

Ambiguity and Choice in Political Movements: The Origins of Beijing Red Guard Factionalism¹

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Theories about political movements typically posit models of actor choice that contain untested static assumptions about context. Short-run changes in these contexts—induced by rapid shifts in the properties of political institutions—can alter choices and actors' interests, rapidly transforming the political landscape. China's Red Guard Movement of 1966–68 is a case in point. A generation of scholarship has attributed its violent factionalism to the opposed interests of different status groups. New evidence about the origins of the movement in Beijing's universities indicates that to the contrary, factions emerged when activists in similar structural positions made opposed choices in ambiguous contexts. Activists subsequently mobilized to defend earlier choices, binding them to antagonistic factions. Rapid shifts in the contexts for political choice can alter prior connections between social position and interests, generating new motives and novel identities. Close attention to these contextual mechanisms can yield novel accounts of the nature and origins of political movements.

The most puzzling feature of the mass movements that swept across China from 1966 to 1968 was their intense factionalism. In virtually every locality, student and worker activists divided into two or more factions that fought for control of schools, workplaces, and local governments. All factions pledged loyalty to Mao and the Chinese Communist Party; all portrayed their fight as a defense of the revolution and as an attack on leaders who had betrayed the cause. In the nation's capital, Red Guards

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were divided into two factions from the very inception of the movement to its forcible suppression two years later. When they first emerged in Beijing in August 1966, they were already divided into “majority” and “minority” factions. This evolved into a conflict between two citywide Red Guard “headquarters” that continued until one was defeated and disbanded four months later (Walder 2002). As the victors moved to seize power in their universities in February 1967, they split once again into two antagonistic factions, which fought with increasingly violent intensity until the army intervened in July 1968, disbanding student organizations and detaining their leaders for re-education.

The most widely accepted explanation for these divisions classifies factions as “conservative” or “radical” based on their orientation toward the sociopolitical status quo. “Conservative” factions, in this view, mobilized to limit attacks on local power structures and blunt challenges to the existing distribution of power and privilege. This orientation would appeal most strongly to people with ties to the political establishment, permanent skilled and white-collar workers in larger and more prestigious organizations, party members, youth league leaders and activists, and students from the “revolutionary” and “proletarian” families favored by the regime.² “Radical” factions, in contrast, reputedly drew members from groups less favored in the country’s social hierarchies: non-party members, workers with marginal jobs in smaller organizations, temporary workers, and students from white-collar families that were neither “revolutionary” nor “proletarian.” In short, factional conflict was rooted in the social inequalities of postrevolution China, pitting those with vested interests in the status quo against those who sought to change it (Lee 1975, 1978; Walder 1978).

This logically appealing explanation has been widely incorporated into standard histories of the Mao era (Harding 1991; Meisner 1999). However, the evidence for this view has always been limited. Regional conflicts at certain stages in Shanghai (Perry and Li 1997; Walder 1978) and Wuhan (Wang Shaoguang 1995) clearly pitted a “conservative” faction, supportive of party and military officials who had survived the initial purges, against a “radical” faction that sought to overthrow them. The evidence that these factions represented different social constituencies was suggestive at best (Lee 1978; Walder 1978, 1996). Later studies of factional conflicts in other

² The regime classified households according to the occupation and political affiliation of the male household head at the time the Communist Party assumed local political control. The regime openly favored two types of “red” households: those classified as “revolutionary” (Communist Party member, Red Army soldier, or revolutionary martyr), and “proletarian” (manual wage earner, poor and lower-middle-class peasants). These labels were inherited through the male line and influenced educational attainment and recruitment into the party and leadership positions (Kraus 1981).

regions have questioned whether the factions had identifiably different social bases, and even whether they actually had recognizably different political orientations toward the status quo ante (Forster 1990, 1991; Xu Youyu 1999). The most convincing evidence for interest group explanations is about high school Red Guards in the southern city of Guangzhou. Retrospective survey questions administered to émigrés to Hong Kong in the 1970s yielded estimates that students from “revolutionary” and “proletarian” households were five times more likely to eventually join the “conservative” faction, while students from less favored backgrounds were three times more likely to join the “radical” faction (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Rosen 1982). Yet this study also noted that among university students the relationship between political background and factional choice was less clear, and the practice of political favoritism according to parental status did not appear to be an issue that divided factions (Rosen 1982, p. 97).

The enduring puzzle about the Red Guards is not the perennial preoccupation of students of contentious politics—how insurgents are able to mobilize adherents to make claims against the existing polity. After all, the Red Guard movement was instigated from the apex of the political system. It was facilitated from the beginning by access to the mass media, funding, means of transportation and communication, and the support and advice of a powerful leadership faction. The real puzzle is why politically active students were divided into factions, and whether their motives can be understood as a form of interest group politics based on positions in the status quo ante. Were their actions based on interests derived from their social and political status? Based on the strength of their network ties to authorities in their schools? Based on value commitments that distinguished the favored elite from a more skeptical rank and file?

POLITICAL CHOICE AS A MECHANISM

At the core of every theory about political movements is the problem of political choice. In recent decades the problem has been conceived almost exclusively in terms of the “collective action problem,” the mobilization of adherents, or member recruitment—how to explain the decision of individuals to join a movement, commit to an organization, or contribute to an episode of collective action. This question is so central that the primary criterion for dividing currently credible theoretical perspectives into what McAdam ([1982] 1999, pp. vii–viii) has called structuralist, rationalist, and culturalist approaches is their different accounts of how actors make this choice. A structuralist explanation emphasizes the way

in which actors' decisions are affected by interests inherent in their social position, or by influences derived from their social ties or membership in formal organizations (Gould 1993, 1996; McAdam 1986; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olson 1980). A rationalist explanation emphasizes strategic interaction of individuals based on the expected personal benefits and costs of contributing to group action (Chong 1991; Hardin 1995). A culturalist (or "cognitive") explanation will emphasize the way in which an actor *perceives* the choice—something that depends on appeals framed in terms of beliefs, value orientations, or cultural symbols (Benford and Snow 2000; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Goodwin 1997; Snow et al. 1986).³ While these different assumptions about actors are not as distinct and incompatible as the labels may suggest (Boudon 1996; Swidler 1986; Udehn 2002), they demonstrate the centrality of choice to a wide range of theories about political movements.

All of these theoretical perspectives imply that individuals observe their environment, interpret it, and choose a course of action. Implicitly, they all assume that actors will confront choices in a context that actually will subject them to the posited influences or permit them to exercise the discretion inherent in the particular model of the actor. When left implicit—that is, when not explicitly demonstrated by empirical or historical evidence—an assumption about context is potentially hazardous, especially in situations where political contexts are known to shift rapidly. For this reason a theory about political choice—or any theory about politics—can be no more valid than its claims about the contexts within which these choices are made.

The theory behind group interest explanations of Red Guard factionalism is similarly centered on the question of political choice: who chooses to affiliate with what faction and why. The explanation contains an essential causal link: students observe political events in their universities on the eve of the movement and then choose a course of action that is consistent with their interests (or consciously held political values) as a member of a given status group. These individual choices form the foundations of factions. While these choices appear to have been made collectively by small cliques of closely tied classmates who supported and reinforced one another's judgments, the problem of choice remains the

³ Or from this perspective, whether the individual even perceives that there is any choice to be made and feels compelled to act based on tradition, emotion, or social pressures. Whether the actor considers all the possible options does not alter the fact that a choice *is* made.

core of the explanation.⁴ The essential point is that the context must be one in which it is likely that individuals who occupy similar positions in the structure of power and privilege will make similar political choices that lead them to form factions that resemble interest groups. If the context is ambiguous or changing rapidly in novel ways, individuals in identical social positions will make different choices and end up on different sides, and therefore their subsequent political mobilization will not be motivated by interests derived from actors' social positions. It will be about something else.

Contextual Assumptions of Group Interest Explanations

The foundations for Red Guard factions were laid during June and July 1966. During this period national and municipal party organs sent "work teams" of party officials into schools to orchestrate purges of their leaders, while the national media urged students to rebel against school officials whose actions exhibited disloyalty to the political line represented by Chairman Mao. These work teams were withdrawn abruptly at the end of July and denounced for suppressing student activism, leaving temporary committees dominated by student activists in charge of the schools. As the Red Guard movement was born in the first days of August, it was already divided into two rival factions that began a struggle for control of these committees. One faction was led by activists who had cooperated with the work team during June and July and who controlled these committees, while the other was led by activists who had clashed with the work team, and who in many cases had been branded for "antiparty activities" as a result.

Group interest explanations take a cue from official denunciations of the work teams, which charged them with suppressing the student movement in order to protect "power holders" in schools and defuse the radical thrust of Mao's Cultural Revolution.⁵ These accusations left the impression that work teams had sought to blunt attacks against the schools' party officials. They suggested a clear political orientation to work team

⁴ At Beijing University in early September 1966 there were more than 92 different Red Guard organizations with close to 3,000 members, an average of 33 members each. However, three of these organizations were large alliances that contained the majority of Red Guards (*Xin Beida*, September 13, 1966, p. 3). The remainder were even smaller groups, based on the classroom, that had yet to amalgamate with a larger factional organization (Wang et al. 1998, pp. 652–53).

⁵ The initial charge in a famous Central Committee document issued on August 8, 1966, was that they suppressed student activism. The later charge of "protecting" top power holders was added in an influential article carried in *Red Flag* on March 30, 1967.

behavior: they were conservative, they sought to protect party officials, and they wanted to preserve the party organization. This would mean that their conflicts with students were an effort to suppress radical students who wanted more extensive changes in the status quo. It would also mean that students whose interests were tied to the status quo would be attracted to the work teams' conservative stance.

This portrayal of the events of June and July is essential for interest group explanations of Red Guard factionalism. It describes a context in which the political choices facing students would be clear. If work teams sought to protect and preserve party hierarchies, their actions would be clearly in line with the interests of all those who were part of these hierarchies or who were favored by it. Party members, students in leadership positions, those from "revolutionary" and "proletarian" households—all of whom had vested interests in the status quo—could observe the actions of the work team and readily interpret them in terms of their interests. As members of university power structures, they were part of an organization that could be readily mobilized to protect its leaders against attacks by dissidents. And as loyal members of the school establishment, they would be more likely to be persuaded by the orthodox political values of loyalty to party traditions and party leadership espoused by the work teams. On the other hand, those who were marginalized or excluded would be more likely to push for more extensive changes, and therefore more likely to clash with work teams. Students who had not joined the party, who had been denied leadership positions, and who came from "non-proletarian" and "non-revolutionary" households in the former middle and upper classes would therefore be much more prone to become radical activists that had little to lose, and potentially much to gain, by an overthrow of existing political hierarchies.

Factual narratives of events in universities during June and July 1966 therefore have a crucial theoretical significance: they document the contexts for the political choices that divided students into antagonistic factions. If work teams behaved in the conservative fashion described above, then political choices would be relatively clear, and individuals could readily interpret the implications of their actions for their interests based on their positions in the sociopolitical status quo. These are conditions that would favor the formation of factions that mirrored the social and political cleavages of China at the time, and there would be strong grounds for interpreting their political orientations as "conservative" versus "radical." If, however, work teams did not behave in this conservative faction, but in fact led radical assaults on party hierarchies, if they shifted from a conservative to a radical approach, or if a conservative work team was later replaced by a radical one, then the implications of political choices for positions in the status quo would be highly ambiguous. In such a

context we would expect that those similarly tied to political hierarchies make different decisions, and indeed that these hierarchies would be shattered by the events of June and July. We would also find it difficult to meaningfully interpret the initial political proclivities of Red Guard factions as either “conservative” or “radical,” or as representing group interests based on position in the status quo ante.

UNIVERSITY POWER STRUCTURES

To understand the political contexts created by work teams, and the vested interests in the preservation of university political hierarchies, it is necessary to sketch the outlines of these hierarchies. The top party officials in universities were tied to a large network of politically active students who were destined for party membership and future career advancement. These power structures were large and extensive. They stretched from the university party committee in the central administration down through the general branches at the department level and the party branches at the basic level. These committees formed an interlocking pyramid, with the leaders at each level—the party secretaries—sitting on committees at the next higher level (see table 1). Students, faculty, and support staff participated in this network as members of party branches, which averaged 12 to 14 members each. Students who had already joined the party attended regular meetings of the party branch and were in constant contact with the party secretary and the occupants of other political posts, the most important of which were Communist Youth League secretaries and political instructors. There were a total of 238 party branches at Qinghua University, Beijing’s largest, in 1966, with an average of 14 members each. The school’s power structure included a total of 263 party secretaries at various levels, and a total of some 400 party cadres overall (table 1).

This network linked party officials with large numbers of student leaders who were not yet party members. Academic departments divided each year’s incoming students into numbered “classrooms” (*banji*) of some 25 students. Each classroom was assigned a “classroom counselor” (*ban zhuren*), an instructor considered politically reliable by the party branch. Each classroom had its own Communist Youth League branch and selected its own Youth League and classroom officers. Students in such posts were “student cadres,” many of whom eventually joined the party. Student party membership ranged from 5% to 20% in different universities (see table 2). At Qinghua, where there were 1,390 students in the party, two additional “student cadres” in each of the 425 classrooms would imply an

TABLE 1
PARTY HIERARCHIES AT BEIJING AND QINGHUA UNIVERSITIES, 1965–66

	BEIJING UNIVERSITY		QINGHUA UNIVERSITY	
	No. of Units	Members per Unit	No. of Units	Members per Unit
Party secretaries		5		7
Party standing committee	1	17	1	16
Party committee	1		1	40
Party general branches	20	109	18	183
Party branches	137	16	238	14
Total party members		2,174		3,287

SOURCES.—Wang et al. (1998, pp. 602–3, 640); Fang and Zhang (2001, pp. 809, 813, and 818).

additional 850 student leaders. The network therefore connected some 2,200 students directly to the party organization.

These structures explain why so many students mobilized so rapidly at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. The Party Center’s call to criticize power holders reverberated through a hierarchy that directly linked large numbers of politically active students to the regime. These students were already formed into small groups with elected leaders accustomed to responding to regime-sponsored activities. While these students were connected to the party leadership and had a history of and propensity for political activism, they also had strong vested interests in these positions. A strong political record was an important criterion for receiving favorable job assignments after graduation, especially in sensitive government posts. In addition, party membership was the first step on a career path toward the leadership positions in the party and government bureaucracy that entailed power and material privilege (Li and Walder 2001; Walder, Li, and Treiman 2000). Student activists therefore had a great deal at stake in participating in this kind of political campaign. It was important to display the proper level of loyalty and activism, but it was even more important not to commit a serious political error, because this could negate years of intensive effort in both academics and politics.

AMBIGUITY AND CHOICE IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

The first generation of scholarship on the Red Guard movement proceeded without the benefit of sources that permitted the reconstruction of university-level narratives of student encounters with work teams. Instead, inferences about the conduct of work teams were drawn from Central Party documents that denounced them after their withdrawal, or from factional accusations hurled against defeated opponents. By the late

TABLE 2
STUDENT PARTY MEMBERSHIP AT VARIOUS UNIVERSITIES, 1965–66

Institution	No. of Students	Students in Party	% Students in Party
Beijing Aeronautics Institute	4,787	1,013	21.2
Qinghua University	10,673	1,390	13.2
Beijing Agricultural University ...	2,959	310	10.5
Beijing Industrial Institute	4,153	414	10.0
Beijing University	8,917	693	7.8
Beijing Industrial University	3,400	160	4.7

SOURCES.—Fang and Zhang (2001, p. 818); Li Rongfa (2000, pp. 1 and 532); Ni and Pan (1995, pp. 507 and 651); Shen Shituan (2000, pp. 316–17, 433); Wang Buzheng (1995, pp. 361, 618); Wang et al. (1998, p. 640).

1990s, however, a wide range of sources made possible the reconstruction of university-level events. During their occupation of the schools, work teams reprinted wall posters written by students, faculty, and officials, and after their withdrawal students began to issue their own periodicals, handbills, wall posters, and pamphlets. Student groups subsequently compiled “investigation reports” and “chronicles of major events,” accounts that were often documented with tabulations of data seized from university archives and work team files. These sources, supplemented by recently published memoirs and university histories, permit reconstruction of the timing and sequence of events, the actions of the work team, the severity of its impact on the school, and the origins of opposition and conflict. I have been able to reconstruct these events for a total of 22 out of the more than 50 tertiary institutions in Beijing at the time. This sample contains 71% of the 1966 university student population, nine out of the largest 10 schools, and all of the schools whose Red Guard leaders played a major role in the radical faction (see app. table A1).⁶ The sources used in reconstructing these case histories are listed in appendix table A2.

These narratives describe contexts for political choice that depart sharply from previous assumptions in two ways. First, the behavior of work teams varied widely across schools. Only half of the 28 work teams sent to these 22 universities sought to limit at least somewhat attacks on the party leadership—the other half orchestrated devastating purges. Second, within schools there were sharp fluctuations in the behavior of work teams. In roughly half the universities, the work team initially sought to protect the party apparatus, but then either shifted to a devastating purge

⁶ By virtue of the political prominence of their leaders, the most important Red Guard organizations over the entire period were from Beijing University, Qinghua University, Beijing Geology Institute, Beijing Aeronautics Institute, and Beijing Normal University.

or retreated from the school and was replaced by a second work team that reversed course.

Varied Contexts

Work teams adopted one of three different political stances vis-à-vis a university's power structure. The first, a "conservative" stance, defended the Party Committee as politically reliable and allowed it to conduct purges in cooperation with the work team. The defining feature of this stance is that the party secretary and selected followers were certified as politically reliable and were permitted to join with the work team in identifying purge victims in the power structure. These purges may have been extensive, but they preserved the essential integrity of the school's political leadership. Militant students who persisted in making accusations against top officials were attacked if they failed to cease after warnings. This stance conforms to the assumptions about work team behavior in group interest explanations, although purges of the power structure in these settings could still be severe.

An example of this conservative strategy is the stance of the work team sent to the Beijing Mining Institute. Anticipating the coming political upheaval, the Ministry of Coal preemptively purged the school's Party Committee earlier in 1966. At the beginning of June, the new party secretary claimed that he was a "steadfast leftist" and that the Party Committee had already been cleansed of politically impure elements. He initiated a militant purge of the political apparatus under him to root out loyal followers of the *former* Party Committee. When the ministry dispatched a work team to take over leadership of the school in mid-June, it simply intensified the purge campaign already underway and shielded the party secretary and other top officials from criticism. The party secretary was sent to participate in a conference off campus for several weeks, and when he returned in early July he joined the work team's leading group. When the work team departed at the end of July, it turned control of the school back over to him. A similar stance was adopted by the work team at the Beijing Sports Institute.⁷

A second, "radical" stance is the opposite of the first: the entire party leadership was denounced and removed, and mass criticism and investigations of officeholders throughout the chain of command were conducted. Unlike the situation where the work team preserved the party leadership intact, under these work teams the power structure was decapitated, and it ceased to operate. Instead, it was replaced by committees

⁷ Sources for broad characterizations of events in a school are listed in appendix table A2. More specific source citations are provided only for more narrow factual claims.

of activists rapidly organized under the work team's sponsorship. Work teams that adopted this strategy did not clash with militant students about the extensiveness of the assault on the status quo. If conflicts occurred, they were about the extent to which work teams could exercise authority over the activities of militant students, and a particular flash point was the effort by many work teams to prevent students from beating and imprisoning officials and faculty members accused of political crimes.

Systematic data are available about the conduct of three of the radical work teams. The data were taken from work team records and later published in the investigation reports of student groups. Work teams typically classified all school officials into four categories, ranging from politically reliable to enemy of the people. In category 1 were those deemed completely reliable; in category 2 were cadres whose errors required only a self-criticism. In categories 3 and 4, however, were purge victims. In category 3 were those whose errors were severe, requiring immediate and indefinite removal from their posts; in category 4 were those said to have committed crimes against the party and socialism. Under these circumstances mobilizing to protect these officials was out of the question. Everyone was expected to distance themselves from these targets and demonstrate their loyalty by joining in the criticism.

The data indicate devastating purges. At Beijing University, where the work team was militant from the outset, fewer than 8% of 694 administrators were placed in category 1, and only six out of the top 173 officials (see table 3). On the other hand, two-thirds of all cadres were placed in categories 3 and 4. Of the 20 general branch secretaries, 19 were in categories 3 or 4, and 16 were in category 4—enemies of the people (table 3). At the Beijing Aeronautics Institute, where the work team initially supported the party committee but later shifted to a radical stance, the assault on the power structure was almost as severe. Ninety percent of 164 cadres were suspended from their posts; all 15 general branch secretaries were placed in categories 3 or 4, as were 78% of the middle-level cadres in political departments and five out of the eight top school leaders (table 4). All of the party secretaries and general branch secretaries were put in labor reform brigades on campus, and every one of them had their homes searched. At Beijing Industrial University, where the first work team had supported the party committee but was replaced by a second, radical one, the data indicate a purge of even greater intensity. All five top university officials were placed in categories 3 or 4 along with 89% of the department and section heads. Loyalist mobilization would have been fruitless in a school where 80% of the 118 cadres in the school were placed in categories 3 and 4, removed from their posts, and put under various forms of detention (see table 5).

In these contexts mobilization to defend power holders was futile. Of-

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TABLE 3
WORK TEAM VERDICTS ON PARTY CADRES AT BEIJING UNIVERSITY, JULY 1966

Unit	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	Total
General branches and branches	1 (5)	0	3 (15)	16 (80)	20
Units under party branches	5 (3.2)	46 (30.1)	56 (36.6)	46 (30.1)	153
Party-administrative cadres	47 (9)	136 (26.1)	219 (42)	119 (22.9)	521
Total	53 (7.6)	182 (26.2)	278 (40.1)	181 (26.1)	694

SOURCES.—Wang et al. (1998, pp. 647–48). Statistics were compiled July 10, and exclude the History Department.

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

ficials were typically held in isolation, made to write confessions and apologies, and were periodically paraded in front of mass meetings where they knelt before audiences and faced shouted denunciations. At Qinghua University, where the work team was militant from the outset, 29 out of the 31 members of the university Party Committee were forced to perform manual labor under supervision, wearing signboards identifying them as political criminals. Of 206 heads or vice heads of offices, departments, or party branches, 182 underwent this kind of labor reform (Qinghua University Jingtangshan United General Headquarters 1967, pp. 4–5). Purges of such severity ruled out any effort to protect party leaders and limit damage to the power structure.

In the 13 schools that ended up with radical work teams there was no power structure left to defend. Opposition grew out of different issues entirely: how accused officials were treated (especially the propensity to imprison suspects and extract confessions through beatings) and whether student militants were subject to work team authority. In these schools, work teams mobilized militant students to accept their leadership and to denounce those who continued to defy them. The work team’s supporters did not mobilize to protect school officials. To the contrary, they rallied in support of devastating purges.

A third, “mixed” stance fell between the first two. These work teams split school power structures into two groups. One group of officials was said to represent a politically reliable “red” line, while another group was designated as forming a traitorous “black gang.” School officials certified as “red” joined the work team in attacking targets among their erstwhile colleagues. These work teams openly pitted one group of party members and officeholders against another. They sanctioned attacks against one group of officials, but would not tolerate those against the ones prejudged as “red.” This stance is conservative in that the party secretary or a vice

TABLE 4
 WORK TEAM VERDICTS ON CADRES AT BEIJING AERONAUTICS INSTITUTE, JUNE-JULY 1966

Rank of Cadre	Total No. in Rank	Put in Categories 3 and 4	Suspended from Duty	In Labor Reform Brigade	Homes Searched	Target of Struggle Session
Party secretaries, president, vice-presidents	8	5 (63)	6 (75)	8 (100)	8 (100)	4 (50)
Middle-level political department cadres	18	14 (78)	16 (89)	14 (78)	14 (78)	4 (22)
General branch secretaries and department heads	15	15 (100)	15 (100)	15 (100)	15 (100)	14 (93)
Middle-level cadres in academic departments	45	31 (69)	41 (91)	34 (76)	23 (51)	15 (33)
Political instructors in various departments	78	8 (10)	69 (88)			3 (4)
Total	164	73 (45)	147 (90)	71 (81)	60 (70)	40 (24)

SOURCES.—Beijing Aeronautics Institute Red Flag (1967, p. 7).

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

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TABLE 5
 WORK TEAM VERDICTS ON CADRES AT BEIJING INDUSTRIAL UNIVERSITY, JUNE–JULY
 1966

Rank of Cadre	Total No. of Cadres in Rank	Categories		
		1, 2 (Good, Relatively Good)	Category 3 (Major Errors)	Category 4 (Antiparty)
Top university officials	5	0	1 (20)	4 (80)
Department/section heads	36	4 (11)	18 (50)	14 (39)
Teaching section heads	29	12 (41)	9 (31)	8 (28)
Ordinary cadres at above three levels	17	2 (12)	7 (41)	8 (47)
Teaching office cadres	31	6 (19)	16 (52)	9 (29)
Total	118 (100)	24 (20)	51 (44)	43 (36)

SOURCES.—*Dongfang hong* (Beijing Industrial University), April 13, 1967, pp. 1–2, in CCRM (2001, vol. 2, pp. 673–74).

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

secretary and a selected group of other top officials and their followers are certified as reliable and shielded from criticism. It is radical, however, in that it sponsors extensive attacks on the power structure.

The clearest example of this type is the stance taken by the work team at the Beijing Railway Institute. This university had been created by a merger of the Harbin Railway Institute and the Beijing Railway Institute in 1953. Roughly half the party apparatus had been transferred to the Beijing campus from Harbin at that time. The work team reasoned that since the Beijing Municipal Party Committee had recently been purged for alleged opposition to Mao, their influence in the institute must have been exercised through the officials who were formerly part of the Beijing campus, which had been under the Municipal Party Committee. The officials transferred in from Harbin, however, had been directly under the Ministry of Railways, and therefore could be certified as reliably “red.” The work team therefore shielded the Harbin cadres from criticism as followers of the “ministry line” and orchestrated purges of officials who had carried out the “municipal line” in the school. The purges were extensive, but they were limited to only one clearly identifiable half of the party apparatus, which survived to the end of July. A similar stance was taken by the work teams—though for different reasons—at Beijing Agricultural University, Beijing Normal Institute, Beijing Petroleum Institute, Beijing Steel Institute, Chinese People’s University, and the Chinese University of Science and Technology.

The implications of this survey are clear: only in two of the 22 universities did the work team maintain a conservative stance into the month

of July. Ten other universities had work teams that initially adopted a conservative stance for one or two weeks in June, but six of those were withdrawn and replaced by a second work team that pursued a more radical policy, and four of them remained in the school but abruptly shifted to a radical stance. Only in the two schools where a conservative stance was maintained to the end of July did the work team unambiguously pursue a policy that sought to preserve the party leadership and existing power structures. In the six schools where a mixed policy was pursued, purges were nonetheless extensive, and therefore it was not obvious that the work team was acting to protect the school's power structure. In the 13 schools where a radical policy was pursued, the power structure was devastated, and there was never any question of rallying to protect it. Therefore the political context for student choices varied radically across schools. Moreover, in most of them the context was not one in which students were faced with a choice of rallying to protect or mobilizing to attack the power holders in their school. In the majority of cases, the reasons for student divisions could not have been those specified in interest group explanations.

Shifting Contexts

Abrupt shifts in the political stance of work teams complicated political choices and created divisions among militant students. This occurred in virtually all of the schools, no matter what strategy the work team pursued. The most common sequence of events were those schools in which the initial work team retreated after a short stay in the school and was replaced by a second. The first wave of work teams, rapidly organized, poorly briefed, and unsure of their mission, widely adopted a conservative stance supportive of the incumbent Party Committee. They were soon confronted by militant students who sought to press accusations against top officials. Outnumbered by students and intimidated by vociferous opposition, work teams at 39 universities withdrew during the first two weeks of June (Beijing Municipal Party Committee 1987, p. 21). This occurred in six of the 22 schools in the sample (table 6).

The arrival of a new, more radical work team appeased many of the opponents of the first. However, some came to oppose the second work team as well, despite its radical stance. In some schools conflict with the second work team originated when students who had played a leading role in driving away the first were not honored by the second one for their earlier role. In these situations most of the students who actively supported the first work team in its conservative stance turned around and supported the second one and its radical stance with equal enthusiasm. This often led the former dissidents to reject the work team's

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TABLE 6
A TYPOLOGY OF WORK TEAM BEHAVIORS, JUNE–JULY 1966

Work Team Behavior	Institution
Conservative	Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (1)
	Beijing Forestry Institute (1)
	Beijing Industrial University (1)
	Beijing Light Industrial Institute (1)
	Beijing Post and Telecommunication (1)
	Beijing Railway Institute (1)
	Beijing Mining Institute
	Beijing Sports Institute
Mixed conservative/radical	Beijing Agricultural University
	Beijing Normal Institute
	Beijing Petroleum Institute
	Beijing Railway Institute (2)
	Beijing Steel Institute
	Chinese People's University
	Chinese University of Science and Technology
Radical	Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (2)
	Beijing Forestry Institute (2)
	Beijing Institute of Politics and Law
	Beijing Light Industrial Institute (2)
	Beijing Post and Telecommunication (2)
	Beijing Industrial University (2)
	Beijing Normal University
	Beijing University
Shifted from conservative to radical	Qinghua University
	Beijing Aeronautics Institute
	Beijing Agricultural Machinery Institute
	Beijing Geology Institute
	Beijing No. 2 Foreign Languages Institute

NOTE.—An institution followed by (1) denotes a work team withdrawn from the school in June; an institution followed by (2) denotes its replacement.

decision to back student leaders who had sided with the earlier work team. In addition, the new work team's radical stance encouraged widespread attacks on cadres that often spun out of control. Student militants seized large numbers of victims and began to subject them to increasingly brutal forms of interrogation and imprisonment. When the work team tried to reign in the violence and exercise control over the treatment of the accused, it clashed with militant students who demanded autonomy. After the third week of June, work teams who faced substantial student opposition were ordered to counterattack, which they did in very decisive fashion in many schools.

This latter source of conflict also plagued the four universities in the

sample where the work team pursued a radical strategy from the start and remained in the school to the end of July. These radical work teams, like the others, were all faced to varying degrees with struggles to maintain some authority over the activities of militant students. In all of these schools, work teams initially adopted a permissive attitude toward student activities, but after the third week of June their stance hardened, and they demanded that students submit to their authority. This led to open challenges by a recalcitrant minority who in turn suffered retaliation from work teams that were now taking a hard line against their opponents.

There were also four schools where the work team initially declared their support for the Party Committee, but after clashes with militant students altered course, deposing the entire power structure and initiating a radical purge (table 6). This political about-face successfully appeased many of the students who had pressured it to take a more militant stance—the work team was now behaving as they demanded. However, some of the students charged that this was only a tactical shift, and that the work team had already shown its inclinations and could not be trusted. They demanded that the work team nonetheless be removed and replaced. The longer the work team remained in the school, the more pointed the criticisms of the dissidents became, until the work team retaliated against them by lodging political accusations of their own. These students, who aspired to be in the radical vanguard of the movement, now found themselves cast down along with the others purged in the campaign.

Even work teams that consistently pursued a conservative or moderate policy inadvertently created divisions in the school. Work teams typically arrived one week or more after critics of the Party Committee had posted public denunciations of the top officials in the school. After arriving, the work teams usually permitted free accusations of this sort for up to one week. When the work teams finally announced their decision—that either the entire Party Committee, or key members of it, were politically reliable—it immediately exposed the critics to retaliation. Under conservative and moderate work teams, these top officials were put in charge of the campaign, and their critics in the party apparatus and among the students were regularly denounced for antiparty activities precisely for their earlier accusations. Resistance to these work teams persisted and was encouraged by the fact that the majority of conservative work teams had already been driven out of the universities by mid-June. The opposition was intimately aware of events on other campuses, which are concentrated in the northwest quadrant of Beijing, and few campuses there are more than a short walk from several others (see app. table A1). Observation of events on nearby campuses created expectations that continued resistance would bear fruit—an expectation that was frustrated in the end.⁸

⁸ Universities were still clustered in Haidian two decades later (app. table A1), and
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The Dimensions of Political Ambiguity

Events within universities during June and July 1966 closely approximated the contextual assumptions of group interest explanations only in two out of the 22 contexts that I have been able to reconstruct—those in which a conservative stance was adopted consistently throughout June and July. Only in these settings were students faced with a choice of rallying in support of the incumbent power structure or rebelling against efforts by the work team to protect it. In all the other universities, the choices facing politically active students were very different. In the 13 universities where the work team eventually pursued a radical course, there was simply no power structure left to defend, and no incumbent officials in a position to mobilize loyal defenders of the status quo. Moreover, the abrupt shifts in work team strategies, and the withdrawal of conservative work teams and their replacement by radical ones, meant that the political context for student choice could shift abruptly, introducing new ambiguities into the situation.

In the universities where the power structure was dismantled, the political choices involved questions about the work team, not the university hierarchy. Where the work team had shifted from a conservative to a radical course, students had to decide whether to accept the work team's apparent change of heart, or whether to consider it discredited by its earlier behavior and demand its withdrawal. Students also had to decide whether to forget their earlier conflicts with the work team in its conservative phase and set aside concerns about the political charges earlier made against them, or whether to continue to press the work team for an official apology and certification that they were in fact politically loyal. And militant students had to consider whether, in continuing to oppose a work team that had shifted to a radical course, they were in fact impeding the progress of the Cultural Revolution and, as work teams began to claim, objectively taking the side of the class enemies that the work team was seeking to root out.

The dilemmas facing militant students under consistently radical work teams were somewhat different, but no less complicated. In these schools the question was never the survival of the existing power structure. The central question was whether work teams could exercise authority over the activities of mobilized students, modulating the pace and violence of the movement and curtailing some of its more extreme and cruel manifestations. In these schools the core choices were about *how* to prosecute the campaign against the school power structure, and *who* would take

this spatial concentration is emphasized in Zhao's (1998) explanation of the student mobilization in the face of repression in 1989. The same cross-campus influences figured in the resistance movement against work teams in June and July 1966.

charge of the task. Do militant students have the right freely to accuse, imprison, beat, and humiliate political targets, or is the work team justified in regulating these activities and controlling access to political prisoners? Is there any truth to the charge that the work team, in seeking to prevent violent “excesses,” is actually scheming to protect these power holders and should therefore be withdrawn from the school? Is there any merit to the work team’s counterclaim that they represent Chairman Mao and the Central Committee, and that students who challenge them are engaged in “antiparty activities”? Is the work team’s counterattack against its most militant opponents—public denunciation meetings, formal political charges, detention for the purpose of writing a self-criticism—a justified response against extremists who may harbor ulterior motives? Or is the work team’s counterattack part of a conspiracy to suppress student activists in order to obstruct Mao’s Cultural Revolution?

The answer to these questions bears no clear relationship to one’s interests based on position in the status quo ante. Students closely identified with and favored by the now-discredited power structure could reasonably choose one of two diametrically opposed courses of action. They could choose to conform to work team authority, seeking to demonstrate their loyalty to higher levels of the party hierarchy they represent, and thereby ensure that they are not tainted by their close association with now-discredited officials. Or they could choose to demonstrate their loyalty to Mao and dramatize their break with their former powerful patrons by repudiating them publicly in the strongest and most violent terms—a course that often led inadvertently to clashes with the work team. The choice was not whether to attack power holders, but what course of action to pursue in their destruction. The choice facing students marginalized under the status quo ante would be similarly ambiguous. Such students might reason that active support for the work team is an effective way to persecute their former oppressors while establishing supportive ties with new party authorities. On the other hand, they might just as well be led to vociferous and violent persecution of the former power holders, a course of action that would lead them to chafe at work team restrictions.

Where the former power structure had been removed, one’s position in the status quo ante therefore had no clear implications for political choice. We would not expect that students would line up, for and against the work team, based on whether they had strong ties to the power structure or were favored by it in the past. We would expect, instead, that students from similar backgrounds would *split*—since ties to the former power structure were no clear guide in the new context, politically active students from similar backgrounds would make choices that led them

into opposed camps.⁹ No matter what one's theory about choice, these contexts were too ambiguous to permit a clear pattern based on social position or prior value commitments.

THE IDENTITY OF THE WORK TEAMS' OPPONENTS

The political choices faced by students tied closely to incumbent power structures were very different—and much more ambiguous—than previously imagined. This implies that individuals closely tied to these power structures should have been split by the events of June and July, and should be prominent among both the supporters and the opponents of the work teams. We know from the narrative accounts that the vast majority of students either actively supported, or passively obeyed, the work team. The opponents of the work team were a small and embattled minority, everywhere on the defensive after the counterattacks of late June. But they were the kernel of a “minority” faction that formed immediately after the work teams' withdrawal. Those who suffered at the hands of the work teams led the opposition movement to overthrow the “majority” faction left in control of the schools. Therefore, evidence about the identity of those who were attacked by the work team, or who led the opposition, is crucial. Of particular interest is the representation of members of the power structure, party members, student cadres, youth league activists, and students from proletarian and revolutionary households.

Considerable evidence can be gleaned from narrative accounts of the period. It is not systematic, but the overall pattern is clear: politically active students with strong ties to power structures were well represented among work team opponents, and indeed they appear to have played a leading role. The evidence comes from across the spectrum of work team stances—even under conservative and moderate work teams. And it comes in several forms: statistics on the backgrounds of opponents punished by the work team, biographical data about prominent anti-work team leaders, and claims made by student factions in their wall posters and newspapers.

The most detailed evidence about the identity of the work team's op-

⁹ This conclusion—which assumes that an individual's reasoning is tied to social position—does not depend on the specific theory about the actor's choice. The ambiguity equally affects all assumptions about the actor. An actor who carefully calculates the risks versus payoffs of supporting one side or another would find it very difficult to predict whether the work team would prevail and what course of action it would take—as sudden shifts in work team strategy and the abrupt withdrawal and repudiation of work teams makes clear. An individual who sought to act in accord with purely disinterested political principles would not find the choices any clearer.

ponents comes from universities where there were abrupt shifts in work team strategies. At the Beijing Aeronautics Institute, where a stubborn minority refused to be placated by the shift from a conservative to a radical stance, the eventual counterattack labeled over 200 opponents as antiparty—90% of them reportedly came from reliably “red” revolutionary and proletarian families (Beijing Aeronautics Institute 1966a, p. 7). At the Beijing Geology Institute, opponents were inspired by a protest from a member of the Party Standing Committee who was a veteran revolutionary. The opposition camp included cadres throughout the power structure, and was centered in the Survey Department, which bore the brunt of the subsequent counterattack. Among the 98 teachers and cadres attacked in this department for their opposition to the work team were two members of the department’s General Branch Committee who were subjected to humiliating mass denunciation rallies in front of the entire school. Of the eight people similarly treated in department-level rallies, seven were party members, including three political instructors and two vice heads of the teaching office. Of the 44 individuals who were accused of antiparty crimes in wall posters, 34 were party members (*Dongfanghong* April 12, 1967, in CCRM 2001, vol. 9, p. 3270). Opponents targeted elsewhere in the Geology Institute had a similar profile. Of the 219 criticized in wall posters, 115 were from “red” households, and 149 were party or Youth League members. Of the 66 who lost leadership posts, 80% were from “red” households, and 88% were in the party or Youth League (Beijing Geology Institute East is Red 1966, p. 6).

Similarly severe conflicts were bred in schools where a second, radical work team replaced a conservative one. In all of these cases the second work team was unable to win over some of the opponents of the first. At the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute the second work team struggled to control student militants and eventually attacked those who refused to yield to their authority. Of the 892 individuals targeted for opposition, two-thirds were from “red” households, and more than 80% were members of the party or youth league. A total of 281 student cadres and other leaders lost their positions in the campaign against opponents.¹⁰ At the Beijing Forestry Institute the second work team’s counterattack expelled 1% of all party members and suspended indefinitely another 10% (Beijing Forestry Institute 1966, pp. 17–18). At the Beijing Post and Telecommunications Institute the counterattack netted 52 cadres and 799 students,

¹⁰ This number included 1 party branch secretary, 4 members of party branch committees, 57 members of classroom Cultural Revolution Committees, 97 classroom student cadres, 7 members of Youth League general branch committees, 35 Youth League branch secretaries, and 80 members of Youth League branch committees (*Shoudu hongweibing* Sept. 30, 1966, p. 3 in CCRM 1999, vol. 12, p. 5365).

and a “large portion” of the latter were reportedly student cadres (Revolutionary Rebel General Headquarters 1967, p. 5).

If there was any context within which political choices would be relatively clear, and where factional divisions would pit those loyal to the power structure against its external opponents, it would be under work teams that consistently pursued a conservative or mixed course, leaving power structures largely intact. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find similar evidence that student cadres, party members, and even lower- and middle-ranking officials were prominent among the work team’s opponents in these settings as well. At the Beijing Normal Institute, the first public challenge to the work team was made by the Communist Youth League secretary of the Chinese Department, a party member who was also a member of the department’s Party General Branch Committee. The work team’s subsequent investigation against “antiparty elements” targeted rebellious members of the party and youth league (*Jinggangshan* May 4, 1966, in CCRM 2001, p. 9157). At the Beijing Mining Institute, the rebellion against the party secretary originated with seven political work cadres from the Machinery Department who wrote the first wall poster calling for his dismissal. These rebels were joined by political work cadres in the mining, economics, and geology departments. To prop up the party secretary, the work team targeted these critics and designated a total of 63 party members as “antiparty traitors” (*Dongfang hong* April 25, 1967, pp. 1–3, in CCRM 1999, pp. 983–85). At the Beijing Sports Institute, the work team vacillated as attacks on the party secretary mounted. Its hesitation convinced some in the power structure that they would eventually sanction such accusations, but this assumption turned out to be mistaken. Those subsequently charged with antiparty activities because of their criticisms included nine members of the university’s Party Committee, two general branch secretaries, four party branch secretaries, two branch committee members, and 113 political work cadres (*Tiyu zhanbao* May 6, 1967, in CCRM 1999, pp. 5919–20). At Chinese Peoples’ University, the work team permitted widespread accusations against top officials, but it drew the line at the school’s party secretary, who had recently been transferred to the Beijing Municipal Party Committee to take charge of the work team effort. Its attempts to shield him proved ineffective until it counterattacked against the most persistent accusers who dared to cross the line. In the subsequent campaign, over 130 cadres and teachers were victimized: 111 party members, 17 heads of teaching offices, and 7 vice chairs of their departments (*Renda sanhong* April 27, 1967, in CCRM 2001, p. 10702).

Previously unavailable biographical information about prominent Red Guard leaders reinforces the impression that people tied to university power structures were prominent in the anti-work team forces. The fa-

mous “commanders” of the Red Guard movement who emerged from this period as work team opponents to lead the struggle of the “minority” faction and become prominent leaders of the “radical” faction were from this background. Kuai Dafu of Qinghua University was an active youth league member and student cadre, head of his classroom’s Cultural Revolution Committee. He was from a “red” (poor peasant) household, his father was a rural cadre, and both his parents were party members (Tang 2003, p. 126).¹¹ Han Aijing of the Beijing Aeronautics Institute had two parents who were revolutionary cadres, and his stepfather was a party official in the security apparatus. Tan Houlan of Beijing Normal University was a party member and model cadre who had been sent back to school for education by the party. A favorite of the university’s party organization, she won an internship at the Central Committee’s theoretical organ, *Red Flag* (Cao Ying 2001, p. 5036). Nie Yuanzi, whose wall poster denouncing Beijing University’s leaders helped to launch the Red Guard movement, was the Philosophy Department’s general branch secretary, and her coauthors were all veteran party members and instructors of Marxism-Leninism (Cao Ying 2001, p. 5025).

The pattern holds even for less well-known Red Guard leaders. Tan Lifu of Beijing Industrial University, son of a high-level official who headed Red Guards loyal to the work team, made a famous August speech in defense of his school’s second (radical) work team and in praise of the party’s policy of favoritism toward students of “red” heritage. His background and political stance was long cited as one of the primary pieces of evidence in support of group interest explanations of Red Guard factionalism. More complete documentation from the school, however, reveals that Tan’s opponents were themselves the offspring of Communist revolutionaries who complained vociferously about Tan’s attempt to wrap himself in the mantle of party orthodoxy.¹² They pointed out that an individual’s political background mattered little to the work team: “As for [the second work team’s] class line . . . [the] standard was, whether or not you obeyed what the work team said . . . if you don’t listen to what the work team says, even if you are from a worker, peasant, or revolutionary cadre background, you’ll be attacked just the same, and be expelled. . . . On the other hand, those from bad class background, the

¹¹ Initially allied with Kuai’s group in the Qinghua minority faction was a group led by computer science student Shen Ruhuai, who was a party member and also from a poor peasant household. The group later split with Kuai’s in early 1967 (Shen Ruhuai 2004, pp. 7–9).

¹² “We are from worker, peasant, and revolutionary cadre families; we have incomparably deep feelings of affection for the Party and Chairman Mao” (Walder 2004, p. 981).

so-called 'leftists' who obey what the work team says, will be relied upon" (Walder 2004, p. 981).

In short, the available evidence establishes unambiguously that the groups closely tied to power structures were split by the events of June and July, and that the opposition to the work team was fueled in large part by militants closely tied with the former power structure. Therefore the factional mobilization that immediately ensued in August could not have been motivated by interests derived from different social positions in the status quo ante. What motives, then, were behind the mobilization of Red Guard factions?

FACTIONAL IDENTITIES AS EMERGENT PROPERTIES

Factional identities were emergent properties. They were not fixed by the positions of their members in the social and political structures that existed at the beginning of June. Instead, they emerged from the varied interactions of students and work teams during the ensuing seven weeks. The factions that appeared in early August 1966 were therefore socially and politically diverse coalitions, with little in common except their recent interactions with work teams, and local political consequences that were now all too clear.

The abrupt withdrawal of work teams represented another fundamental shift in political context. University power structures were incapacitated, and student militants were in charge. The divisions created in the previous two months now bred a high-stakes contest for power within each university. Work teams withdrew in favor of "preparatory committees" that formed Red Guard organizations and prepared for elections to new Cultural Revolution Committees to govern the schools. Not surprisingly, preparatory committees and Red Guard organizations were controlled by those who had cooperated with the work teams. Two features of this political settlement threatened the former opposition. First, those who now held power were colleagues who had earlier sided with the work team. While they were willing to admit that the work team's actions were erroneous, they were not willing to yield their positions as student leaders or accept responsibility for the work team's alleged errors. Second, many of the work teams had put opponents under surveillance, compiling dossiers on them and bringing formal political charges. These damaging verdicts were lodged in the school's archives, and in some cases had been taken by departing work teams to be archived at higher government agencies.

The opponents of the work team formed rival Red Guard organizations and mobilized to challenge the militants left in charge. They argued that

their history of resistance proved them to be the true leftists and that they deserved a greater share of power—certainly more than compliant student activists who were complicit in an erroneous political line. A greater share of power was essential for one very important reason—many of them had recently been charged with serious political offenses that could ruin their futures if they were not reversed.

Student activists who dominated preparatory committees refused to step down and denied that they were conservatives complicit in the errors of the work teams. As these two groups engaged in on-campus debates, hurled charges and countercharges, and competed for the allegiance of the broader student body, they formed alliances with groups in analogous positions on other campuses. Those engaged in the struggle against the preparatory committees and official Red Guards became known as the “minority” faction, while militants who dominated the schools became known as the “majority.” As the conflict escalated in September, the majority factions formed a new citywide Red Guard organization to rival the existing one, and became known as the “Second Headquarters.” In response, many of the more militant minority factions formed their own “Third Headquarters” (Walder 2002, pp. 459–60).

After key Maoist officials publicly expressed their unambiguous support for the “minority” movement in early October, their “majority” opponents were denounced as conservatives who sought to defend their privileges in a corrupt status quo in concert with reactionary work teams (Walder 2002, pp. 460–61). This rhetoric suggested that factions expressed a social cleavage defined by social status and ties to power structures. It suggested, further, that the factions’ political orientations could be meaningfully distinguished as different orientations to the status quo ante—one more conservative, the other more radical. This rhetoric convinced a generation of researchers that Red Guard factions were based on group interests.

In fact, the only thing that distinguished the two factions at the outset was not their positions in the pre-Cultural Revolution status order, but their contrasting experiences under the work teams. Because work team actions varied widely across schools, and because their shifts in strategy generated opposition unrelated to individuals’ status, the minority faction that became the “radical” Third Headquarters was a politically diverse coalition. Students in different schools faced work teams that took fundamentally different stances, and therefore support of or opposition to a work team meant different things in different schools. Students who cooperated with “conservative” work teams were in fact defending school power structures, while the opponents of the work team were those who were willing to denounce their superiors. Support for a radical work team, on the other hand, meant support for a ferocious purge. What separated the supporters and opponents of militant work teams was not their stance

toward the power structure, but their willingness to obey the work team in the course of its destruction.

Each faction, therefore, united individuals from diverse backgrounds who shared a new political identity that had emerged for the first time in the conflicts of the summer. One group had not clashed with work teams and had been left in control of the schools; the other had clashed with the work teams, had been the targets of official political accusations that could entail severe consequences, and was left in a vulnerable and exposed position. There were no longer any political institutions that could ensure an evenhanded resolution of the outstanding issues: the majority faction was in charge. The minority faction therefore was compelled to mobilize against majority faction control and demand political vindication—and insurance against future victimization. The “majority” faction was forced to defend itself. These identities and interests did not exist before June. They had been created in rapidly shifting political contexts in the schools during the prior seven weeks. And now, in a context altered once again following the work teams’ abrupt retreat, students who had been loyal supporters of the status quo only two months before were on a collision course.

CONTEXTUAL ORIGINS OF MINORITY “RADICALISM”

During their struggle for ascendance, minority factions earned a reputation for radicalism by invading central government ministries—an activity that their factional opponents did not have in their repertoire. These daring acts have long been interpreted as evidence that these militants had a radical political orientation that betrayed a different orientation to the sociopolitical status quo than the militants in the reputedly more “conservative” majority alliance. In fact, however, these “radical” actions were a direct response by minority factions to their initially subordinate position, and were rooted in the university-level events of June and July.

During August, the minority factions’ line of attack was to denounce erroneous work team actions that had placed them in a subordinate and threatened position. To do this, they were not content to continue the Cultural Revolution in their schools as if the work teams had never been there. They insisted on keeping the work team question alive by searching out and detaining their leaders, bringing them back to campus to answer for their actions (Walder 2002, 2004). Extracting elaborate public confessions from them would serve two purposes: undermine the majority faction’s claim to power, and provide further assurances that the political charges lodged by the work team would be discredited and would not subsequently harm them. The majority factions had no incentive to invade

the ministries that had sent the work teams. They preferred to keep the focus on the universities, where they continued to defend their power. They participated actively in public rallies and attacks on prominent figures outside the campus, but they did not engage in coordinated assaults on central government organs.

The minority's assault on these offices inadvertently led the Cultural Revolution to its next phase. Work teams had been dispatched by higher party organs, and they were led by higher-level officials.¹³ When minority factions left campuses to find and interrogate departed work team leaders, they went to the ministries and commissions of the central government, where they staged demonstrations, sit-ins, and office invasions. The most militant minority factions at this stage were from schools where higher officials had intervened publicly to support the work teams. The minority faction from the Beijing Aeronautics Institute pursued its work team head into the offices of the State Council's National Defense Technology Commission. The minority factions from the Geology Institute, Forestry Institute, and Post and Telecommunications Institute—schools where ministry officials had become directly involved in the work team effort to suppress opposition—pursued work team leaders back into their respective ministries, demanded their surrender along with work team files, and called for apologies from the higher officials who had dispatched the work teams. In several cases students occupied ministry offices for weeks, completely paralyzing their work (Beijing Geology Institute East is Red 1967; Beijing Municipal Party Committee 1987).

This wave of attacks on central government organs—whose motives were rooted in specific political experiences during June and July—eventually persuaded Mao and his radical associates to drop their evenhanded support for all Red Guards and openly favor the minority factions. Attacks on central government organs promoted the Maoist tactical agenda of expanding purges to higher levels. Expressed publicly in unequivocal terms in early October, the elite support for the minority led to the collapse of the majority faction, now misleadingly reviled as “conservatives.” The minority factions were publicly certified as “revolutionary” and were repeatedly assured by Maoist officials—who understood their motivations well—that all incriminating materials collected by work teams would be removed from ministry files and destroyed (Walder 2002, pp. 460–61).

¹³ Work teams sent to the specialized institutes under national ministries were composed of officials from the ministry concerned. Work teams sent to prestigious comprehensive universities—Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Beijing Normal—were composed of even higher-level officials from an array of different party organs (Walder 2002).

PARALLELS

While the political circumstances of Beijing in 1966 appear to be highly unusual, if not unique, the process involved is generic: rapid shifts in political institutions that force individuals into consequential choices that in turn generate new divisions, new interests, and new identities, which subsequently form two sides of an antagonistic conflict. There is perhaps no clearer illustration of the same process than the final chapters of Tilly's analysis of the counterrevolutionary uprising in western France in 1793 known as the Vendée (Tilly 1964, pp. 227–304). A generation of Marxist historiography had portrayed the rebellion as an expression of class struggle, but Tilly found the class lines to be blurred in the same manner, and for similar reasons, as we have found for students in Chinese universities. Central to Tilly's analysis is the delayed impact of the 1789 revolution in Paris on the local political context as the new regime extended its control into regional communities. Local divisions were generated by new laws that required the Catholic clergy, and, later, artisans, to declare their loyalty to the new constitution.

The choice was an agonizing one for clergy and artisans alike. Refuse the loyalty oath and lose your position and receive punishment as a rebel; take the oath and face retaliation from the many members of the community who oppose your betrayal of your faith, your choice of loyalty to outsiders versus members of your own community. For the clergy, in particular, the choice involved severe conflicts of personal interests with matters of religious faith. Not surprisingly, the clergy split: "The application of the required oath in January, 1791, in effect created two clergies, the 'Constitutional' and the 'Refractory,' those who took the oath and those who refused it. The Refractories had signified their resistance to the new religious order; they were to be replaced by Constitutionals as soon as possible. The Constitutionals had thrown in their lot with the Revolution; they kept their posts or received better ones" (Tilly 1964, p. 242).

The same mechanism divided other social groups through the extension of the oath requirement to other parts of the population and the second-order consequences of the establishment of two separate churches. "The new oath of Liberty and Equality, at the end of 1792, again brought agitation, division, and the resignation of municipalities. As in the case of the earlier decisions of the clergy, the requirement of a public oath forced even the temporizers to declare where they stood, and thus served to hasten the bifurcation of the population into opposing parties. It crystallized the conflict" (Tilly 1964, p. 275). Artisans, like the clergy, were split into two camps, and they played prominent roles as leaders and activists on both sides of the conflict. The refractory clergy lost their positions in church and government, leading shadow churches and co-

ordinating underground resistance to the new revolutionary authorities. Divisions spread by forcing others who were uncommitted to make a choice: “Moderates were squeezed between the factions. The sheer inevitability of a choice between attendance and nonattendance at the services of the Constitutionals in a country where church attendance had been close to universal forced the waverers to place themselves in one camp or another. This decision made, the immoderates of each camp pressed for further proofs of faith from those on their side of the line” (Tilly 1964, p. 288).

What is so familiar about Tilly’s account is the way that rapid shifts in political institutions altered local contexts in ways that forced individuals into difficult choices that in turn crystallized new political identities. The entire range of local social groups was split: “Participation in the counterrevolution cut boldly across class lines. . . . No simple scheme of class alignment can account adequately for the division of forces in 1793. For that reason, we should give severe scrutiny to any attempts to explain the counterrevolution in terms of the problems, attitudes, or actions of a single class, be it peasant, noble, clergy, bourgeois, or some other one” (Tilly 1964, p. 330). There was even division among local bourgeois, the group most openly identified with the revolution and who, as a group, appeared to have the most to gain.¹⁴

Similar processes are evident in studies of guerilla insurgencies that pay close attention to the interplay of contending forces in local contexts. These studies describe a local struggle for sovereignty between the central government and organized local insurgents. Shifts in the local balance of power force certain local residents into difficult choices. When government authority appears secure, local property owners side strongly with the forces of order, because they have much to lose in policies to redistribute land. When local insurgents are strong enough to establish alternative underground governments, and are able to drive away government officials through campaigns of assassination and take retribution against their richest supporters, local contexts fundamentally alter political choice. Under these circumstances middle peasants—propertied, self-sufficient farmers—are well known to flock to the revolutionary movement in large numbers, often moving into leadership positions. They do so precisely

¹⁴“The considerable number of bourgeois named in the interrogations raises some questions about the Revolutionary propensities of their class. At least some of them joined the counterrevolution” (Tilly 1964, p. 330). Tilly’s findings about the divisions among all social classes were anticipated by earlier statistical analyses of the social origins of those victimized by the Terror for opposition to the revolution, many for refusing the constitutional oath: “The split in society was perpendicular, not horizontal. The Terror was an intra-class, not an inter-class war” (Greer 1935, p. 98). Traugott (1980) demonstrates how these class splits occurred in a later Parisian insurrection.

because they have property to lose—and an alliance with the underground movement is a way to prevent victimization and keep their land. Once they make this decision they have crossed a line of no return, and they are hunted by the authorities as insurgents (Benton 1992; Race 1972).

CONCLUSION

This analysis suggests a series of general points about the analysis of political movements. The first is about the centrality of choice—but of a specific variety. Recent approaches to the question—from structural to strategic to cognitive—while offering widely varying models of political choice, nonetheless share common features. They have been applied almost exclusively to the relatively narrow question of whether to join in or support a movement once it is already underway—in circumstances where the analyst presumes to know the participants' motives and further presumes that the movement would benefit that individual if it succeeded. Further, they all assume a context in which individuals are able to choose by applying the decision rules and are subject to the structural or cultural influences that the analyst imagines.

We have seen, however, that Red Guard factionalism (or the Vendée counterrevolution) grew out of a series of highly consequential choices that individuals made between two starkly opposed alternatives in a context of considerable political ambiguity. Rapid shifts in these contexts—first due to the external interventions of work teams, and later due to their abrupt withdrawal—disrupted the ability of individuals to come to consistent choices, regardless of how the process is understood. During a crucial seven-week period, interests due to social status and structural influences operating through university power structures provided no clear guide to this choice, because so many power structures were disrupted by work teams, and the conflicts were about varied and changing work team actions, not the features of the status quo ante. Strategic individual calculations would have to be made in highly uncertain circumstances that changed unpredictably. And actors who tried to act in accord with disinterested political principles, or who responded to symbolic or moral appeals, would have been faced with a welter of competing claims and counterclaims by political authorities and classmates, all of whom declared their allegiance to the thought and intentions of Chairman Mao.¹⁵ During this crucial period, the abilities of individuals to choose a

¹⁵ Institutionalist conceptions of action that emphasize the “taken for granted” nature of organized political life (March and Olsen 1989) tend to downplay the role of conscious choice in many dimensions of political behavior. Paradoxically, however, actors in this conception would nonetheless be most deeply affected by rapid shifts in context, be-

course of political action—regardless of the model of choice one adopts—were disrupted. Yet choices *were* made, and they generated urgent new political interests that motivated participants in the immediately ensuing period.

The second general point is therefore about the centrality of the *context* for political choice. At first glance, this may not appear to be a novel implication. There is already a strong tradition in political sociology of careful structural analysis of the local contexts that breed political movements. Different forms of economic enterprise, for example, are seen to generate different types of rural social movements (Paige 1975), or the structure of craft and community networks creates the foundation for different types of urban insurgencies (Gould 1991, 1993). Understanding local social and political structures in this sense is an essential element of any understanding of political context. However, the central implication of this analysis is about the consequences of *shifts* within local contexts, not cross-contextual variation in their (stable) features. These shifts are initiated by changes in political institutions that originate outside the immediate context, they can be abrupt, and their impact can be felt in a short period. Therefore a detailed understanding of the context's social and political structures on the eve of the movement will not necessarily help one predict political choices of individuals based on their structural position. Sudden shifts in context can rapidly alter the implications of social position for political choice and disrupt the connections between social structure and politics that we might otherwise expect. This is the central lesson to be learned from our critical scrutiny of interest group explanations of Red Guard politics.

An emphasis on *shifts* in political context may also appear, at first glance, to be a familiar notion. Analysts of political movements have long emphasized the impact of changes in the political environment in the rise and fall of political movements. "Political opportunity structure" invokes a range of contextual features that are known to facilitate or impede political mobilization—the disposition of national and regional governments and forces of repression, national legislation and court decision, the disposition of the mass media, and in particular the responses of other organized political forces (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1999; Tilly 1978). However, political opportunity structure is a macropolitical context that bears on the activities of movements as collective actors. It assumes that the interests that motivate actors are already formed (and well understood), and that they have already found an organized expression. The shifts in local context highlighted in this study, by contrast, influence the formation

cause it is precisely in these circumstances that what is "taken for granted" in fact can no longer be.

of political motives and identities—the *who* and *why* of a political movement rather than the *how* or *how successful*. The analysis of political opportunity addresses a different question, and to the extent that it assumes rather than demonstrates local contexts for political choice, it is vulnerable to the very same type of error committed in interest group explanations of Red Guard factions.¹⁶

The final point is about the role of historical narrative in establishing the context for political choice. By documenting sequences of events, political interactions, and conflicts in a designated period of time, historical narrative has a strategic role to play in the evaluation of theories about politics (see Bates et al. 1998). In the present study, the characterization of university contexts was based on narratives reconstructed from various historical sources for 22 universities in one city. The call for narrative forms of analysis in recent years has usually been framed in broad meta-theoretical terms (Abbott 1988; McAdam and Sewell 2001; Sewell 1996), or as novel methodologies for analyzing event sequences (Abbott and Hrycak 1990; Griffin 1993). This study designates a specific role for historical narrative in the evaluation of certain theories about politics. It does not entail new metatheoretical assumptions or innovative methods for handling data, and it does not in itself constitute a new type of theory.

The role of narrative depends on the empirical implications of the theory being evaluated. Narrative realism is the only way to document the shifts in political context that can have a major impact during the formative stages of a political movement. These are shifts that can invalidate actors' certainties about their social and political statuses, and stress existing social networks to the breaking point. They can complicate and confound the strategic calculations of the most perceptive and analytically capable of actors. And they can render highly problematic the values, cultural symbols, and everything else that represents the taken-for-granted nature of social life. When choices are made under these circumstances, new cleavages, political motives, and identities are created, rapidly altering the political landscape.¹⁷

Ignoring these rapid contextual shifts can be costly. It can lead to an analysis that misidentifies participants and their motives, endowing them with structural or cultural sources of interests and solidarity that did not

¹⁶ The earliest interest group explanations (Lee 1978; Walder 1978) in fact explicitly viewed the Cultural Revolution as an unprecedented opportunity for disaffected groups to pursue their interests in altering the status quo—efforts that were opposed by the countermobilization of more favored, conservative forces.

¹⁷ This is a different point than the finding that participation in a political movement can change individual identities in ways observable in former activists' subsequent life course (McAdam 1989; Yang 2000). The changes in identity referred to here are more abrupt and serve to constitute the political movement itself.

in fact exist. Analyzing rhetoric as discourse torn from context—in this case rhetoric about conservatives and rebels and vanquished enemies who were mere reactionaries protecting their vested interests—can ensnare the analyst in the willful deceptions of political actors. History and narrative are indispensable for the evaluation of theories that rely on largely unrecognized, undocumented, and potentially erroneous assumptions about the contexts for political choice.

Appreciating the potential impact of contextual shifts, on the other hand, can provide clues about the mechanisms that create sudden changes in the political landscape. It should sensitize analysts to the way that changes in political institutions disrupt the choices that individuals might be expected to make based on the prior features of their social or political settings. It should diminish the perceived importance of disputes among proponents of structural, rational, and cultural theories. For in fact it is only in context that the processes specified in any of the extant theories work themselves out. The close analysis of contextual shifts therefore presents a challenge, and an opportunity, for all extant theories of politics.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1
SAMPLE OF UNIVERSITY CASE HISTORIES

Institution	No. of Students in 1966	District
Qinghua University	10,673	Haidian
Beijing University	8,917	Haidian
Beijing Steel Institute	5,000	Haidian
Beijing Aeronautics Institute	4,787	Haidian
Beijing Post and Telecommunications Institute	4,645	Haidian
Beijing Mining Institute	4,121	Haidian
Beijing Geology Institute	4,055	Haidian
Beijing Petroleum Institute	3,920	Haidian
Beijing Normal University	3,602	Haidian
Beijing Industrial University	3,400	Chaoyang
Beijing Normal Institute	3,400	Haidian
Beijing Agricultural Machinery Institute	3,034	Haidian
Chinese University of Science and Technology	3,034	Shijingshan
Beijing Agricultural University	2,959	Haidian
Chinese People's University	2,519	Haidian
Beijing Railway Institute	2,290	Haidian
Beijing Forestry Institute	2,200	Haidian
Beijing Foreign Languages Institute	1,835	Haidian
Beijing Institute of Politics and Law	1,628	Haidian
Beijing Light Industrial Institute	1,228	Haidian
Beijing No. 2 Foreign Languages Institute	1,131	Chaoyang
Beijing Sports Institute	1,028	Haidian
Total student population in sample	79,406	
Total student population in Beijing	111,157	

SOURCES.—Beijing Statistical Bureau (1990, pp. 481 and 488), Gao Yi (1982, p. 18), Li Xiaofeng (1992, pp. 53, 99, and 104), and published university histories of the kind cited in table A2.

TABLE A2
SOURCES FOR UNIVERSITY CASE HISTORIES

Institution/Sources	Type of Source
Beijing Aeronautics Institute:	
Beijing Aeronautics Institute Red Flag (1966a, 1966b)	Red Guard pamphlets
Beijing Aeronautics Institute Red Flag (1967)	Wall poster collection
Shen Shituan (2000)	School history
Beijing Agricultural University:	
<i>Xin nongda</i> (New Agricultural University), April 22, 1967; May 1, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Wang Buzheng (1995)	School history
Beijing Agricultural Machinery Institute:	
<i>Dongfanghong zhanbao</i> (East Is Red War Bulletin), April 7 and 19, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Foreign Languages Institute:	
<i>Liu.yiliu zhanbao</i> (June 16 War Bulletin), November 19, 1966; December 16, 1966	Red Guard newspaper
<i>Hongweibing</i> (Red Guard), October 19, 1966; October 28, 1966	Red Guard newspaper
<i>Shoudu hongweibing</i> (Capital Red Guard), September 30, 1966	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Forestry Institute:	
<i>Bei Lin Dongfanghong</i> (Beijing Forestry East is Red), February 16, 1967; April 6, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Forestry Institute East is Red (1966)	Wall poster collection
Beijing Geology Institute	
Beijing Geology Institute East is Red (1966, 1967)	Red Guard pamphlets
<i>Dongfanghong</i> (East is Red), April 12, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Xiao and Turner (1998, pp. 146–288)	Memoir
Beijing Industrial University:	
Beijing Industrial University East is Red Commune (1966)	Wall poster collection
<i>Dongfanghong</i> (East is Red), April 13, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Li Rongfa (2000)	School history
Beijing Institute of Politics and Law:	
Chinese University of Politics and Law, History Editorial Group (2002)	School history
<i>Zhengfa gongshe</i> (Politics and Law Commune), April 16, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Light Industrial Institute	
<i>Hong ying</i> (Red Eagle), May 6, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Mining Institute:	
<i>Dongfanghong</i> (East is Red), April 25, 1967	Red Guard Newspaper
Beijing No. 2 Foreign Languages Institute:	
<i>Hongweibao</i> (Red Guard News), April 12, 1967; June 24, 1967	Red Guard newspaper

TABLE A2 (Continued)

Institution/Sources	Type of Source
Beijing Normal Institute: <i>Jinggangshan</i> (Jinggang Mountain), May 4, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Normal University: Beijing Normal University Jinggangshan Rebel Corps (1967)	Red Guard pamphlet
<i>Jinggangshan</i> (Jinggang Mountain), January 14, 1967; April 25, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Petroleum Institute: <i>Changzheng</i> (Long March), June 1, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
<i>Daqing gongshe</i> (Daqing Commune), April 15, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Yu Shicheng (2003)	School history
Beijing Post and Telecommunications Institute: <i>Bei you dongfanghong</i> (Beijing Post East is Red), April 3 and 7, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Revolutionary Rebel General Headquarters (1967)	Red Guard pamphlet
Beijing Railway Institute: <i>Tiedao hongqi</i> (Railway Red Flag), May 21, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Sports Institute: <i>Tiyu zhanbao</i> (Sports War Bulletin), April 8, 1967; May 6, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing Steel Institute: <i>Dongfanghong</i> (East is Red), April 9 and 15, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
<i>Xin Gangyuan</i> (New Steel Institute), April 15, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Beijing University: Beijing University Cultural Revolution Committee (1966a, 1966b, 1967)	Wall poster collections
Wang et al. (1998)	School history
Zhang Chengxian (1999)	Memoir
Chinese People's University: <i>Xin Renda</i> (New Peoples University), April 27, 1967 ...	Red Guard newspaper
<i>Renda sanhong</i> (Peoples University Triple Red), April 27, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Chinese University of Science and Technology: <i>Dongfanghong</i> (East is Red), April 26, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Qinghua University: Fang and Zhang (2001)	School history
<i>Jinggangshan</i> (Jinggang Mountain), December 10, 1966; April 1, 1967	Red Guard newspaper
Qinghua University Jinggangshan Red Guards (1966)	Wall poster collection
Qinghua University Jinggangshan United General Headquarters (1967)	Wall poster collection
Shen Ruhuai (2004)	Memoir

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