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Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered

ANDREW G. WALDER

A GENERATION OF RESEARCH ON RED GUARD politics has traced the origins of its debilitating factionalism to social and political divisions that were well established among students on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. These social interpretations impute political motives to student activists according to their positions in the pre-Cultural Revolution status quo. However, a closer examination of events in Beijing during the summer and early autumn of 1966—where the Red Guards and their factional divisions first emerged—suggests a different interpretation. Factions emerged when student activists from similar social backgrounds responded differently to ambiguous and rapidly changing political signals. These initial acts left students on opposite sides of an emerging political divide and exposed them to unforeseen risks as the movement took unpredictable turns. In this interpretation, student divisions are rooted in political interactions in the early phases of the conflict itself. Red Guard factions did not emerge in Beijing as expressions of opposed group interests based on preexisting social divisions, but as struggles to vindicate earlier actions and to avoid the harsh fate of political victims.

To establish this political interpretation we must carefully consider the seemingly persuasive evidence for social interpretations. Red Guard handbills and newspapers are a rich source of information about the social and political categories that affected student career prospects on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. For a period, some Red Guards debated the validity of class labels used by the Party to sort students into political categories based on their parentage, labels that served as indicators of political reliability and that affected career prospects (Kraus 1977, 1981). Later rebels would denounce some of the early Red Guards as conservative children of reactionary party officials whose actions defended their privileges in the status quo. The prominent early leaders of the Red Guards were indeed recruited heavily from students from “red” classes, particularly revolutionary cadre and army backgrounds. And later Red

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Guard and Rebel groups drew from a broader cross-section of the student population, and some denounced the privileged origins of the early, “conservative” Red Guards (Rosen 1982; Unger 1982; White 1976).

This evidence is beyond question. It indicates that the society from which the Red Guard movement emerged had an identifiable pattern of politically shaped social inequality. Indeed, the Red Guard movement provided us with the earliest evidence about this structure of inequality. It does not follow, however, that Red Guard factions emerged when students acted upon interests defined by these social structures. I suggest, instead, that the issue of family origin surfaced in the midst of a factional conflict that had already emerged over essentially political questions that had divided students from similar backgrounds. The question of student social origins, parentage and political reliability, and the privileges of students from elite background were a consequence of student factional struggles, not their cause.

The Varieties of Social Interpretation

The feature common to all varieties of social interpretation is an implicit structural theory about the identities and interests that motivate political action. All such theories begin with the notion that political action can be explained by the position of individuals in prior social and political structures. Building on early suggestions that the Cultural Revolution reflected the politics of interest groups (Oksenberg 1968; Vogel 1968), Hong Yung Lee (1975, 1978) argued that Maoist officials mobilized discontented social groups against the status quo. The status quo, in turn, was defended by an alliance of the party-state bureaucracy and those citizens who had benefited most under the regime (See Blecher and White 1979; Walder 1978; White 1974, 1980). Lee argued that a conservative faction comprised of students from families of high officials and other red social classes (e.g., worker and peasant households) fought to defend their vested interests in the status quo. A radical faction comprised of students from bourgeois families and others discriminated against by the regime sought to challenge the status quo and to gain rights previously denied them (Lee 1978, 1–10, 340–43).

Subsequent research revised Lee’s arguments without challenging the underlying structural conception. Based on interviews with former Guangzhou high-school students, these studies found that students from revolutionary cadre households, who presumably had the greatest interests in the status quo, were far more likely to join the large “conservative” alliance that eventually emerged in 1967. Students from educated middle-class backgrounds (but not the children of politically stigmatized families) were far more likely to join the radical alliance. Factions were based on identities formed in the course of prior competition for advancement between two relatively successful status groups who possessed different credentials, not a struggle between haves and have nots (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Rosen 1979, 1982; Unger 1982).

An alternative structural analysis emphasizes positions in a different conception of social structure—political networks cultivated by grass-roots party organizations. Party committees and Communist Youth Leagues were centrally involved in evaluating individuals for advancement. Active participation in the Party and its youth group was the primary means for individuals to establish their loyalty and worthiness. Holding a leadership post in the Youth League was itself an important

criterion for college admission (Rosen 1982; Shirk 1982; Unger 1982). These structures of reward and advancement were analogous to those established in urban workplaces by the early 1960s, where party organizations had evolved into political machines that provided career rewards for loyalty, creating formal organizational ties often reinforced by informal personal ones (Walder 1986).

This network conception has informed studies of factionalism among urban workers. Factions that defended factory and municipal leaders emerged from among party members, youth league leaders, and other political activists whose past activities linked them to the party organization of their factory. These people would defend authorities from attack, in part because any attack on their network would threaten the interests of all its members, and in part because of the ties of authority and obligation within that network. The early confrontations with critics of authority would harden factional divisions in schools and workplaces, and after the fall of party authorities, factions linked to these origins would continue to battle one another for control (Perry and Li 1997, 71–95; Walder 1996, 2000).

From a network perspective, factions should emerge along fault lines marked by party and youth league affiliation. Students already in the Party, or prominent in the Youth League, should tend to join in the defense of existing arrangements. These groups, further, should have the advantage of prior solidarity and organizational ties. Radical challenges should emerge from those with weak affiliations to party and youth league or those who were frustrated by their failure to advance within these organizations (Perry and Li 1997, 43–51; Walder 1996). To the extent that family background is correlated with factional affiliation, this simply reflects the Party's tendency to recruit people from red family backgrounds.

The original objective of this research was to assess the validity of this network conception in comparison to earlier status group explanations. The only way to do so was to look beyond Red Guard rhetoric and factional membership to trace the actual sequence of events out of which factions emerged. When it became clear that factions emerged in Beijing colleges and high schools in a pattern that fit with neither network nor status group conceptions, I began to reconsider the premises common to both varieties of social interpretation. This article has two aims: to articulate an alternative political interpretation consistent with the historical evidence, and to put evidence that has inspired social interpretations into proper perspective.

The Significance of Timing and Event Sequences

The direct evidence for social interpretations of Red Guard factionalism is primarily of two types. The first is the social composition of factions. The earliest Red Guard organizations were clearly dominated by students from red households, and prominent among them were the children of high-ranking party and government officials. The first three months of the Cultural Revolution marked the reassertion of the Party's class line in education and culture, and this heavily favored students from red and especially from revolutionary households. It is also clear that the massive expansion of the Red Guard movement after August 1966 led to an influx of students from other family backgrounds. The most systematic evidence about the composition of Red Guard factions is a Hong Kong survey of former high-school students from the city of Guangzhou. The survey showed a heavy concentration of high-school

students from revolutionary backgrounds in the citywide faction labeled conservative, and a similar concentration of students from non-revolutionary backgrounds in the opposing factional alliance.¹

The second kind of evidence is the content of Red Guard rhetoric and debates. Some student tabloids and wall posters reinforce the idea that factions expressed status differences. A recurring debate about the question of family origin first emerged in August 1966 and continued sporadically well into 1967. Some students claimed that their revolutionary family heritage predisposed them to loyalty to the proletarian class line and that this uniquely qualified them to lead Mao's Cultural Revolution. Others later charged that this claim was part of a plot by conservative students who sought to protect their privileges and the positions of their reactionary parents from the expanding purges of the Cultural Revolution. These writings have received lavish attention in scholarship about the Cultural Revolution (White 1976; Rosen 1982), and they have been interpreted as a clear indication that Red Guard politics were largely about these identities and the interests attached to them.

If the question of family origins became a subject of intense debate at various points in the Cultural Revolution, does this mean that Red Guard factions emerged from these social cleavages to express the opposed interests of different groups? To answer this question one must trace the sequence of events through which Red Guard factions first emerged. Social interpretations presume a process that begins with individuals whose actions in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution are influenced by their positions in China's social and political structures. Different positions lead to different actions, out of which opposed factions grow. In order for this to be possible, one thing is essential: political circumstances must present members of different social categories (or of social networks) with choices that have understandable implications for their presumed interests. To the extent that this is true, we should see factions emerge as people from similar social categories respond similarly to emerging political circumstances.

Social interpretations rest implicitly on the assumption that events during the summer of 1966 unfolded in a manner that permitted students to understand their implications for the status quo and to act accordingly. The crucial period in question is June and July 1966, when work teams sent by higher-level Party organs were dispatched to all schools to orchestrate student criticism and purges of school officials. The work teams were supported by many student activists, but in many schools they were opposed by militant minorities, some of whom were in turn attacked by work teams and punished in retaliation. When the Red Guard movement emerged and grew rapidly in August, it was already marked by factional divisions that originated in the encounters with the work teams.

Social interpretations start with the observation that work teams were sent by a central Party bureaucracy to reign in and to discipline a student movement that threatened party authority. They are thought to have blunted the initiative of the more rebellious and disaffected students and to have preserved the status quo by calling for orderly and moderate criticism of individuals in the school administration.

¹Informants were asked their family origin and factional allegiance, and the same information for their classmates. The sample of 2,187 students was drawn from fifty *ban* (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1982; Rosen 1982, 147–61). There were strong correlations between family background and factional allegiance. However, it is not known when individuals joined these factions, or whether they switched affiliation at some point in time. Therefore we do not know whether the same correlations would have been observed as factions originally formed within schools.

Faced with student challenges, the teams are thought to have rallied their natural allies in the student body—leaders and activists in the Youth League and those already marked for bright futures as probationary or full Party members. It was naturally in the interest of these loyal students to defend organizations and leaders with whom their personal interests were so closely tied and with whom they had a history of cooperation. Moreover, it is thought, these work teams promoted the formation of conservative Red Guard groups whose membership drew heavily upon the loyal children of party and army officials—students already favored by the status quo with whom the leaders of work teams and of the schools shared common interests. This portrayal of the work teams has all the elements essential for a social interpretation. Students could make sense of the unfolding Cultural Revolution in terms of the status quo and their position in it. The biases inherent in the work teams' conduct of the Cultural Revolution tended to split students along fault lines already apparent in the social and political structures of the schools (Dittmer 1974, 84–87; Lee 1978, 27–31; Vogel 1969, 322–28).

The main thrust of this article is to show that this logical scenario does not fit the unfolding of the Cultural Revolution in Beijing's schools. Red Guard factions emerged from a wholly different set of causes that bear no direct relationship to the social and political divisions they are so often thought to reflect. This article will establish a series of points that together portray an essentially political process of factional formation. First, work teams were themselves so embattled and unsure of their missions that they conducted themselves in a wide variety of ways. Available evidence, including later accusations by their opponents, suggests that when they were able to assert their control over a school, they purged school party organizations very thoroughly, focusing their attacks on the party apparatus itself. Second, opposition to work teams did not emerge when students opposed work-team efforts to preserve school power structures. Instead, it grew out of disagreements about the extent of the work teams' authority, and especially about student demands for free access to purge victims for violent "struggle sessions." Third, the foundations for student factions were laid in the universities, when work teams attacked and punished their most militant opponents, then withdrew from campuses leaving a different group of students in charge. This pitted a minority faction of university students who had vigorously opposed the work teams against a majority of student activists who had not. Fourth, as the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) assumed increasing prominence in August and September, it began to intervene directly for and against emerging student factions, shifting their support from one faction to another, strongly influencing their rise and fall, and causing a major realignment of factional divisions. Fifth, Red Guard factions did not have different social compositions until September, after the large influx of students new to the movement into the one faction openly favored by the CCRG. Sixth, after some of the early high-school rebels were repudiated by the CCRG, their daring counterattack in late autumn against these rising Maoist politicians earned them police suppression and a propaganda campaign that vilified them as reactionary children of high officials. This campaign served as a powerful interpretive framework for students new to the Red Guard movement in Beijing and the provinces, and its documents provided much of the original inspiration for social interpretations.

My analysis does not challenge a well-established historiography of the Red Guard movement in Beijing, for there is little scholarly work on the subject. The last sustained attention to the events described here was Hong Yung Lee's (1978) pioneering study, where they were a relatively small part of a much broader narrative

that spanned events nationwide at both the mass and elite level for a much longer period. The definitive English-language contributions of the 1980s, on the other hand, were based almost exclusively on interviews with former high-school Red Guards from Guangzhou.² Recent works that focus on events in Beijing have begun to fill this gap (e.g., Hao 1996; Tang n.d.; Yin 1997), but the most comprehensive have treated the Red Guards as a backdrop to an emerging factional struggle at the top (e.g., Wang 1988).

Because the sequence and timing of events is crucial, I will rely heavily on documentary sources. Oral histories are extraordinarily valuable, but informants find it difficult to recall dates of events now distant in time, and their narratives about the crucial early period are invariably shaped by understandings developed later in the movement or even in subsequent years of reflection. Documentary sources contain their own biases, but because they are frozen in time they paradoxically permit a better understanding of the dynamics of an evolving conflict. They are highly accurate about timing, and the claims and counter-claims of emerging factions change revealingly through time in a documented sequence.

Three types of sources permit the reconstruction of events and the evolution of conflict in ways that earlier were impossible. The first are the chronicles of major events (*dashiji*), narratives designed to vindicate the political position of the authors. These chronicles are usually of limited length and cover events only in one school, but one that has proven particularly useful is the book-length chronicle of events throughout Beijing published in mid-1967 by the East is Red faction of the Beijing Geology Institute (1967). Such chronicles exhibit clear partisan biases, but they are usually written with sufficient detail to support alternative interpretations. Another useful chronicle was compiled two decades later by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee (Beijing shiwei 1987) with very different political objectives. A second vital source—one essential for making sense of events during the work-team period and the specifics of factional quarrels—are the selected wall posters (*dazibao xuan*) compiled and reprinted by work teams, school Cultural Revolution Committees, or individual Red Guard factions. One remarkable feature of these compilations is that they present detailed arguments from both sides of a debate—Red Guard factions often provide full texts that lay out their opponents' position before providing a series of denunciations of it.³ A third and more familiar source are the newspapers and handbills published by individual Red Guard organizations. These were the primary sources relied upon by researchers in the 1970s and 1980s, but many more are now available, especially those issued during the last half of 1966 (e.g., CCRM 1992, 1999, 2002).

²Rosen (1979, 1982) and Unger (1982) state that their interpretation applies primarily to high schools, and they understand that cleavages based on family origin were not prominent in universities. They attribute this difference to the different class composition of the student bodies of the elite high schools (which dominated the Red Guard movement) and the universities. I will offer a political rather than social interpretation of the differences between high schools and universities in Beijing.

³One example is the lengthy pamphlet published and reprinted nationwide in October 1966 that presents the full text of Tan Lifu's widely reviled speech in which he defends the actions of his university's work team and argues that students from red households have stronger revolutionary sentiments than others. The pamphlet contains a transcript of the speech, wall posters authored by Tan, a series of explanatory footnotes, and a series of criticisms and responses from the opposed faction (Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966). This speech has long been cited as prime evidence for the social interpretation of Red Guard politics, but was known to researchers twenty years ago only through denunciations of it. The original text was not reprinted outside China until the late 1990s (Song and Sun 1997).

Sources of Opposition to the Work Teams

On May 25, 1966, seven party members from the philosophy department of Beijing University, headed by the secretary of the Department's Party General Branch, put up the famous "first wall poster" of the Cultural Revolution. The poster denounced Lu Ping, the university's president and party secretary, the university's vice-president, and a deputy director of the university department of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, for a liberal conspiracy against the Party. The accusation expressed long-standing factional antagonisms within the university's party organization. The authors represented a group of senior political instructors of Marxism-Leninism—most of them party members who joined in the 1940s—who were embittered by previous conflicts with the university's president. The antagonisms first erupted over the failed election of Lu Ping's appointee as Department Party Secretary in the early 1960s. This led to open hostility in the Socialist Education Movement of 1964, when these philosophy instructors, led by their new party secretary (Nie Yuanzi), denounced the president and his party organization to an investigation team sent to the university. After a long political battle that finally involved the Party Central Committee, in which these accusations were finally reversed, the careers of the philosophy department group were effectively ruined so long as Lu Ping remained in charge.⁴

Initially, the university leadership and the rest of the university community were unaware that the first wall poster was a setup. It was written at the behest of Kang Sheng, a high party official who was urging Mao to expand purges of traitors in the party leadership. Kang's wife, Cao Yi'ou, informed Nie Yuanzi that she should not consider the verdict of the Socialist Education Movement as final. Emboldened by assurances of high-level backing and encouraged that the verdicts of that campaign would be reversed, the group posted their accusations, essentially reissuing their challenge of two years before.⁵ Party members and activists in the university initially reacted in the manner one would predict from a network perspective—they criticized the dissidents for what they viewed as an unprincipled factional attack. However, when on June 2 the wall poster was printed with editorial praise in the nation's leading newspapers and other mass media (*People's Daily* 1966a), defensive actions by those loyal to the Beijing University party leadership collapsed immediately.⁶

An elite party work team, led by the Party Secretary of Hebei Province, Zhang Chengxian, who also was Vice-Secretary of the North China Bureau of the Central Committee Secretariat, arrived at Beijing University on June 1 to take over leadership of the school. The team immediately announced its intention to investigate the entire party organization in preparation for further purges. Only the philosophy

⁴Official sources available at the time referred to the earlier conflict during the Socialist Education Movement of 1964 (Nee 1969, 42–54), and fuller accounts have been published in recent years (Hao 1996; Munro 1980).

⁵The roles of Kang Sheng and Cao Yi'ou were not widely known until after the death of Mao (Hao 1996; Lin 1981).

⁶Activists from the school's youth league and party manhandled, denounced, and interrogated the dissidents, accusing them of antiparty activities (Nee 1969, 54–58; Sun 1966). Early imitators of the Beijing University wall poster at other schools reported similarly that they were "surrounded and attacked" (*weigong*) by party members and students close to the party leadership (Xiao and Turner 1998, 172–73; Beijing Aviation Institute Red Flag 1966b, 2–3).

department's party organization was exempted.⁷ On June 2 an official editorial condemned the three officials denounced in the May 25 wall poster as an "anti-party clique" (*People's Daily* 1966a) and the next day all three were publicly stripped of their posts. The mass media announced these dismissals and praised the rebels who had denounced them, inspiring similar attacks on university and high-school administrators by imitators throughout the city.⁸

These events had an immediate impact on schools throughout the city. As the newly appointed Beijing Party Secretary Li Xuefeng (1966b, 25) put it a few weeks later, "After June 1, the situation accelerated. As soon as the Beijing University wall poster appeared . . . it immediately affected all the schools and the leadership and activities of all work units. The broad masses and leaders stood face to face, exchanging fire." A typical reaction occurred at Beijing Aviation Institute, where the first attack against the Institute's Party Secretary appeared the same morning that *People's Daily* published the Beijing University wall poster. The party leadership reacted as if to an emergency and scrambled to head off its possible consequences: "[t]he Beijing University situation spread to our Institute; many classes stopped meeting and the situation became tense." A total of six urgent meetings of the party committee and of the entire party membership was held that day. At a mass meeting of the entire school, the party secretary argued that everyone should criticize the Beijing University party committee and that the school's leaders had no connection with the purged Municipal officials. Students, on the other hand, demanded that party members climb on stage to expose the errors of the Institute's own party committee. Wall posters attacking the party committee went up all afternoon and evening (Beijing Aviation Institute Red Flag 1966b, 3).

Events moved very quickly. Li Xuefeng (1966b) testified, "At that time the new Party Committee had just been established. We were holding party work conferences, reshuffling the leadership of various agencies, leading the mass movement at the grass roots, all at the same time. Day and night, giving speeches here, giving speeches there . . . there was an awful lot going on." At two separate meetings called by the New Municipal Party Committee on June 2 and 3, university Party secretaries were reassured that the movement would focus on academic authorities and scholars, "but this doesn't include us here" (People's University Red Guard Headquarters 1966, 44–45). Cadres were reassured that "the vast majority of party organizations at various levels are good"; "we've sent out a few work teams, but we can't send out too many, mainly we have to rely on the leadership of party committees" (Li Xuefeng 1966a, 22–23).

Within days, however, these assurances were overtaken by new events. Municipal officials were surprised at the extent to which students and teachers targeted their

⁷Students opposed to Nie Yuanzi would later detail the ways that her philosophy department Party Committee was exempted from the purge and cooperated actively with the work team, and later came to dominate the school's Cultural Revolution Committee (Beijing University Jingtangshan 1967).

⁸The dismissal of Lu Ping and the university party vice-secretary was announced in the *People's Daily* on June 4. The same issue announced a purge of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee and the dispatch of a work team to Beijing University. This team would assume authority over a party organization whose work would be suspended while its members were investigated and its leading group purged (*People's Daily* 1966b). The purge of the third official named in the May 25 wall poster was announced June 7 (Beijing shiwei 1987, 15). The texts of the official orders dismissing the trio are reprinted in National Defense University (1988, 39, 41). The decisions were made at a May 29 meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee—only four days after the wall poster appeared (Mu 1997a, 55–56).

Table 1. Beijing Colleges and High Schools, 1966

Type of School	Number of Schools	Number of Students
<i>Tertiary</i> (Universities, Colleges, and Institutes)	54	111,157
<i>Secondary</i>		
Academic High Schools	105	35,983
Specialized/Technical High Schools	43	22,366

Source: Beijing Statistical Bureau, 1990, 481, 488.

leaders for criticism, and at their confusion about how to respond: “[t]he masses had risen up, and the leadership of many units was paralyzed—what to do? We had no choice but to send in work teams” (Li Xuefeng 1966b, 25).⁹ At this point, and for several months to come, none of the participants—party officials, members of work teams, or students—could have understood the eventual scope of the campaign or the ultimate purpose of Mao. Yet large numbers of people were drawn into political stances that subsequently hardened into factional divisions.

This unprecedented wave of officially sanctioned attacks against school officials created a chaotic, rapidly changing political environment into which the work teams rushed headlong. The speed and scale of the effort to dispatch work teams to Beijing’s colleges and high schools contributed to the confusion. The nation’s capital had by far the largest concentration of tertiary institutions in the country. Virtually every one of the dozens of national ministries ran a college or institute devoted to the training of personnel for their branch of industry or government. More than 110,000 fulltime university-level students attended fifty-four institutions—more than twice the number of college students in any other Chinese city (*China Educational Yearbook* 1984, 976–1014). Local high-school students, only half as numerous as the college population, were spread across almost 150 separate schools (Table 1). In the space of less than a week, thousands of party officials were selected, briefed, and formed into more than four hundred work teams. They were sent to schools for an indefinite period, with missions that were poorly defined.¹⁰ The task was accomplished by bureaucratic division of labor: work teams for universities and institutes were organized by state council commissions, national ministries, or municipal bureaus that supervised them. The only exception was the most prestigious institutions, which were handled by the Central Party Secretariat itself. High schools were assigned to the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, which dispatched large work teams to each of the nine city districts, which in turn dispatched smaller work groups to high schools. A total of 8,750 people were reportedly pressed into service on these teams, fifteen hundred of whom were sent to high schools.¹¹ Several thousand were urgently recalled

⁹The Municipal Party Committee offices were besieged with appeals and letters of complaint lodged by various students and school officials. During June, they received an average of thirteen hundred such appeals per day, and received a total of 57,000 visitors, 4,600 on the busiest day alone (Guo [1966] 1967, 113).

¹⁰The Beijing Municipal Party Committee reported that more than 420 work teams were sent out—a number that included elementary schools in addition to high schools, colleges, research institutes, and cultural organizations (Guo [1966] 1967, 113).

¹¹These figures are based on a series of partial estimates drawn from contemporary sources. The Central Committee of the Communist Youth League was said to have sent fifteen hundred members to the high schools under its jurisdiction—a plausible estimate that puts the size of

from the Beijing suburbs, where they were still carrying out the rural socialist education campaign, and another thousand were transferred from Hebei Province (Li Xuefeng 1966b, 25). University work teams were led by ministry-level officials; high-school work teams, usually by officials from city district governments.

Social interpretations rest on the claim that work teams protected school party organizations from the more severe forms of denunciation. They are thought to have colluded with school officials to divert accusations onto relatively powerless bourgeois professors, to counterattack against students who denounced school officials, and to mobilize politically active students from elite red households to attack rebellious students (Lee 1978, 29–56; Vogel 1969, 326–27). If this in fact is what occurred, one can readily understand how students could identify work teams with the status quo. One could also readily understand how the actions of work teams would serve to divide students according to either their prior affiliations with school party organizations or to the status groups among students that the regime had long favored.

This is the first point at which doubts arise about social interpretations. The Beijing work teams did not behave in the ways posited. Most work teams did not arrive at their posts until the second week of June.¹² By the time they entered their schools, there was usually no prospect of preserving the existing party leadership. Almost all of them began by attempting to establish their authority, immediately replacing the school party leadership and proceeding with the investigation of the party committee and its branches.¹³ “The work teams went out, and at first they were welcomed enthusiastically by the masses, but some of them very quickly lost their trust, and many units wanted to chase them away” (Li Xuefeng 1966b, 25). Frictions with the more vocal and militant students were almost immediate, leading to surprisingly strong resistance.

At first glance this resistance is puzzling. If the work teams were sent by the party center to purge school leaders, and if they did this work thoroughly by investigating the entire party organization, the objectives of the militant students and the work teams would appear to be the same. Why, then, did work teams meet so quickly with such staunch resistance? Careful reading of the later accusations lodged by the opponents of the work teams, coupled with contemporary reports by party officials, provides a fairly compelling answer. The work teams were accused of “attacking the many to protect the few” and “attacking genuine revolutionary leftists”

high-school work teams at roughly a dozen members each. The same source claims that 7,239 members of work teams were sent out to “cultural and educational units” in Beijing (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 42). Fifteen work teams with a total membership of over six thousand were sent to the institutes under the ministries in the Industry and Transportation system of the Central Committee Secretariat (Qinghua Jinggangshan [1967] 1992, 2). More than one thousand work-team members were sent to institutes under the Ministry of Culture (Capital Red Guard Congress 1967a, 12). The Municipal Party Committee reported that more than 5,500 work-team members were dispatched to schools (Guo [1966] 1967, 113).

¹²The first work team was sent out on June 1 (Beijing University) and the last June 20 (Guo [1966] 1967, 113). Sources from individual schools indicate that most arrived between June 5 and June 12.

¹³The initial plan was reportedly that the work teams would only take over power in those schools where the school party leadership was paralyzed and unable to lead—but it turned out that this was the case in almost every school (Guo [1966] 1967, 114). The Beijing Aviation Institute was a partial exception. The work team, which arrived on June 8, waited four days before deciding that the Institute’s party secretary could not survive. He was dismissed from his post and the work team took over leadership of the school, proceeding to concentrate criticism against the school’s top party officials, and mobilizing middle- and lower-level cadres to expose their crimes (Beijing Aviation Institute Red Flag 1966a, 2–3; 1966b, 5–6).

(see e.g., Beijing Steel Institute Revolutionary Rebel Commune [1967] 1975; New People's University [1967] 1975). This rhetoric has led some analysts to conclude that the work teams sought to protect top school officials by diverting attacks onto vulnerable teachers and lower-ranking administrators. Something quite different occurred in Beijing, and herein lies the answer to the puzzle.

The factual claim behind the former accusation that many work teams “attacked the many to protect the few” was that too many party functionaries in the schools had been made to stand aside for investigation. A typical account is the accusation lodged against the work team at Qinghua University: “they didn’t mobilize the masses to point the spearhead of struggle onto the small group of capitalist roaders . . . all basic-, middle-, and higher-level cadres, more than five hundred in all, were temporarily removed from their posts and made to stand aside, making no distinctions at all.” This work team was said to have declared that, “Jiang Nanxiang [the recently deposed president and party secretary] was rotten, so from the party and youth league committee right down through the general branches and branches, the whole organization is rotten.” All cadres in the school, this account complained, were forced to undergo study sessions, and they were all forced to do labor reform—“even the revolutionary ones and those who wanted revolution” (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 46). This last phrase is revealing, and it appears repeatedly in similar post-hoc accusations about the work teams’ behavior.¹⁴ Even the revolutionary ones had to endure investigation—that is, the work teams would not immediately acknowledge the claims of leftist members of the school party apparatus.¹⁵

¹⁴See, for example, the account of the work team’s activities at People’s University, in which the work team was criticized for excessive zeal in investigating cadres, student leaders, party members, and Youth League leaders (New People’s University [1967] 1975; People’s University Triple Red [1967] 1975). There are similar accounts about the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (Red Flag Battle Brigade [1966] 1999; Red Guard News Editorial Group [1966] 1975), Beijing Geology Institute (Beijing Geology Institute East is Red [1967] 1975), Chinese Academy of Sciences (State Science and Technology Commission Revolutionary Rebels [1967] 1999), Beijing Education Institute (Education Institute East is Red Commune [1967] 1975), Beijing Normal University High School No. 1 (Shi Qi et al. [1967] 1975), and Beijing Iron and Steel Institute (Beijing Steel Institute Revolutionary Rebel Commune [1967] 1975; Beijing Steel Institute Yanan Commune [1967] 1975). In the example of the Iron and Steel Institute, the work team was blamed for the suicide of the Institute’s President, which reportedly occurred while he was in detention. Some work teams were not accused of excessive zeal, however. At Beijing Aviation Institute, the work team focused its attention on top party officials, as the students wanted. And the work team also encouraged lower-ranking party officials to denounce the top officials, something that student rebels had demanded before the work team arrived. Student opposition to the work team began when it refused to share power with more militant students, who demanded an independent student work team (Beijing Aviation Institute Red Flag 1966b, 4–7).

¹⁵In effect, this standard accusation against the work teams is that they were only pretending to carry out a radical purge. Of course, had work teams failed to conduct thorough purges, they would have been accused of actually protecting school party leaders. Accusations against the work teams changed drastically over time. Party sources in June and July indicate that the purges focused on party leaders (Guo [1966] 1967, 113). Internal reports circulated by the Municipal Party Committee in mid-July stated that 55 percent of first party secretaries and 40 percent of general branch party secretaries in the universities were labeled reactionary by the work teams (Beijing shiwei bangongting 1966). This was the fourth and worst category into which leading cadres were sorted; the numbers exclude those who were judged to be in the third category—“serious political errors” that required removal from their post. Consistent with this evidence, Red Guard accusations and official denunciations of the work teams’ errors in the summer and fall of 1966 focused on their alleged suppression of the student movement.

Other work teams became entangled in existing factional divisions that extended beyond the school. One such example was the protest lodged by Li Gui, a member of the standing committee of the Party Committee of the Beijing Geology Institute, a man described as “an old party member of working-class background.” On June 20, five days after the arrival of the work team, he and like-minded party cadres and teachers carried a letter of protest to the party center. While the contents of this letter of protest are still unknown, students learned from wall posters that the Institute’s First Party Secretary, a cadre with a prestigious revolutionary past, was known to have been at odds with the Minister of Geology. The posters charged that the work team was sent down to persecute Gao as part of a personal vendetta under the guise of the Cultural Revolution (Xiao and Turner 1998). The Li Gui group’s protest called for the work team’s withdrawal. The harsh punishment soon meted out to these cadres put them in the same camp with students attacked by the work team, even though many of the same students had themselves attacked the Institute Party Secretary with enthusiasm.¹⁶ Thus the Li Gui affair became a cause célèbre for the emerging student opposition to the work team—not because their original motives were the same, but because it illustrated the perfidy of the work team and its higher-level backers (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 42, 49–50; Beijing Geology Institute East is Red 1966, 5).

The second evident source of conflict was over the treatment of those officials and teachers who had already been made to stand aside for investigation. Militant subgroups among the students claimed the right to choose freely the targets of attack, to hold physically abusive struggle sessions against them, and even to hold interrogation sessions in makeshift prisons during which threats and physical torture were used to extract confessions.¹⁷ When work teams moved to assert leadership, this meant at minimum that they would control access to and treatment of the officials and faculty removed from office and placed under investigation. When students sought to display their revolutionary credentials by seizing these officials and subjecting them to rough mass justice, work teams routinely moved to block them.

In his June 16 wall poster, one of the first to challenge the work team at Qinghua University, the subsequently famous Red Guard leader Kuai Dafu complained that the work team prevented his group from subjecting “scholar tyrants” to public interrogation sessions. “Various departments organized dog-beating squads (*dogou*

These denunciations of the “bourgeois reactionary line” were revised radically in April 1967, when student opposition to the rehabilitation of selected party officials created new factional splits, and Maoist officials sought to portray attacks against too many officials as a bourgeois deviation. Thus was born the new slogan “attacking the many to protect the few.”

¹⁶One of the founders of the anti-work-team East is Red Faction recalled that his group was at first very happy about the arrival of the work team, because before its arrival the school’s party establishment and its student supporters had strongly resisted them. “After the work team’s arrival, we were the ones who were supported. I was a movement activist, and exposed the Institute’s party committee, precisely as the work team wished.” But after his group criticized the work team for attacking too many lower ranking cadres as well, their fate changed drastically. “Instantly I became someone who opposed the work team, and the work team put me on the list of people to be investigated. From a movement activist I was transformed into a reactionary student” (Xiao and Turner 1998, 172–73).

¹⁷From June 1–26, the Municipal Party Committee recorded 138 cases of leading party cadres being struggled, beaten, and paraded with dunce caps and placards at nine leading institutions of higher learning (Guo [1966] 1967, 114). An informant who led a work team to an elite high school reported that by the time they arrived, radical students of high cadre background had already imprisoned and beaten virtually all the school’s leaders, holding them in basement cells. They had already chased away the first work team, and the primary source of conflict with the second was over its effort to take control of the prisoners.

dui), looking everywhere for dogs to beat. But you said this was attacking on too broad a front. . . . Now we are just starting to rise up and curse the black gang, but our public address system and [the work team's] reports all say 'don't curse people,' struggle sessions and parading in the streets are not permitted; we can't even curse the black gang. We ask the work team: has the party center really passed a directive against cursing people?" (Qinghua Jinggangshan 1966, 2). At Beijing University, opposition to the work team coalesced after June 18, when students pulled approximately sixty school officials onto "demon beheading platforms" scattered across campus and proceeded to subject them to abusive struggle sessions. The work team rushed members to these sites in automobiles, persuaded students to stop, and escorted the targeted officials back to the dormitories where they were being held for reeducation. This episode—and the work team's report about the incident to the Central Committee, which labeled it counter-revolutionary—would later be cited as the primary example of the work teams' protection of the power-holders and their alleged suppression of the student movement.¹⁸

At Beijing Aviation Institute, students resented the fact that during the work team's struggle session against the Institute's party secretary he was treated too liberally: He "sat on the stage with a glass of green tea and a palm fan. He was completely unaffected by the speeches against him" (Beijing Aviation Institute Red Flag 1966b, 9). The physical protection of the accused became the second major source of conflict with work teams, and in due course student militants appear to have used such incidents as ways to demonstrate that their own leftism was superior to that of the work teams.

We have seen that work teams did not act to keep school leaders in office or to protect them from denunciation, but that work-team authority was nonetheless challenged by a minority resentful of their assumption of power. The ensuing struggles often focused on work-team efforts to ensure the physical safety of the accused. If these were the political circumstances within which students made political choices, we can see that the implications of prior identities for political action are far from clear. How would a student from an elite red household, or a loyal and active member of the party organization or youth league leadership, make sense of this situation and decide how to act? Should one side with school officials or with higher-ranking party work teams? Should one challenge the work team by claiming the right unilaterally to interrogate and to beat the accused, or should one accept the work teams' demand that such sessions be limited, orderly, and planned? Did the work teams really represent Chairman Mao as they claimed?

Tan Houlan, who would later emerge as a leading opponent of the work team at Beijing Normal University, and who would eventually become one of the most powerful leaders of the city's rebel faction, apparently could not find the correct answer to this puzzle without expert prompting from above. Like Nie Yuanzi of Beijing University, Tan had an inside line into the Maoist camp. Tan, a model secondary-school teacher who had been sent back to college by her local party organization, was an advanced student in the political education department (i.e., Marxism-Leninism). In January 1966 she had received a coveted posting as an intern to the Party theoretical

¹⁸The incident is described in the report submitted by the Beijing University Work Team to the Central Committee (National Defense University 1988, 49–50), in post-Cultural Revolution accounts (Yu 1979), and contemporary Red Guard publications (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 48). The victims of the struggle sessions reportedly had their hair pulled, were beaten and kicked, and "even the women" were "bullied and abused" (Guo [1966] 1967, 115).

journal, *Red Flag*, edited by leading Maoist radicals. During that period she became familiar with Lin Jie, who would soon emerge as one of the leading figures associated with the Central Cultural Revolution Group.

Tan returned from *Red Flag* on June 1 and, in imitation of the Beijing University group, put up a wall poster attacking the party. The party secretary was removed from his post on June 4, and the work team arrived on June 6. She apparently got along well with the work team, and when several students challenged the work team on June 20 in provocative wall posters, Tan actively defended the team and condemned the challengers as rightists. She was quickly summoned to the *Red Flag* offices for a consultation. When she returned on June 23, she reversed her position. She put up her own wall poster calling for a reassessment of the work team's conduct, putting herself at the head of the anti-work-team movement (Beijing Normal University Jिंगgangshan 1967, 3–5).

Once we reconstruct more accurately the political context within which students chose a course of action, it is evident that neither family heritage nor prior close ties with school authorities had clear implications for action. Students with close ties to now-discredited school leaders would have every reason to distance themselves from them, even to show their revolutionary zeal by attacking them, while students who had prior conflicts with those leaders would want to do the same. Similarly, students from favored red backgrounds would also seek to display the approved critical stance towards discredited school leaders. Whether to cooperate with or to challenge the work team was not a choice for which one's prior identities provided any clear guidance, for the issue was not the pre-Cultural Revolution status quo, it was the work team itself. And this is in fact what we observe about student political choice during these weeks: party members, youth league members, and students from red backgrounds split.

Social interpretations derive support from the fact that students from favored backgrounds were prominent supporters of work teams. However, at this point the most militant opponents of work teams were from these same categories. The founders of Beijing Geology Institute's East is Red included the son of the Secretary-General of the Central Committee's United Front Work Department (Xiao and Turner 1998, 10). In that institute, 80 percent of the students attacked for opposing the work team were from red households, and 89 percent were party or youth league members (Beijing Geology Institute East is Red 1966, 6). Early opponents of the notorious "conservative" student leader Tan Lifu at Beijing Industrial University were from the same red background as he was.¹⁹ Kuai Dafu of Qinghua University was the son of a rural party official and an activist in the Youth League (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 62–64). The leaders of the Red Flag faction of Beijing University High School, who had antagonized their school's leaders as well as the work team, were children of

¹⁹Tan Lifu's late father had been a top official in the State Procurator's office (similar to a state prosecutor). Tan gave a famous August 20 speech in defense of his school's departed work team that later became the cornerstone of a propaganda campaign designed to show that conservative students were motivated to protect the vested interests of their privileged families. The faction that opposed and denounced Tan was from the same red background at the time: "We are from worker, peasant, and revolutionary cadre families; we have incomparably deep feelings of affection for the Party and Chairman Mao" (Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966, 15). The student whose denunciation of Tan Lifu's father hastened Tan's downfall was from a family of high officials who had known Tan's father well (Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966, 25–27).

high civilian and military officials.²⁰ The students from Qinghua University High School who reputedly formed the first Red Guard organization and who had challenged their work team throughout the period were from the same kind of elite families.²¹ At this early point in the conflict those close to the Party led the challenge to the work teams as well as their defense.

The Creation of Political Cleavages

As the last week of June approached, work teams still were unable to consolidate their control over the campuses. In fact, most of them retreated when they saw the task facing them. Of the total of fifty-four work teams dispatched to tertiary institutions in the city, thirty-nine reportedly became so tangled in conflicts and intimidated by students that they had to be withdrawn and replaced (the sources say they were “driven away” [*bei gan*]) (Beijing shiwei 1987, 21; Li Xuefeng [1966c] 1992, 3). The week after June 16 was decisive. Resistance to work teams began to turn into attacks against the work teams. Anti-work-team students began to charge that the work teams were themselves trying to obstruct the Cultural Revolution. Officials who were coordinating work-team efforts were flooded with appeals from besieged work-team leaders and urged them to remain at the schools and to stand firm.

An example of the problems plaguing the work teams is contained in a report circulated to all industrial ministries that reached the attention of Vice-Premier and Politburo member Bo Yibo. On June 20, five days after the arrival of the work team at their school, students at Beijing Post and Telecommunication High School placed all ten of its members under detention. They organized struggle meetings during which work-team members, including the head (a vice-director of the Political Department of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication), were forced to read confessions. On June 21 the students called the Ministry to demand that they dispatch a ranking official to bring a formal letter of introduction to the school and officially withdraw the work team. An official went to the school that afternoon to negotiate, but when it became clear that the Ministry would not withdraw the work team, the negotiator was also imprisoned. The students sent out a second warning: “If the Minister does not come personally [the captives] will not be released, and you will bear responsibility for all consequences.” The Vice-Premier’s response was not immediately helpful: “This work team cannot be withdrawn lightly. Should stand firm. Students struggling work teams is mistaken. Seems these ‘leftists’ are fake, even have other problems. The work team should carry out its activities” (Bo [1966a] 1997).

²⁰An informant who was one of the three famous leaders of this organization provided detail that confirmed material in contemporary sources. One student’s father held the rank of vice-director in the Logistics Department of the Army and had joined the party in the 1930s. A second student’s father had also joined the party in the 1930s, had high military rank, and was an instructor in the Military Sciences Institute. The third had a father who was vice-head of the Chinese Red Cross, which at that time was equal in rank to the Ministry of Foreign Relations.

²¹The fathers of the top four leaders of this early Red Guard organization were all revolutionary cadres. One was a personal secretary to a Minister of Public Security and a member of the Northwest Bureau of the CCP Secretariat; another was a ranking official in the No. 7 Machine-Building Ministry (Qinghua University High School 1966).

This is just one example of a widespread effort by students across the city to drive work teams away from their campuses and to establish committees to carry out the Cultural Revolution on their own. Matters came to a head on June 23. Some “three hundred revolutionary teachers and students” from the Beijing Post and Telecommunication Institute invaded the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, forcing the first party secretary outside to hear their accusations against him and the work team (see Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 47–56). That same day, Beijing’s Party Secretary concluded a report to a municipal party work conference with an expression of concern about “the increasing spread of such destructive activities as beating people and humiliating revolutionary cadres and party members” (Li Xuefeng 1966b, 28).

The CCP Secretariat ordered a counteroffensive. Top national officials went to the universities to make speeches in support of the work teams and to debate troublesome students on the spot (e.g., Bo [1966b] 1997, [1966c] 1997). School officials who criticized the work teams (such as Li Gui of the Geology Institute) were labeled anti-party and designated as targets of the movement. Students who persisted in accusations against work-team leaders were treated in the same fashion. And work teams would pursue the investigations and purges of school leaders with greater militancy and mobilize more students into the process. The counterattack gained force during the last week of June and continued through the first week of July, at which point it began to abate as opposition from Maoist officials became apparent at the highest levels (see Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 56–62; Kang 1966).

This short-lived counterattack never fully achieved its objectives. In the judgment of the Municipal Party Committee, the work teams were fully in control in only nine universities or institutes (such as Beijing University), ones where opposition had not been particularly strong in the first place. At twenty-one institutions (such as Qinghua), work teams had been able to curb beatings and struggle sessions and had contained strong student opposition, while in the other institutions things were still completely out of control (Guo [1966] 1967, 114). However, the counterattack had the unintended effect of solidifying new political identities among students. In schools where the counterattack had been strong, work teams asserted that any attack against them was an attack on the Party Center and Chairman Mao. Students who persisted in their opposition were subjected to struggle sessions (of the type reserved for class enemies) and physical confinement; in some cases they were labeled rightist or anti-party. Accusations and supporting testimony were compiled about these anti-party students and placed in files.

These counterattacks varied in intensity across universities and high schools, but they created large numbers of victims. Later accounts would claim that just over ten thousand students were labeled rightist and just over 2,500, counter-revolutionary—a figure equivalent to 11 percent of the student population of Beijing.²² Whatever the true scope of the counterattack, a significant number of student activists found themselves saddled with labels that could have disastrous personal consequences, in much the same way that rightists had suffered in 1957. In fact, at this point in time the sequence of events appeared to replicate that year’s Hundred Flowers and

²²The figures were partial counts based on twenty-four institutions of higher education, according to a contemporary Red Guard source (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 57). Comparable figures are reported for the Beijing Forestry Institute, an institution with fourteen hundred students and staff, where 197 were reportedly given the anti-party label (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 71).

subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign (see MacFarquhar 1960, 1974, 218–49, 261–92).

These labels represented a stunning reversal. Work teams asserted their claim to represent Mao and the party center with apparent higher backing. Attacks against the work teams were now considered attacks against Mao and were efforts to obstruct the Cultural Revolution. If, the reasoning continued, these attacks obstructed the Cultural Revolution, their goal must be to protect bourgeois revisionists within the schools. Therefore, the argument followed, anti-work-team students were taking the side of the former exploiting classes in an effort to shield bourgeois elements in the university administration, using the cover of leftism to block the campaign. The opponents of the work teams therefore found themselves saddled with the same political labels they had so recently fashioned for school authorities. Students who saw themselves as the most militant persecutors of revisionists now found themselves accused of a conspiracy to protect them.

The work-team counteroffensive inadvertently reshaped identities and interests among other student activists as well. As they attacked their opponents and mobilized support from student activists, work teams mobilized other students into committees and mass meetings to denounce revisionist school officials *and* their alleged protectors, students newly targeted for opposing the work team. The most active of these student activists would assume leading positions in Cultural Revolution preparatory committees, embryonic new leadership structures for the schools. The issues that had initially created opposition to work teams and that had split the party organization, its network of activist students, and students from red households, were now replaced by newer ones of much greater immediate relevance. The new cleavages that emerged in early June deepened into political identities that students had strong interests in defending. A loss in this contest, as students well knew, could lead to a ruined career and a lifelong political stigma. These new identities were not systematically related to one's position in the social or political status quo ante. They were created by the unanticipated consequences of political interactions during the confusion of June and July.

Factions Emerge: August 1966

Barely three weeks after the work teams' assertion of authority, the party center reversed itself. By mid-July it became clear that work teams did not have the backing of Chairman Mao. The attacks against students were curtailed, and Maoist officials from the Central Cultural Revolution Group began to visit schools to express support for the victims of the work teams. Some of the work-team leaders were ordered to mollify student opposition by making public self-criticisms. Chairman Mao returned to the capital on July 18 after a prolonged stay in Hangzhou and immediately criticized events in the schools. After a series of meetings held over the next week, he declared that the work teams had obstructed the movement and should be withdrawn, that party leadership of the movement was not necessary for the present, and that the counteroffensive against opponents of the work team was incorrect. On July 25 work teams received orders to depart from the schools within seven to ten days. They were instructed to set up preparatory committees comprised of activist students and to leave behind liaison personnel to oversee and to advise the students (see Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 66–71; Beijing shiwei 1987, 20–21; Mu 1997a). The

decision to withdraw the work teams was announced July 28. Their political errors were explained at a mass meeting of student activists—both supporters and opponents of the work teams—in the Great Hall of the People (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 75; Beijing shiwei 1987, 20–21).

National leaders withdrew immediately into a plenary session from August 1 to 12 to reconsider the direction of the Cultural Revolution, to allocate blame for the work teams' errors, and to issue new directives. During this period two student factions formed in universities: one led by students that had opposed their work team and had been victimized by it, and another that had cooperated with it. By the time party leaders emerged from their meetings with a new document that ambiguously declared support for "the revolutionary student movement," two factions were already engaged in a struggle for power within colleges. And while the new document seemed to vindicate students who opposed the work teams, it did not condemn the students who had cooperated with them. Instead, all schools were to hold elections for Cultural Revolution Committees that would take over leadership of the movement (Central Committee [1966a] 1968). In the face of official ambiguity, political cleavages created by the events of June and July would deepen. But this occurred only in the universities, for reasons that I shall now explain.

The Triumph of the High-School Red Guards

The high-school Red Guards who had opposed the work teams emerged in August with a clear victory, unlike their counterparts in the universities, who would soon be called the minority faction. The political outcome in high schools differed from that in the colleges in several crucial respects. The first was the low rank of the officials who comprised the high-school work teams. Except for the handful of schools attached to the major universities, high schools were situated in a relatively low position in the bureaucratic hierarchy and were under the supervision of the district offices of the municipal government. Responsibility for organizing their work teams was assigned to the Central Committee of the All-China Youth League. Top officials from the Central Committee of the Youth League oversaw entire city districts, but the work teams sent to most high schools were comprised of relatively low-ranking cadres from district government offices. There was little reason to fear the consequences of political labels meted out by these lowly officials, especially because the top leaders of the national Youth League headquarters were quickly removed from their posts and denounced for the work teams' errors.²³

A second reason why high-school rebels could feel secure was that Mao praised them publicly on several occasions. As early as June 18, wall posters written by student rebels at elite high schools were reprinted with praise (Beijing No. 1 Girl's High School 1966; Beijing No. 4 Middle School 1966). On August 1 Mao wrote an open letter in support of the Red Guards of Qinghua University High School (Mao [1966] 1988); while it was not published until a year later it was widely circulated to Red Guard groups at the time. When the first mass rally of Red Guards was held at Tiananmen Square on August 18, several hundred Red Guard activists were reportedly

²³At a mass meeting of Central Party leaders and "representatives of revolutionary teachers and students" on August 15, the purge of the three top leaders of Central Committee of the Communist Youth League was announced. They were criticized for sending out work teams that "incited students to struggle against students" and "suppressed" and "cruelly oppressed" the students (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 91).

invited onto the reviewing stand to meet with Chairman Mao personally. Red Guards from Qinghua University High School, Beijing No. 4 Middle School, Beijing Aviation Institute High School, and Beijing University High School, among others, were greeted by Mao. At this rally Mao himself wore a Red Guard armband and was quoted as declaring himself a member (*People's Daily* 1966c). The lavish publicity for these high-school leaders continued throughout August, as their wall posters were repeatedly publicized with editorial praise in both national and local newspapers (e.g., Qinghua University High-School Red Guards 1966; Beijing University High-School Red Flag 1966).

There had indeed been students in high schools who had cooperated with the work teams, or who at least had not actively opposed the teams. These students, too, came from solidly red backgrounds, and they too were often children of high officials. With the more rebellious factions evidently earning Mao's personal approval, and the work teams now blamed for dividing the students, no opposing faction would form at this point in time. Active students who had not challenged the work teams or who had cooperated with them lapsed into political inactivity, migrated into the swelling ranks of the now-celebrated rebels, or formed new groups that imitated rebel rhetoric and activities and made contrived claims about earlier opposition to work teams.

The Ambiguous Political Settlement in Universities

Anti-work-team students in universities were in a fundamentally different position. These work teams were led by high national officials: twenty-four of them held the rank of vice-minister or above (Guo [1966] 1967, 113). In early August, national Youth League and Municipal Party Committee officials were blamed for the work teams' behavior in high schools, and top officials in both hierarchies lost their posts. Yet the entire echelon of national-level officials who had either served on the university work teams or who had intervened to help them were still in power.²⁴ Moreover, many work-team heads returned to their posts in the ministries, and some were put in charge of new Cultural Revolution Committees established within the municipal government and national ministries to monitor and observe the continuing movement in the colleges.²⁵ When they withdrew, they took their files with them, including incriminating testimony gathered against students branded as anti-party.

More ominous still, when work teams withdrew from colleges, the preparatory committees they left behind were dominated by the more cooperative Red Guards. These students were to prepare for elections of new bodies to orchestrate the continuing investigations of school leaders. Even in situations where representatives of the other faction were included on these committees, they were weakened by the small size of their membership. In short, while the high-school Red Guards who had opposed the work teams in June and July were triumphant in August, their counterparts in the universities had reason to wonder whether their victory over the work teams would prove illusory, and entail heavy personal costs.

²⁴There were notable exceptions: for example, the unfortunate head of the Beijing University work team, who was purged after reportedly being beaten publicly by Red Guards at a denunciation rally at the university on July 26. In this case Nie Yuanzi immediately took control of the university's Cultural Revolution Committee.

²⁵For example, the head of Beijing Industrial University's work team became a vice-chairman of the new Beijing Municipal Party Committee's Cultural Revolution Office (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 90; Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966).

August therefore began with deep-seated factional divisions in the universities.²⁶ The earliest recorded instance of confrontation between two organized factions was on August 2, at the Beijing Construction Institute. A minority group of more than two hundred work-team opponents organized an August 1 Combat Corps, while a majority group that claimed eleven hundred members organized a Revolutionary Brigade (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 79–80). Similar events occurred at colleges and institutes throughout the city. A majority faction composed of student activists who had not clashed with the work team and who supported the preparatory committee faced off against a minority faction formed by those who had clashed with the work team and suffered as a result.²⁷ Because the forthcoming elections were to be democratic, the minority faction faced the prospect that despite their heroic fight against the work team, they would be denied leadership over the Cultural Revolution in their schools.

The student minority refused to accept this settlement. They argued that it was oppression by the work team that put them in the minority, when in fact it was they alone who had adopted the correct political stance in the earlier stage. They obstructed planning for elections that they saw as inherently unfair and argued that the work-team issue was not dead (see Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 89; Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966). They demanded that members of work teams be seized and taken back to the school for struggle sessions. They implied, at first, that the leaders of the student majority in fact had cooperated with the work teams and were therefore unqualified to lead preparatory committees. In the course of debates they began to charge that the majority was simply continuing the work teams' mistaken line. By early September they were accusing the majority of colluding with work teams as part of a conspiracy to oppose Mao and the Cultural Revolution (e.g., Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966; Qinghua Jinggangshan 1966).

The majority firmly resisted these claims. They refused to accept the charge that they had all along been part of a conspiracy to oppose the Cultural Revolution and to protect the power holders of their schools. They initially had the support of the overwhelming majority of students, and the clear support of the officials in charge of the Cultural Revolution within the ministries, none of whom had been punished for political errors. As the minority accused them of conspiring with revisionists in the ministries to oppress the true revolutionary left, the majority faction charged that the minority were in fact attempting to obstruct the Cultural Revolution by diverting attention back to the work teams. They began to insinuate that the minority was seeking to protect bourgeois revisionists within the university—a charge that echoed the earlier accusations laid against these same students by the work teams (see Beijing

²⁶At a July 26 mass meeting at Beijing University attended by several top Maoist officials, "more than twenty" students stood up to defend the work team against the more extreme accusations made against them. On the next day, a wall poster at the Geology Institute accused that work team of "severe right-wing opportunist errors of line," and "more than 750" wall posters appeared to dispute that judgment (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 72–73).

²⁷On August 8 the minority faction at Qinghua University formed the August 8 faction to protest the preparatory committee's decision to carry out denunciation meetings against leaders within the school. They swore to continue to "criticize and debate the work team line to the very end" and "thoroughly cleanse its lingering poison" and to "thoroughly reverse verdicts on the spirit of revolutionary rebellion." In response, on the next day the supporters of the preparatory committee formed the August 9 faction to support the committee's plans and to oppose the August 8 group (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 82–83).

Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966). The minority complained that “students and teachers attacked by the work teams were not yet liberated” and that they were considered by school Cultural Revolution Committees to be hooligans (*liumang*) and punks (*pizi*) (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 88–89). Amidst escalating campus confrontation, minority factions began to stage marches to the ministry offices from which their work teams had been sent; they engaged in sit-ins and hunger strikes, invaded buildings, and demanded the surrender of the leaders of work teams for denunciation and self-criticism.²⁸

Factions Realigned: September–October 1966

The next stage of the Red Guard movement brought a striking shift in factional alignments, further illustrating the ways in which identities and political orientations are altered by events. During this period, the elite high-school Red Guards who had spearheaded the opposition to work teams became the primary factional opponents of their college counterparts in the minority faction. How these two groups, from initially similar social and political backgrounds and with identical political orientations in July, came to occupy opposite sides in the emerging factional struggle is a further violation of the premises of social interpretations.

The Emergence of the Red Guard “Picket Corps”

The high-school Red Guards who attained political stardom in mid-August saw themselves as the vanguard of the rapidly growing movement. After the nationwide publicity and praise that accompanied the August rallies, Red Guard organizations multiplied in number and grew rapidly in size. With the restraining force of the work teams removed, students became more indiscriminate in their selection of victims, and more violent in their treatment of them (Wang 2001). Moreover, encouraged by inflammatory speeches at the August 18 rally by Lin Biao and others, the Red Guard movement spilled outside of the campuses for the first time. Temples and museums were desecrated, books and paintings burned, homes invaded and ransacked and their occupants beaten and sometimes killed. During the months of August and September, according to later official tallies, 33,695 homes were invaded and searched by Red Guards, and 1,772 people were beaten to death by students in struggle sessions or interrogation cells (Beijing shiwei 1987, 26).

²⁸Beijing Aviation Institute students went to the Central Party Offices on August 10 to demand the return of the work team head for criticism. He returned to give a brief self-criticism on August 14, during which fights broke out between the two factions (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 89). The head of the Geology Institute work team made a self-criticism at the school on August 12. During the speech a fight broke out between the bodyguards of the school’s preparatory committee and members of the minority faction, the East is Red corps, who had tried to rush the stage and denounce the self-criticism as inadequate. The incident deepened factional conflict in the school in the ensuing days (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 86–87). The East is Red faction renewed its demand for a more thorough confession with a sit-down hunger strike at the offices of the Ministry of Geology on August 23. The former work-team head was taken back to the school for self-criticism the next day (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 98–99).

Some of the first high-school Red Guards, including early rebels who had antagonized the work teams, were critical of these developments. Unfocused violence, theft, and attacks on state property were not part of their conception of the Cultural Revolution. In their view, the massive growth in the scale of the Red Guard movement led to a huge drop in political sophistication and permitted large numbers to use the movement to pursue other ends. Such a large and undisciplined movement, they reasoned, could provide cover for class enemies who sought revenge against the Party and socialism. What the movement needed was leadership and discipline, something they felt uniquely qualified to provide. With impeccable credentials as students from revolutionary households, and anointed by Mao himself as the student vanguard, they took action to reign in the growing excesses and anarchy of the movement.

On August 25, one week after the first mass rally in Tiananmen Square, Red Guards from thirty-one high schools in the city's Western District formed the Western District Branch of the Capital Red Guard Picket Corps.²⁹ Similar organizations were formed in the days to come in the Eastern and Haidian districts, the other two that contained the greatest concentration of colleges and high schools. In a series of proclamations, the picket corps called for "observing rules of discipline" in the Red Guard movement: "It is strictly forbidden to beat people and inflict physical punishment; it is strictly forbidden to humiliate people." These students asserted that Red Guards should protect important state organs and enterprises and preserve state secrets. Rebellion by Red Guards was to be facilitated, but counter-revolutionary activities were to be suppressed in cooperation with the bureau of public security. "Fake Red Guards and hooligans" who violate these rules were to be detained. Red Guards should not search homes of old revolutionary leaders without reason, nor should Red Guards cart away household furnishings from such locations. In the absence of clear prior directives from the party center, ranking officials were not to be attacked, detained, or beaten. Investigations of suspected traitors should not rely on oral confessions extracted through physical coercion; documentary evidence must be emphasized (Capital Red Guard Picket Corps 1966).

In their efforts to enforce these regulations, constituent groups from this alliance rushed to the scene of Red Guard attacks on government offices or the homes of old revolutionary leaders to enforce what they considered to be proper discipline. The picket corps was formed at precisely the time that college minority factions were beginning to attack the ministries that harbored former members of work teams. The different orientations that these two groups adopted in August therefore put them on a collision course that would lead the college and high-school opponents of the work teams to an irrevocable split.

A typical example occurred in a series of confrontations at the Ministry of Geology. On September 5, an organization that spoke for the school's minority marched to the ministry, broke into the building, and demanded the surrender of the former work-team head. When they seized him, he was reportedly so upset that he yelled, "If I die, you'll be held responsible!" Failing to achieve their aims, the protesters staged a sit-in and hunger strike. Two days later, students from the Western District Branch of the Capital Picket Corps arrived: they surrounded the college students, dragged them away by the hair, tore at their clothing, punched them, and whipped

²⁹The organization received material and logistical support from the State Council office under Zhou Enlai. Zhou Rongxin, Secretary-General of the State Council, was apparently in charge of the liaison work, a task in which one of Zhou Enlai's secretaries was also directly involved (see State Council 1967a; 1967b, 39–46).

them with belts. They seized eight student leaders and reportedly held them for twenty hours, beating them severely. The factions associated with the Picket Corps circulated accounts that accused the Geology Institute rebels of instigating a violent counterrevolutionary attack against the ministry. On September 13, another delegation from the Geology Institute's minority faction went to the ministry to continue to press for their demands (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 102–4).

Out of such confrontations factional alignments were redrawn. The high-school and college militants of July and early August parted ways. As the antagonism between the Red Guard Picket Corps and the college minority grew, the former forged an alliance with the college majority, who were making similar accusations of anti-party motives against the minority faction on their campuses (see Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune 1966; Qinghua Jinggangshan 1966). In other words, the college minority's efforts to vindicate the positions they had taken during the work-team period put them on a path that made enemies of high-school Red Guards who enjoyed high prestige and influence for taking exactly the same position in June and July.

Unfortunately for the Red Guard Pickets, the college minority now served the political purposes of Maoist officials who sought to escalate purges of national officials. The high-school militants who were so useful in antagonizing work teams were now standing in their path. Mindful of the emerging realignment of student factions, members of the CCRG who were pushing for widening purges of the top leadership threw their public support to the growing minority faction. On September 5, a large collection of college groups representing the majority pulled out of the official Cultural Revolution Congress to form their own Capital College Red Guard Headquarters, or the Second Headquarters. The next day, the minority factions of sixteen colleges formed a competing Third Headquarters. During the next week, several CCRG leaders declared their support of the minority faction, and new high-school Red Guards were formed to oppose the original Red Guards who were virtually all aligned with the Picket Corps. On September 26, Zhou Enlai conveyed Mao's personal greetings to a mass meeting of the Third Headquarters. He also sent a message of personal vindication to the college minority—all materials collected against college militants by the work teams would be removed from the files and destroyed (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 109–11).

CCRG support for the Third Headquarters became unmistakable on October 6, when a delegation of its members made speeches at one of their rallies and expressed “wholehearted support” for the minority faction.³⁰ Two days later, when the Second Headquarters held a similar mass meeting, no leaders attended, and factional opponents disrupted the proceedings. The group would soon split and collapse. Now sure of top-level support, the minority Third Headquarters staged raids on the offices

³⁰Transcripts are widely available for speeches given to this mass meeting by six top officials, including Zhou Enlai, Jiang Qing, and Kang Sheng. In his speech, Zhang Chunqiao read a directive that ordered the complete rehabilitation of all of those who were attacked and labeled by work teams or school Cultural Revolution Committees (see Central Leaders' Speeches 1997b, 169–74). Zhou Enlai took the lead in expressing the party center's support for the minority faction, perhaps because several members of the CCRG were reportedly trying to target him for denunciation (Mu 1997b, 157–70). He was vulnerable at this point because his State Council Office had actively supported the Red Guard Pickets Corps from their inception. Zhou Rongxin eventually took the fall for this in December 1966; criticism materials would later feign outrage that he had the temerity to say that everything he had done was on the orders of Zhou Enlai (State Council 1967a, 1).

of their majority opponents throughout the city, seizing public address systems and effectively taking over leadership of the schools (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 116–19). The defense of government ministries mounted by the Red Guard Pickets was overwhelmed, and ministry officials were soon at the mercy of their antagonists. On October 8, the minority East is Red faction from the Geology Institute occupied the Ministry of Geology and finally won official vindication (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 117). They were given office space inside the ministry and access to the files compiled by the work team. Vice Premier Li Fuchun declared them officially to be revolutionary and he ordered the heads of the Geology Institute work team to take part in future struggle sessions at the school (Li Fuchun [1966] 1997; Zhou [1966] 1997). Student militants throughout the city now searched the files of ministries for incriminating documents against officials who had carried out the “bourgeois reactionary line” and to ensure that the files were purged of incriminating materials compiled against them by the work teams.³¹

The Last Stand of High-School Student Opposition to the Central Cultural Revolution Group

By mid-October, the college minority had become an overwhelming majority, as students defected from factions that now clearly lacked CCRG support. The erstwhile college minority, now joined in victory by new high-school Red Guard groups that declared their opposition to the Picket Corps, now referred to themselves as the rebel faction (*zaofan pai*); their opponents were villified as conservatives (*baoshou pai*). These new designations are important, because they represent the political orientations presumably explained in earlier accounts by variations in preexisting social identities. However, the way in which these factions emerged makes clear that the political processes implied by social interpretations were not the ones that actually led to the formation of factions, and the membership of factions did not vary in the predicted ways as factions first formed.

Remnants of the original Red Guards, mainly from the Haidian district, including some of the same students praised by Mao at his mass rallies, decided to make a last stand. Now numbering fewer than two hundred, they made a final counterattack against members of the CCRG who had used them to gain political advantage in July and August and who had discarded them so quickly in September and October. Continuing to pledge their complete loyalty to Chairman Mao, they formed a loose-knit and largely informal alliance known as United Action (Liandong) and devoted themselves to criticism of and opposition to the CCRG.

Their strategy reflected an acute sense of Cultural Revolution rhetoric. Work teams and the officials who sent them had been purged for “obstructing the student movement.” United Action now pointed out that the CCRG was doing the same thing. The public security bureau had been forbidden from arresting Red Guards from the beginning. United Action pointed out that they were now being arrested. In leaning so heavily toward one student faction, the CCRG was “dividing the student movement” and “suppressing the student movement”—the same charge earlier lodged against the work teams and the leaders who sent them. United Action found allies

³¹The attacks on ministry archives would not subside until after a November 16 Central Committee directive that all materials collected on students during the prior months be removed and burned in public (National Defense University 1988, 162–63; Central Committee [1966b] 1968).

among college students from a variety of social backgrounds who wrote wall posters that directly questioned the motives and conduct of Vice-Chairman Lin Biao and several CCRG members (see Song and Sun 1997, 231–40; Qinghua University 1966, 8–25; Beijing University 1967, 9–23). United Action even raided public security bureau offices to rescue their arrested comrades (Beijing Geology Institute 1967, 143–48; Shanghai Red Guard Headquarters 1967, 11–14; Capital Red Guard Congress [1967c] 1980).

The reaction was swift and severe. At the end of December remaining members of United Action were arrested along with college students who posted criticisms of the CCRG. There followed a nationwide campaign to discredit United Action and its allies and to warn all rebel groups that the right to criticize stopped short of the members of the CCRG. The social base of United Action and the earlier Picket Corps was said to be the corrupt privileged stratum of reactionaries within the party; these students were denounced for trying to protect their parents and the special privileges they enjoyed. They were claimed to lead aristocratic lifestyles, to hold the proletariat and peasantry in disdain, and to use violence and torture in their reactionary efforts to defend their privilege. Indeed, they were blamed for virtually all violence committed by the early Red Guard movement (see Capital Red Guard Congress [1967c] 1980; Shanghai Red Guard Headquarters 1967). This polemic was repeated endlessly in Beijing and in the provinces.³² It contains the basic elements of subsequent social interpretations of Red Guard politics.

Conclusions

To understand fully how this political account of the origins of Red Guard factionalism differs from social interpretations, we should consider the contrasting answers that each provides to a simple yet neglected question: why did Beijing Red Guard factions exhibit differences in family background beginning in September 1966—through what process did this difference emerge? This question has never been posed because the answer is thought to be obvious. If there were such differences, and if Red Guards talked about the issue of family origin, then factional divisions must have originated when individuals of different backgrounds evaluated the unfolding movement and made political choices based on identities defined by the pre-Cultural Revolution status quo. In other words, Red Guard factions exhibited social differences because these social differences defined the motives of participants as factions formed.

The political interpretation of this article offers a different answer. Factions emerged due to political choices made by students within schools during the first two months of the Cultural Revolution. These choices were made under rapidly changing and ambiguous circumstances where one's position in the status quo ante had no clear implications for political action. The work teams in Beijing did not act to protect school officials from attack, and therefore students could not interpret their actions as either in support of or in opposition to a status quo. Status groups among students and school political hierarchies split, with students of red households and strong ties to the party prominent on both sides of the struggle over work-team authority. A

³²See, for example, the account penned by the former Guangzhou Red Guard Liu Guokai ([1980] 1987, 25–41), who accepts this version of events uncritically and passionately. Tan Lifu (1978) offers a strikingly different retrospective interpretation.

correlation between factional affiliation and student backgrounds did not appear until mid-to-late September. Before that point existing factions had very similar compositions, and politically active students from red households dominated both factions. As it became clear that only one faction had the backing of the Maoist leadership, new entrants joined that faction, while the other shrank and declined. Therefore the correlation between student background and factional affiliation is spurious, in a causal sense. In fact, if we take the sequence and timing of events seriously, it appears instead that the apparent social differences between factions were the consequence, not the cause, of Red Guard politics.

This article has focused primarily on evidence about the earliest period of the Cultural Revolution—in particular the work teams—in an effort to shed new light on the political circumstances in which student factions first emerged. The main thrust of the analysis pertains to the nature of the conflict in which work teams and students became embroiled. This conflict was about work-team authority, not about alleged efforts by work teams to preserve the school status quo—an allegation refuted by the evidence now available. I have tried to show that participation in this conflict changed student political identities and redefined their interests for the subsequent stage of the Cultural Revolution, and that factions first grew directly out of varying experiences during this early period.

There are other important aspects to the reconsideration of social interpretations that we have yet to explore. The interventions of central party officials were crucial to the evolution of factional alliances after late August, and our highly compressed treatment of this period does not begin to explore their full implications. Even more important is the need to reexamine Red Guard debates about the question of family origin—surely a central issue in any reconsideration of social interpretations. Such an examination would proceed by placing Red Guard statements on the subject in the specific political contexts in which they emerged and would examine how the arguments changed through time. The question to be answered is whether these statements expressed opposed interests of different constituencies, or whether they were doctrinal disputes about the correct method of expressing party doctrine—a dispute only tangentially related to the political substance of school-level power struggles.

It is implicit in this argument that different political circumstances in Beijing might have led to a closer connection between social position and political orientation. There was nothing foreordained about the behavior of work teams in Beijing. If the work teams had acted to protect school leaders by suppressing criticism, or if no work teams had entered the schools and school authorities had been left in place for several months, structural positions of students would have been more likely to predict their political orientation. Events in the universities before the work teams arrived (when party members and youth league activists rallied around the party leadership and attacked the authors of the first wall posters) suggest that this may have been the likely outcome—if work teams had not disrupted this predictable pattern. It is possible that in the provinces, work teams dispatched by local party leaders did act to protect school party organizations, thereby leading to a different process of factional formation.³³ Studies of the emergence of worker factionalism, which emerged in

³³However, Wang Shaoguang's brief account of "tangled fighting" in Wuhan schools is similar to the interpretation offered in this article (1995, 59–68). Pepper (1997, 375–77) argues that the emphasis on family origins was distinctive to Guangzhou. She suggests that these social divisions did not become prominent until well into 1967, when regional army commanders charged with restoring order showed an open bias toward party members, youth league leaders, and students with red family credentials.

institutions where independent political action was strongly discouraged until after October, suggest that factions there did initially emerge along fault lines established by the party organization (Perry and Li 1997; Walder 1996).

Social position can be a guide to political action only to the extent that there is continuity and coherence in the circumstances under which people conceive the consequences of their actions. The entire leadership of Beijing high schools and colleges was removed at a single stroke in June 1966, along with much of the Beijing municipal leadership. Students who were critical of their school leaders and who saw themselves as loyal to the party and Chairman Mao fell into a pattern of conflict or cooperation with the work teams before it was clear whether these officials spoke for Chairman Mao. Eventually it became clear that they did not, but by this point in time the student political elite had split over the work teams, and their withdrawal only exacerbated the nascent factional divide. What mattered in the ensuing Red Guard movement was not parentage or prior ties with the party, but what you had done in June and July, and whether your faction won reliable backing from above. Factions formed as a result of political processes than can only be understood by tracing the sequence of events through time. Tracing these events shows us how political experience may recast the identities and motives that social interpretations impute to people according to their initial social positions. Red Guards were not fighting over the status quo. They were fighting not to lose.

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