 1966, the slow and uncertain response of existing Party and mass organizations

²⁹ *Renmin ribao*, 15 August 1966, 2.

³⁰ "Zai jiejian quanguo gedi lai Beijing geming shisheng dahui shang Lin Biao tongzhi de jianghua" (Comrade Lin Biao's speech at the reception of revolutionary teachers and students coming to the capital from all corners of the country), *Renmin ribao*, 4 November 1966.

³¹ "Yingjie gongkuang chiye wenhua dageming de gaochao" (Welcome the high tide of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in factories and mining enterprises), *Renmin ribao*, 26 December 1966.

triggered a growing sense of a representation gap at the grassroots. As Andrew Walder has shown, work teams ostensibly “representing” the Party Centre were initially welcomed by some, but their presence complicated the situation considerably, and contributed to the rapid escalation of the conflict.³² From the second half of June to the middle of July, the work teams counter-attacked, launching a drive to “oppose disruption,” singling out students and staff members when they could and labelling them as “rightists,” “fake leftists [who are] true rightists,” and “counterrevolutionaries.”³³ During what came to be known as the crackdown “against interference” (*fan’ganrao* 反感饶), the more aggressive stance taken by the teams alienated even some who had initially welcomed their arrival. The question of whose interests the work teams represented quickly emerged as a sticking point on some Beijing campuses. Third-year chemical engineering student Kuai Dafu 蒯大富 at Tsinghua University argued that the work team was as repressive of the revolutionary left as the old Party committee had been.³⁴

At the heart of Kuai’s complaint was the tension between direct participation and political representation. On 21 June, he scrawled the following on a wall poster:

The primary task of revolution is to seize power. Previously, power was in the hands of the school Party committee, and we struggled and overthrew them; now power is in the hands of the work team, and every one of us revolutionary leftists must now ask ourselves: does this power *represent* (*daibiao* 代表) us? If it represents us, then we’ll support it, if it doesn’t represent us, then we’ll seize power again.³⁵

A backlash that became known as the “white terror” crystallized around the issue of political representation.³⁶ School authorities and work teams accused student radicals of being “representatives of the anti-Party anti-socialism capitalists [who are] waving the red flag to oppose the red flag,” while activists asked campus communities “to consider whether the power held and exerted by the work team” in fact “does or does not represent the Party Centre, Chairman Mao, [and] the proletariat.”³⁷

At the 27 June public debate organized by the work team at Tsinghua University, radical students seized upon the work team’s claim that, “we represent the proletariat masses, we represent the new municipal Party committee, and we represent Mao Zedong Thought.” Not even Party vice-secretary Bo Yibo 薄一波 could assuage the rebels: while reviewing the thousands of wall posters displayed at the Tsinghua University campus, Bo’s vigorous assertion that “the work team is representing the Party’s leadership” following the original university Party committee’s dismissal was mocked and derided.³⁸

32 Walder 2009.

33 Liu 1987, 18.

34 Qinghua daxue jinggangshan hongweibing xuanchuandui bian (n.d.), 8.

35 Ibid., 8.

36 Ibid., 90.

37 Ibid., 13, 27.

38 Qinghua daxue jinggangshan hongweibing xuanchuandui bian (n.d.), 15, 32.

These claims were linked to Mao's increasingly acerbic critique of Party organizations over the course of the 1960s. The Party no longer reflected proletarian consciousness or a revolutionary class position; instead, Mao accused the Party and the Communist Youth League (CYL) of harbouring undesirable social elements that were steering those organizations in a new and worrying direction. Official statements and the state-controlled press were awash with speculation about the activities of "representatives" (*daibiao renwu* 代表人物) of counterrevolutionary classes in the Party and state bureaucracies. By contrast, the student rebels portrayed themselves as representatives of the true revolutionary left, struggling against indwelling enemies: aside from Mao himself, no one was above suspicion. Unable to rely upon the usual stable referents of Party and CYL for ideological assurance, the original Red Guards swore to "be forever loyal to the proletariat line *as represented by Chairman Mao*,"³⁹ as opposed to the "general line" of the newly suspect Party.⁴⁰

Confusion and contestation over representation was common even on campuses where the work teams sided with radical activists. Although the work team at Tsinghua High School, the birthplace of the Red Guards, supported the rebellious students at the outset, the relationship soured when the work team insisted that the school's new Cultural Revolution committee should have "broad representation" outside the Red Guard organization. The Red Guards rebelled, later reporting their unhappiness with the work team to the campus's new revolutionary committee.⁴¹

Radical Students and Self-Representation

Following the withdrawal of the work teams at the end of July 1966, the student discourse on representation shifted. The so-called "16 points" released on 9 August declared that the new Cultural Revolution committees formed in the schools to be "long-term, permanent new mass organizations" of "great historical significance," and elected "according to the principles of the Paris Commune." "Nomination lists must be thoroughly discussed by the masses before the elections," and committee members, once elected, could "be criticized at any time, and if they turn out not to be suitable for the post, after discussion among the masses, new elections can be held and they can be replaced."⁴²

Yet, the Paris Commune model conveyed different lessons for various student activists: those who had cooperated with the work teams and held positions on their school's Cultural Revolution committees were reassured that these were "permanent" new organs of power, whereas those who fared less

³⁹ Qinghua daxue fushu zhongxue hongweibing 1966, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Bu 2008, 158–163.

⁴¹ Ibid., 169–170.

⁴² "Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu wuchan jieji wenhua dageming de jue ding" (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's decision regarding the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), *Renmin ribao*, 9 August 1966, 1.

well focused on the document's criticisms of the work teams as the representatives of "anti-Party, anti-socialist elements who infiltrated the Party." Rather than alleviating the polarization of the social grassroots in most schools across Beijing, the "16 points" instead contributed to a growing competition among activist groups and students for control over the new Cultural Revolution committees.⁴³

The first battleground was the "preparatory committees," which were hastily established by the work teams on most campuses just prior to their withdrawal. Unsurprisingly, these were largely composed of students, teachers and employees who had cooperated with the work teams. At Tsinghua, the preparatory committee issued a call for students to unite under its leadership to carry the movement forward. The following day, students in favour of intensifying criticism of the work team organized the "August 8 alliance" – which included those who were attacked alongside Kuai Dafu – to push their agenda. The next day, the preparatory committee established an "August 9 alliance" to redirect the movement against the school's "revisionists." Two weeks later, on 22 August, the "August 8 alliance" established a new political organization, the Maoism Red Guards. Enjoined to "link up" and form "grand alliances," the "August 9" group invited representatives of similar groups from 12 other schools to a meeting to agree a coordinated strategy: Paris Commune-style elections should be held in short order. Groups without representatives on the preparatory committees sought to delay the elections, arguing that, without levelling the playing field, the planned elections would lack legitimacy.⁴⁴

In September, 24 "minority faction" Red Guard groups not favoured either with seats on preparatory or school Cultural Revolution committees banded together in the city-wide Capital Third Headquarters. When Zhou Enlai 周恩来 addressed them on 26 September, he said: "You really bring together – and your views represent – the people who have been suppressed. That's why in your case 'to rebel *is* justified'."⁴⁵ Yet, in the absence of either a clear process of delegation, the claims of these grassroots organizations to give voice to or act on behalf of mass constituencies grew more tenuous over time. In most schools across the capital, preparatory committees either selected student representatives from pre-movement class leaders who found favour with the work teams, or, on campuses on which the work teams had been discredited, selected rebel student leaders who had opposed them.⁴⁶ Electoral participation was restricted to students with unimpeachable revolutionary credentials, and candidates were chosen and screened by the preparatory committee. All or most of the delegates owed their participation to superordinate levels rather than to expressions of grassroots support.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, instead of serving the

43 Walder 2009, 95–97.

44 Ibid., 102–110.

45 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 134.

46 Interview with informant C, Beijing, 3 March 2015.

47 Interview with informant B, Beijing, 3 March 2015; interview with informant D, Beijing, 5 March 2015.

interests of or giving voice to the concerns of broader mass constituencies, the new representatives competed to become the tools of the Centre, and, in particular, served as “gullible ... gofers” for the central Cultural Revolution group.⁴⁸

By the end of 1966, substantive political representation appeared more elusive than ever. Continuing violence had fractured the potential constituencies student activists might have otherwise represented: self-authorizing Red Guards on both “conservative” and “rebel” sides had eroded the institutionalized mechanisms under which representation could have conceivably taken place, and were locked in a contest for recognition from the Centre. If the legitimacy of one’s status as a representative was to be judged by the numbers of supporters one could mobilize into action, as 1966 drew to a close, the student activists set their sights on other venues: the working class was their next port of call.

Self-Representation and Radical Workers in Shanghai

The first major delegation of 170 Red Guard representatives from Beijing arrived in Shanghai on 24 August 1966, seeking to “light a fire” (*dianhuo* 点火) and spread the Cultural Revolution to the “Paris of the East.” A second wave, consisting of tens of thousands organized into divisions and battalions and calling themselves the “Southern touring regiment of capital universities and institutes,” arrived on 10 September and immediately fanned out to various Shanghai schools and factories. A third group, dispatched by Jiang Qing 江青 and Zhang Chunqiao, arrived a month later charged with overturning the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, and quickly established links with rebel workers in nearby factories.⁴⁹

The influx of Beijing Red Guards brought the debates about representation to a head by the end of August in Shanghai, a city in which the old power structure had remained more or less intact. Despite an official welcome staged at the Cultural Square, the first wave of visiting Red Guards complained that their reception had been “hastily organized” (*congcong zuzhi* 匆匆组织) and was “fundamentally not genuine” (*genben bushi zhenxin* 根本不是真心). The self-authorized Beijing Red Guard representatives complained that several Shanghai schools refused them entrance because they lacked official letters of introduction; that they had to purchase tickets when boarding public transportation; and that it had been difficult to meet with local Party leaders. The Municipal Party Committee apologized, but the delegates were adamant. On the morning of 31 August, more than a dozen Beijing Red Guards marched to Yan’an Road 延安路, demanding to see the municipal Party leadership. Before a crowd of more than a thousand onlookers, they rushed the building to find Mayor Cao Diqu 曹荻秋 meeting with two self-proclaimed Beijing Red Guard representatives who had likewise demanded an official audience. In the fracas that ensued,

⁴⁸ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 145.

⁴⁹ Perry and Li 1997, 10–11.

the deputy mayor, Song Liwen 宋季文, was struck in the head by a Red Guard representative, and the glass door to the building was shattered.⁵⁰

Defying the Central Committee's September 1966 ban, Beijing Red Guard representatives entered factories and workplaces around Shanghai in the name of establishing the "worker–student united movement" (*gongren xuesheng lianhe yundong* 工人学生联合运动).⁵¹ In early November, the Capital Red Guards' Liaison Station organized a meeting that attracted at least 30 workers from 17 different factories, and the Shanghai Workers' Revolutionary Rebels' General Headquarters (*Shanghai gongren geming zaofan zongsilingbu* 上海工人革命造反总司令部) was founded, with Number 17 Cotton Mill security officer Wang Hongwen 王洪文 as its chair. When Mayor Cao refused to attend the inaugural ceremony on 9 November, over a thousand angry workers surrounded the municipal Party committee building and staged a sit-in before deciding to take their protest to Beijing. Well over a thousand workers headed to Shanghai North Station the next morning and boarded three trains bound for the capital. A State Council directive from Premier Zhou Enlai halted the trains, snarling national rail lines for hours. The train that happened to be carrying Wang Hongwen was stopped outside of Anting 安亭 station, leading to a standoff between the workers and local authorities. The Central Cultural Revolution Small Group dispatched Zhang Chunqiao to mediate the conflict and he formally recognized the new workers organization.

But official recognition of the rebels quickly triggered a backlash: "conservative" workers demanded a voice and a seat at the table as well. The leader of what would later become the Scarlet Guards later recalled how he approached the mayor in November 1966:

Since the rebels had established an all-city organization, I asked whether we might not also establish an all-city organization to counter them ... At our factory, the work team composed one faction, the rebel "warriors to defend Mao Zedong Thought" were another faction, and the factory CR committee was yet a third faction. I said to the work team captain Wang Ming, "We also want to participate." Wang retorted, "We represent organizations; what do you represent?" I said, "Then I'll establish an organization, too!"⁵²

The counter-mobilization had a recursive effect across the city: "The more militant the rebels at a particular factory, the more active the conservatives became as well."⁵³ Although relatively short-lived, the Scarlet Guards confronted the rebel forces in two high-profile incidents in December before popular support for the Conservatives dwindled amidst widespread strikes, work stoppages and slow-downs that paralysed the city.

Institutionalizing Mass Representation

Trumpeting the early success of the Cultural Revolution in October 1966, Chen Boda 陈伯达 proclaimed that in its first two months it had already proved "even

50 Li, Xun 2015, Vol. 1, 122–28.

51 Shanghai "wenge" shiliao zhengli bianzhu xiaozu (n.d.), 152–53.

52 Perry and Li 1997, 78.

53 Ibid., 82.

more tempestuous than either the Paris Commune or the October Revolution, with an even more profound impact on the international proletarian revolutionary movement” than either of its illustrious predecessors. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that there were persons who “oppose Mao Zedong Thought ... and oppose the Paris Commune principle of election,” and who were using the tactic of stalling until the ideal composition of a unit’s “preparatory” or “revolutionary committee” might be secured.⁵⁴ Three months later, he appeared to do a U-turn, counselling caution in Beijing in January 1967:

The seizure of power on a city-wide basis ought to be in the style of the Paris Commune, using a representative body of workers, peasants, soldiers, students and merchants ... This requires some preparation, however. Don’t you think you should first consult the workers, peasants, students and merchants, as well as the cadres and urban residents concerned, and on that basis form a preparatory committee with representation from the entire Beijing municipality? Granted this will be a temporary organ of power, but it is certainly better than a bunch of small groups seizing power from one another. What do you think?⁵⁵

Chen’s shift reflected the fact that by 1967, the Cultural Revolution had entered a new phase in which the *modus operandi* was the seizure of political power by revolutionary and rebellious social forces. The *People’s Daily* and Red Guard publications began declaring that instead of appearing as a blueprint for mass election, delegation, accountability and recall, the new lesson to be drawn from the Paris Commune was the importance of destroying pre-existing power structures. On 31 January 1967, a front-page editorial in the *People’s Daily* reminded readers of Mao’s earlier declaration of that the Beijing Commune would be a Paris Commune “for the sixth decade of the 20th century”:

At that time, Chairman Mao ingeniously foresaw that a new form would appear in our state machinery and mobilized from bottom to top hundreds of millions of people to seize power from the handful of persons within the Party who are in authority and are taking the capitalist road, smash the old things, create a new situation and ... enrich and develop the experience of the Paris Commune, the Soviets and Marxism-Leninism.⁵⁶

The rebels’ power seizure and founding of the Shanghai People’s Commune in January 1967 – depicted as a heroic measure carried out by workers and residents to keep production going – began as a series of largely uncoordinated mass actions that were subsequently “ideologically transformed into a national political model.”⁵⁷ The efforts by a core group of seven Workers’ General Headquarters members to restore the city’s basic transportation and communication systems was heralded by Zhang Chunqiao only a week later as a “newborn thing, a new form of political power,” and an “‘economic soviet’ replacing the Shanghai people’s government.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Chen, Boda 1966.

⁵⁵ Zhou, Jiang and Chen 1967.

⁵⁶ “Lun wuchan jieji gemingpai de duoquan douzheng” (On the proletarian revolutionaries’ struggle to seize power), *Renmin ribao*, 31 January 1967, 1.

⁵⁷ Wu 2014, 96–97.

⁵⁸ Perry and Li 1997, 146–47.

Yet, the rebel groups that united to “seize power” in early January were quickly overwhelmed by the complexity of the task at hand. By 15 January, Zhou Enlai and Chen Boda were warning rebel delegations to “guard against the seize management wind” (*fangzhi jieguan feng* 防止接管风) that swept Shanghai.⁵⁹ Ominous diatribes against “anarchism,” “departmentalism,” and “ultra-democracy” followed over the next few days, culminating in the 23 January decision to order the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to intervene in the Cultural Revolution by supporting the rebels.⁶⁰ On 31 January, the Shanghai Commune model was jettisoned in favour the “three-in-one” power seizure model implemented in Heilongjiang, where rebels had joined forces with former provincial Party committee cadres and the senior officers of provincial PLA units to take power. Whereas provincial administrations had previously been divided into separate bureaucratic systems, the new “three-in-one” model created a single bureaucracy overseen by a revolutionary committee that included military officers, rebel leaders and veteran cadres, and admitted no division between Party and state.

The Paris Commune model of universal suffrage and the rights of election and recall quickly fell by the wayside. Instead, Zhang Chunqiao asserted that, “if [it can be said that] there is a new idea in the ‘three-in-one’ revolutionary committee, that would be because it has mass representation. Cadre representation and military representation were part of the original [structure]. Its goodness rests in it having mass representation.”⁶¹ However, the percentage of mass representatives serving on provincial-level revolutionary committees varied, from a high of 63.8 per cent of the committee’s membership in Xinjiang to a low of 13.3 per cent in Sichuan.⁶² Furthermore, these mass representatives were generally unelected and were instead chosen by a provincial committee composed of the senior Party, PLA officers and rebel leaders.⁶³ The chief reason for abandoning election in favour of appointment was the need of the central leadership to guarantee the inclusion of radical rebel forces on the new revolutionary committees, a position consistent with the 16 Points’ specific instruction that the Party’s leadership become more adept at identifying, developing, and expanding leftist forces.⁶⁴ In a public discussion in April 1967, Zhou Enlai pointed to the “reversal” of the revolutionary process then underway in Tianjin, where, in the wake of unjustified and excessive violence purportedly carried out by rebel Red Guards and workers, not a single member of the rebel forces had managed to win a seat on the preparatory small group (*choubei xiaozu* 筹备小组) entrusted with setting up Tianjin’s new revolutionary committee. Kang Sheng 康生 interrupted the premier to warn

⁵⁹ Zhou and Chen 1967.

⁶⁰ Bridgham 1968, 11.

⁶¹ Shanghai ‘Wenge’ shiliao zhengli bianzhu xiaozu (n.d.) 572.

⁶² Dangdai Zhongguo yanjiusuo shu 2012, 70.

⁶³ Chen, Fenglou 2012, 190–92.

⁶⁴ “Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu wuchan jieji wenhua dageming de jue ding” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party’s decision regarding the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), *Renmin ribao*, 9 August 1966, 1.

against putting blind faith in elections: “under specific circumstances, elections are not as good as consultative democracy.” Zhou quickly clarified for his audience: “Why must we not hold elections? Because the revolutionary committee is a provisional mechanism of authority, [we] still haven’t united up to 95 per cent. We must take the rebel factions as the nucleus, and carry out consultation.”⁶⁵ By March 1968, the very notion of ballots being cast for seats on revolutionary committees was derided as “election superstition” (*mixin xuanju* 迷信选举), and as a manifestation of “conservative thought” (*baoshou sixiang* 保守思想). Revolutionary committee members were to “not be produced by elections, but instead by relying directly on the revolutionary action of the broad masses.” This process involved the careful selection of mass representatives following “repeated arguments, deliberations, consultations, and examinations”:

Democracy has a class character. The revolutionary organ of power ... conforms better to proletarian democracy and democratic centralism, and reflects the interests of the proletariat and working people in a much more deep-going way than those organs of power produced in the past only by means of elections.⁶⁶

During the Beijing wave of power seizures in early 1967, attempts were made to institutionalize representative assemblies for Red Guards and rebel workers, and to place them under the control of the new Beijing Revolutionary Committee, but internecine squabbling between the participants prevented the plan from being realized.⁶⁷ On 22 February 1967, the University Red Guard Congress (*hongdaihui* 红代会) was established in Beijing at the behest of the central leadership; middle school Red Guards established a separate assembly just over a month later. Similar assemblies were formed across the country at county, city, regional and provincial levels in quick succession, the goal of which was not to guarantee mass political representation but instead ensure coordination and control over the Red Guard movement.

Although central leaders asserted that the Red Guard Congress was not merely a “consultative body” but a genuinely “revolutionary organization and a representative assembly,” the organization reflected the needs and interests of its founders instead of its grassroots participants. Crippled from the outset by factional strife, “chaotic name-calling” (*luan koumaozi* 乱扣帽子) broke out frequently among the representatives, and it was never seen as a bona fide organization with political influence.⁶⁸ Instead, by April 1967, Capital Red Guard Congress representatives were waging pitched battles against each other in fierce competition for recognition from above.⁶⁹ A national representative assembly of Red Guards was never formed.

The new Workers’ Representative Assembly (*gongdaihui* 工代会) suffered a similar fate. Although Zhang Chunqiao announced that, unlike the All-China

⁶⁵ Zhou, Chen and Zhang 1967; Wang, Hui 2013, 167–174.

⁶⁶ Hongqi bianji bu 1968.

⁶⁷ Qi 1967.

⁶⁸ Xie and Qi 1967.

⁶⁹ Walder 2009, 217–222.

Federation of Trade Unions organization, the Workers' Representative Assembly had been established by "rebel worker forces to ensure their engagement in class struggle," it quickly became the site of competition between rivals seeking official recognition. In March 1967, the Beijing Workers' Representative Assembly was formed (*Beijing gongdaihui* 北京工代会) under the control of the new Beijing Revolutionary Committee. Its first high-profile action, in April 1967, was to organize a march of over 200,000 workers calling for Liu Shaoqi's 刘少奇 downfall.⁷⁰ Within weeks, at the behest of Chairman Mao, rebel worker factions within the former official union branches at every district, county and department level were instructed to link up to form preparatory committees with the intention of establishing worker representative assemblies to replace the former labour unions. Once again, Zhang Chunqiao warned the rebels not to bother with "trivial philosophy or superstitious bourgeois class democracy ... carrying out elections by ballot and choosing representatives, making such a mess." Zhang enjoined the rebels to use "livelier" methods to produce "better" representatives than those that prevailed in bourgeois democracies. However, clear procedures and mechanisms for doing so were never agreed upon by the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group, and as such, haphazard methods of selection prevailed.⁷¹

Conclusion: the Problem of Delegation

When the "Paris Commune principle of election" collapsed amidst the storm of power seizures, complex questions concerning the mechanisms of authorization and accountability were overridden in the interest of securing centralized control and social order. Having rejected the nascent Shanghai Commune in favour of the revolutionary committees, Mao's terse 1967 order calling for the "implementation of the revolutionary 'three-in-one combination' principle" aimed to "establish a provisional mechanism of power that is revolutionary, representative, and has proletarian authority."⁷² Yet, the precise composition of these new bodies varied widely, and the means of delegation remained opaque.⁷³ Within the year, it was clear that the revolutionary committees' power was chiefly exercised by the military, and by the end of the decade, the revolutionary committees served to reconstitute the Party's battered structure. Lacking clear mechanisms of delegation and accountability, the representatives of the revolutionary masses were indistinguishable from either the self-authorizing representatives of indeterminate origin or the appointed tools of more highly placed political actors.

Why did the Paris Commune model of mass representation fail to take root after the initial stage of the Cultural Revolution? In their recent discussion of

⁷⁰ Zhong 1998, 1257–61.

⁷¹ Li, Xun 2015, 1025–27.

⁷² Mao 1967.

⁷³ Bridgham 1968.

socialist political representation, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe that, in failing to develop fundamentally different conceptions of representation and democracy, 20th-century socialist and communist movements ended up reproducing bourgeois models of sovereignty because they were trapped by the need for the unity of the state, the failure of which facilitated the collapse of East European socialist regimes in the 1980s.⁷⁴ In Alain Badiou's view, the institutionalization and then elimination of grassroots Red Guard and rebel groups under the reconstituted remnants of the Centre is evidence of the Cultural Revolution's failure to liberate "politics from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it." Although the model of the Paris Commune was invoked as an early declaration that "the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be a simple statist formula," it was not clear whether the "new" revolutionary committees "reduplicate[d], or purely and simply replace[d], the old and dreaded 'party committees'." In the end, "the Cultural Revolution is the Commune of the age of Communist Parties and Socialist States: a terrible failure that teaches us some essential lessons" about the difficulty of securing both mass representation and mass participation under revolutionary socialism.⁷⁵

These contradictory impulses – between the Party's attempt to absorb fully the rebellious radical left, and its attempt to retain control over the process of representing the masses – was already evident in the August 1966 "16 points," which directed Party cadres to institute a Paris Commune-type system of regular elections to guarantee delegation, representation and recall, and to recognize, develop, expand and rely firmly upon the ranks of the *true* revolutionary left. Given the inherent antagonism of these two goals, it is hardly surprising that the Cultural Revolution's radical political experiments could neither resolve nor eliminate the contradiction between the plural nature of mass representation in a heterogeneous socialist state, and the disciplined unity imposed by an elite revolutionary party. The Great Helmsman's 1967 decision to support the revolutionary committees and to protect the role of the Party plotted a future course for the Party's control over mass political representation that has remained firmly in place down to the present day.

In the rush to "thoroughly negate" the Cultural Revolution, the post-Mao leadership shelved discussion of the critical unresolved issues the movement raised about the nature of mass representation under Party rule. These were put on hold again during the process of opening China to international market forces, and deferred yet again under Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, who cited the "tribulations" of the recent past. Xi Jinping 习近平 reformulated the problem early on by recognizing that the Party's rule was authorized by the power of the people – "power conferred by the people, and power exercised on their behalf" (*quan weimin suo fu, quan weimin suo yong* 权为民所赋, 权为民所用).⁷⁶ However, as Yu Keping

⁷⁴ Hardt and Negri 2004, 252.

⁷⁵ Badiou 2010, 107, 190, 137, 278.

⁷⁶ Li, Weidong, and Cheng 2011, 10.

俞可平 observed, in the absence of mechanisms ensuring mass authorization and accountability, Xi's reformulation remains little more than a mere abstraction: "The fundamental premise underlying 'power conferred by the people' remains in grasping that the governmental power of Party and state officials should represent the popular will of its citizens,"⁷⁷ and, of course, in securing the institutional means by which mass authorization and official accountability can be realized.

Biographical note

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摘要：《五一六通知》为十年文化大革命重要的纲领性文件之一，并以“混进党里、政府里、军队里和各种文化界的资产阶级代表人物”，视为文化大革命清洗、斗争的主要目标。此时许多学生与工人认为他们是代表底层的革命者与先进力量，进而开始抗争，就此揭露共产党“代表性”的概念存在，及深刻的矛盾。社会主义的代表性，我认为此概念从文化大革命到现在一直有着同样的矛盾，而此矛盾到目前为止还是悬而未至，例如江泽民“三个代表”概念并没有受到人民热烈的爱戴，并从改革开放时代到现在，人民对共产党的“代表性”一直保持著怀疑。虽然文化大革命对代表性的概念促进了公共辩论，並体现了代表性的新方式，但未能解决代表性本身的矛盾。因此，文化大革命遗产之一就是共产党对“代表性”问题一貫性的沉默以对。

关键词：代表性；文革；革委会；红代会；工代会

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⁷⁷ Yu 2011, E31.

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