

"Had Mao died in 1956, his achievements would have been immortal. Had he died in 1966, he would still have been a great man. But he died in 1976. Alas, what can one say?"¹
- Chen Yun

Despite his celebrated status as a founding father, war hero, and poet, Mao Zedong is often placed within the pantheon of totalitarian leaders, amongst the ranks of Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler. Mao is widely known for being at the helm one of the most murderous regimes, with millions of deaths caused by classicide, famine, and political rivalry. One of the deadliest eras under his reign was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in which millions were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, disgraced, led to suicide, maimed, and killed. During this tumultuous decade, Mao's personality cult reached its climax, and thousands wreaked chaos in his name, resulting in a factionalism-fueled civil war that ravaged the nation, stunting the nation's economic, educational, political, and artistic growth for years. Although generally discouraged and hindered by the powerful single-party state, Chinese historiography has been largely defined by its interest in Mao's legacy – namely the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and how his personality cult shaped those events.

Although the Cultural Revolution ended over 40 years ago, the historiography of the Cultural Revolution has been rather meager in comparison to other recent historical events. However, since the centennial of Mao's birth, there has been a steady stream of literature on both Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Sinologists have found the Cultural Revolution to be an inexhaustible topic, ripe with discussion and debate. However, in mainland China, discussing the Cultural Revolution is still highly discouraged. Following Mao's death, dialogue about the Cultural Revolution became increasingly more public and readily available, especially in the form of former Red Guard memoirs and "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue*). Scar literature was

¹ Philip Short, *Mao: A Life* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co, 2000), 629.

a cathartic form of literature in which writers described the suffering and persecution of cadres and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. Although Deng Xiaoping refused to outright denounce Mao, similar to Khrushchev's secret speech, the moderate liberalization that occurred immediately following Mao's death resulted in such exposés being widely published and circulated. Beyond being cathartic, the scar literature of the "Beijing spring" of 1978-1979 was also a means to criticize the Communist Party under the guise, and through the means, of placing blame squarely on the Gang of Four and criticizing Mao.

Before the Cultural Revolution even occurred, prominent American journalist, Edgar Snow, was one of the few Westerners to document the infancy of Communism in China and the Chinese Communist Revolution. Snow and Mao developed a lifelong mutual rapport, and Snow's *Red Star Over China*, published in 1937, which chronicled the Long March and the ensuing events, not only glorified Mao but also presented the emergence of Communism in China for the first time to an international, notably Western, audience. Snow interviewed Mao several times, and despite presenting a romanticized version of Communist China, in one of his later works – *The Long Revolution*, published in 1972 – Snow is the first to report the nascent personality cult.

Although the earliest works on the Cultural Revolution were written before it *technically* ended, the majority of the historiography of the Cultural Revolution exploded on the scene immediately following the centennial of Mao's birth in 1993, and since then, there has been a consistent outpouring of several publications a year for the past ten years. The Cultural Revolution has been a relatively unexplored pocket for most historians, and the majority of works are being written by the same handful of prominent sinologists. In 1974, the first volume of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* by Roderick MacFarquhar, the leading expert on the

Cultural Revolution,² was published. The second and third volumes of the trilogy were published in 1983 and 1997, respectively. In 1987, Lowell Dittmer's *China's Continuous Revolution* was published. Prominent Swedish sinologist Michael Schoenhals' *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969: Not a Dinner Party* was published a few years later in 1996. That same year, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* by Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao was also released. In 2006, Schoenhals and MacFarquhar published what is now considered the utmost seminal work of the Cultural Revolution – *Mao's Last Revolution. The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* by New Zealander sinologist Paul Clark was published and Mobo C.F. Gao's treatise, *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, were both published in 2008. In 2011, *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* by Richard Kurt Craus and *Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China* by James Palmer were published. Other prominent sinologists include Jonathan Spence, Jonathan Unger, Lucian Pye, Richard Baum, and Maurice Meisner.

The majority of the aforementioned histories on the Cultural Revolution have been largely concerned with detailing the “history” of the events, which, to this day, are largely shrouded in official secrecy by the Chinese Communist Party. However, besides being concerned with dates, facts, and events, the historiography of both Mao and the Cultural Revolution has also been largely influenced by other interdisciplinary texts, such as biographies, memoirs, and art theory pieces. Published in 1999, *Mao: A Life* by Philip Short chronicles Mao's ascension to prominence and how this former peasant became the revolutionary Communist leader and “secular deity” he is today. In the same year, *Mao: A Biography* by Ross Terrill was published. While Short was more concerned with Mao's ideological standpoint, Terrill is interested in

² Helen Gao, “Q. and A.: Roderick MacFarquhar on the Cultural Revolution and China Today,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-macfarquhar.html>.

examining Mao's less savory habits, such as promiscuity, and how the myth and humanity of Mao were largely irreconcilable and yet beneficial to his legendary status. Lee Feigon's largely sympathetic work, *Mao: A Reinterpretation* was published in 2002. The most prominent of these biographies has been Jung Chang and John Halliday's scathing biography, *Mao: The Unknown Story*. The vehemently anti-Mao work, which names Mao as the greatest mass murderer in human history, was published in 2005.

Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the majority of the scholarship on the Cultural Revolution has been overwhelmingly focused on the "facts:" What was the Cultural Revolution? How did it come about? Who is to blame? How many victims were there? Unlike other historical topics, the historiography of Mao has not been in line with contemporaneous historiographical trends, nor have the historiographical lens progressed in a linear fashion. Within the narrow frame of historiography, many works on the Cultural Revolution have failed to go beyond the "great men" historiographical approach and have focused much of their attention on Mao and his actions. The discourse of the Cultural Revolution has been largely centered around Mao's culpability – namely that Mao was in fact culpable and that he purposefully cultivated his own personality cult. However, recent literature has been less critical of Mao and acknowledges that Mao was but one piece of the puzzle – after all, it was Liu Shaoqi who is considered the main architect of the personality cult, who ordered the publication of the revered *Little Red Book*, and who elevated and deified Mao to the party cadres as a means to secure his own political legitimacy.

A very recent trend in the Mao historiography has been going beyond trying to articulate what the Cultural Revolution was and trying to examine the everyday experiences of the ordinary people who were involved. This scholarship has utilized the "bottom-up" perspective of social

history, granting greater agency to Mao's followers. This shift is visible within works such as *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* by Wu Yiching (2014) and *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History* by Frank Dikötter (2016). In *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*, Wu analyzes how the movement was originally orchestrated from above, but quickly evolved into a grassroots movement, and would ultimately leave the most faithful of Mao's followers cynical and disillusioned. In *A People's History*, utilizing previously classified party documents, such as secret police reports, and in-depth interviews, Dikötter gives a voice to the voiceless and unearths how ordinary people "buried Maoism," thus undermining the pervasive image of conformity that is often taken for granted and unquestioned in most of the scholarship on the Cultural Revolution. In a similar vein, recent scholarship has also been interested in analyzing more localized stories instead of grand sweeping, all-encompassing histories. In 2017, *The Killing Wind: A Chinese County's Descent into Madness During the Cultural Revolution* was published. The work by Hecheng Tan examined what is now known as the Daoxian massacre – the mass killings of more than 4,000 "class enemies," including children and the elderly, over the course of 66 days in 1967. Rather than attempt to present a singular truth on what the Cultural Revolution was or what it represents, these more localized works can uncover the multiplicity of realities that occurred.

While the historiography of the Cultural Revolution has been largely concerned with facts and dates, the historiography of the personality cult of Mao has been mostly framed within similar personality cults of other totalitarian leaders. An exemplary work in this vein is Paul Hollander's *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship*, published in 2016. Although Western historiography places Mao within the ranks of other dictators, Chinese historians are more inclined to place Mao within the cultural context

of Chinese leaders. For example, while Hollander aligns Mao's cult with those of other leaders, Xuezhi Guo positions Mao and his cult amongst a lineage of other Chinese political leaders in *The Ideal Chinese Political Leader: A Historical and Cultural Perspective*, published in 2002. A similar work is *When Heroes Pass Away: The Invention of a Chinese Communist Pantheon* by Dachang Cong, published in 1997.

Beyond social history, there has also been a rather substantial amount of scholarship regarding both the propagandistic art of the period, and contemporary artistic production that is both influenced and critical of art from the Cultural Revolution. Published in 2012, Barbara Mittler's *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* is similar to other predecessors who discuss both the art of the Cultural Revolution and how its influences can still be found in modern-day China. In August 1968, Mao gifted a crate of mangoes he had received from the Pakistani foreign minister to factory workers who had helped quell the factional violence between Red Guards at Qinhua University, thus marking the transition of Mao's faith in the Red Guards to the proletariat. Named after the eponymous exhibition at the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, *Mao's Golden Mangoes and the Cultural Revolution* by Alfreda Murck (2013) traces the history of this momentous event, the spontaneous "mango cult" that blossomed shortly afterwards, and how its legacy has resonated in subsequent artworks. Other works interested in the propaganda artwork of the period include: *Cultural Revolution Posters and Memorabilia* by James and Victoria Edison (2005); *Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution* by Helen Wang (2008) – based on the titular exhibit at the British Museum; *Art in Turmoil: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976* edited by Richard Kang (2010); and *Museum Representations of Maoist China: From Cultural Revolution to Commie Kitsch* by Amy Jane Barnes (2014).

Within China, the scholarship and public discourse on the Cultural Revolution has been largely constrained by the marked silence of the Chinese Communist Party. Following Deng Xiaoping's death in 1997, there was a period of liberalization and relaxation. However, what is most difficult about covering the Cultural Revolution, or any event since the beginning of the reign of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, is that the party is still very much in power. As such, what is released, discussed, and debated is at the mercy of official party rhetoric. Even in 2018, half a century after the outbreak of the Revolution, an official state-endorsed school textbook has been accused of heavily censoring text on the Cultural Revolution, as well as omitting key elements, and condensing the already short text.³ There has been notable silence on the issue – the Communist Party has been notably reluctant to open any discussion concerning the Cultural Revolution, and the victims have never been allowed to mourn considering many cemeteries which hold the victims of the Cultural Revolution are considered off-limits and are protected by surveillance cameras and barbed wire.⁴

What appears to be happening is a blatant contradiction – Mao's popularity is evident in every media of art, Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants⁵ proliferate, and every market stall hawks commodities and relics from the period, and yet the public discourse is relatively mum on the topic, the party frowns upon discussing the events, and commemoration is largely nonexistent. In 2011, the 90th anniversary of the Communist party ushered in a new resurgence

³ Mandy Zuo, "Controversy over Chinese textbook's Cultural Revolution chapter as state publisher denies censorship," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), January 11, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2127817/controversy-over-chinese-textbooks-cultural-revolution-chapter>.

⁴ Chris Buckley, "Chaos of Cultural Revolution Echoes at a Lonely Cemetery, 50 Years Later," *New York Times*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-chongqing.html?mtrref=undefined>.

⁵ Jamie Fullerton, "This Restaurant Celebrates a Brutal Era in Chinese History," *Munchies (Vice)*, May 15, 2017, https://munchies.vice.com/en_us/article/pg73jb/this-restaurant-celebrates-a-brutal-era-in-chinese-history.

of “Red Culture,”⁶ further inspiring works on the tumultuous period. Despite its initial rocky release of Feng Xiaogang’s film, *Youth*, a love-story set to the backdrop of the turbulent era, was the top-grossing film in China when it was released two months after its initial release date, amassing \$44.4 million its opening weekend.⁷ Red Guard memoirs are still tremendously popular, and with the Internet they have become even more accessible to the general public. Within the past few years, former Red Guards have chronicled their experiences through blogs,⁸ issued public (potentially state-orchestrated) apologies to their victims,⁹ and become popular school-assigned books in the states, likened to *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *I Am Malala*.¹⁰

Overall, the Cultural Revolution is largely ignored, or at least not openly spoken about, in China, representing a mass form of public amnesia. Whether this is due to lack of interest, or due to stringent censorship, remains to be seen. As such, within China, “the domestic story remains tightly controlled, and in any realm the unofficial history of the PRC cannot yet be written.”¹¹ However, the relatively scant historiography in the West is not due to lack of interest, but more so an effect of the “archive gap.” Beyond the sanctioned study of “Party history” (*dang shi*),¹² access to documents from the Cultural Revolution are largely unavailable for obvious reasons.

⁶ Louisa Lim, “Chinese Reopen Debate Over Chairman Mao’s Legacy,” *National Public Radio*, June 22, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/06/22/137231508/chinese-reopen-debate-over-chairman-maos-legacy>.

⁷ Matt DeButts, “Cultural Revolution movie ‘Youth’ tops China’s box office as Pixar’s ‘Coco’ continues its surge,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-china-box-office-youth-20171220-story.html>.

⁸ Tom Philips, “Fifty years on, one of Mao’s ‘little generals’ exposes horror of the Cultural Revolution,” *Guardian*, May 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/07/mao-little-general-horror-cultural-revolution>.

⁹ Anthony Kuhn, “Chinese Red Guards Apologize, Reopening a Dark Chapter,” *National Public Radio*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/01/23/265228870/chinese-red-guards-apologize-reopening-a-dark-chapter>.

¹⁰ Ji-li Jiang’s *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). A new edition is being released January 30, 2018: <http://www.bankstreetbooks.com/book/9780064462082>.

¹¹ William C. Kirby, “Archives and Histories in Twentieth-Century China,” in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, eds. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 440.

¹² Kirby, “Archives and Histories in Twentieth-Century China,” 440.

In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party passed the resolution, “On some questions regarding the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC,” which famously declared Chairman Mao as “70 percent right and 30 percent wrong.” In this same resolution, the Party declared that the Cultural Revolution was “responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the country, and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic.” This disavowal maintained Mao’s legacy and left the culpability of the violence in those who could no longer defend themselves – Mao and the Gang of Four – while simultaneously absolving the following administrations and legitimating their history. After all, if the Party completely disavowed Mao, it would naturally follow that the Party itself would come under scrutiny. Six years later, in an effort to present at least a semblance of transparency, the CCP attempted to make historical archives more accessible. After the passage of the Archive Law of 1987, it was decreed that diplomatic and other archives are to become open after 30 years. However, despite the lessening of restrictions on Chinese archives, the majority of archives are largely unavailable to historians. There are notable exemptions of act that, in effect, render the law useless and ineffectual for anyone besides official historiographers. These exemptions include: matters of state, public security, national defense, and foreign relations, not to mention, in the case of foreign scholars, matters unsuitable for foreigners.¹³ These exemptions obviously present giant loopholes in which Chinese officials can argue that pretty much any archival material that doesn’t coincide or corroborate the official party line is off-limits. The available archives were purposely curated to expose only what was permissible and would serve the party – while the party has openly encouraged historical materials on Japanese atrocities in

¹³ Kirby, “Archives and Histories in Twentieth-Century China,” 440.

China, “the massacres of Chinese, by Chinese, during the history of Chinese Communism and of the People’s Republic,” have been carefully omitted.¹⁴

With all the obstacles, perhaps the secrecy and censorship surrounding the Cultural Revolution has been an enticing provocation for sinologists rather than a deterrent. This paper will trace the efforts of these persistent sinologists within the historiography of the personality cult of Mao, and in particular, its intensification during the Cultural Revolution. I will be tracing historiographical trends within and between the following works: *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* by Jay Lifton (1968); *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* by Anita Chan (1985); *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* by Geremie Barmé (1996), *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Consumption of a Personality Cult* by Melissa Schrift (2001); *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual* by Daniel Leese (2011); and *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China’s Cultural Revolution* by Pang Laikwan (2017). Each title has been published approximately eight years after the prior one. These works cover a span of nearly fifty years and encompass a wide variety of historiographical lenses, ranging from psycho history to political history to cultural history.

Boasting the status of being the world’s most populous nation, and closely following the United States with the world’s second-largest economy, the People’s Republic of China is simultaneously revered for being one of the world’s earliest civilizations and for being one of the most rapidly-advancing nations, leading the way in infrastructure, ecommerce, and renewable energy initiatives. Between thousands of years of rich history and its status as a burgeoning global power, Chinese culture and society is defined by both its past and future. After thousands

¹⁴ Kirby, “Archives and Histories in Twentieth-Century China,” 439.

of years of dynastic rule, the Republic of China was founded in 1912 following the Xinhai Revolution. Political and ideological strife between the ruling Nationalist Party of China, or the Kuomintang, and the Communist Party of China fueled the Chinese Civil War that lasted from 1927 to 1949. Briefly interrupted by a momentary truce during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937-1945, the Chinese Civil War ended with the Chinese Communist Party seizing control of mainland China and the Kuomintang retreating to Taiwan. The communist revolutionary, Mao Zedong, proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic in China on October 1, 1949. Formerly the commander-in-chief of the Red Army, Mao became a dominant figure and de facto leader of the Communist Party. The founding father of the PRC, Mao served as the Party Chairman until his death in 1976.

Initially popular with the peasantry through a violent system of land reform in which thousands of landlords were killed, Mao attempted to solidify his popular support during the Great Leap Forward. The disastrous economic campaign aimed to rapidly transform the largely agrarian and rural nation into a socialist society through collectivization and industrialization at break-neck speeds. The campaign resulted in the deadliest famine recorded with an estimated 30 million deaths. After the catastrophe of the ill-fated reform movement, which killed millions of and disillusioned those who suffered and survived, Mao and the CCP ushered in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as a means to strengthen what appeared to be the weakening of Mao's grip on his people and his influence within the party. Although widely disputed, with a range from the minimum of 400,000 casualties upwards of several millions, countless lives were destroyed, with widespread torture, "struggle sessions," imprisonment, public humiliation, murder, and even instances of cannibalism.¹⁵ The period of intense political upheaval affected

¹⁵ See *The Killing Wind: A Chinese County's Descent into Madness During the Cultural Revolution* by Hecheng Tan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

every aspect of Chinese society – schools and universities were shut down for students to criticize teachers, spouses reported each other, children spied on their parents, and the state halted many of its functions until 1969.

One of the earliest works on Mao's culpability and the Cultural Revolution was published only two years into the decade of chaos in 1968. Dr. Robert Jay Lifton's *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Cultural Revolution* is one of the, if not the, earliest works that analyzed Mao's role in the revolution, as well as his personality cult.¹⁶ Lifton's work differs from later scholarship in a very significant manner – Mao was still alive while his work was written. While later scholarship had the benefit of viewing at the events in retrospect, Lifton wrote *Revolutionary Immortality* at the height of the revolution. This is significant considering the lack of information available to Western historians, much less anyone outside of China at the time, on the events of the revolution. Also, Lifton is one of the only historians, or perhaps the only historian, who has approached the topic through the controversial lens of psychohistory. Despite Lifton's unique psychohistorical perspective, he falls within the trap early historians of the Cultural Revolution found themselves in by being solely interested in finding Mao's culpability for the Cultural Revolution, ignoring the spontaneous, popular nature of the movement.

Revolutionary Immortality utilizes a psychohistorical framework to construct a proposed analysis on what exactly happened during the Cultural Revolution and how it came to be, mainly focused within the bloody first two years of the period. Lifton attempts to address how the period of violence was even possible. Refuting those who put forth a simple explanation of "power struggle," Lifton contends that the Cultural Revolution was not a power struggle between

¹⁶ Robert Jay Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Cultural Revolution* (New York: The Norton Library, 1976).

opposing factions, but rather a struggle for “power over death.”¹⁷ Even in recent scholarship, the causes of the Cultural Revolution have been largely ascribed to Mao’s desire to purge untrustworthy cadres, or those who opposed them.

A violent and cathartic “human experiment,” Lifton views the revolution as a symbolic grasp for immortality. Written while Mao was still alive, Lifton views the revolution as a dying, or at least aging and/or ill, heroic figure’s attempt to preserve the fervent passion of Communist China against a symbolic death. This desire to construct something that will live beyond oneself is a universal theme in human history for Lifton. Mao’s ardent call, or at least condoning, of violence during the Cultural Revolution is interpreted by Lifton as representative of Mao’s fears that the revolution and the party would take the “capitalist road” after his death; a “symbolic death,” not physical death. While Mao had previously been motivated, and sensitively affected by deaths, including those of his siblings and the execution of his first wife and comrades under the Kuomintang, Lifton explains Mao’s “loss of confidence in his claim to immortality,” marking his transition from great leader to despot in an attempt to repeatedly enact the deaths of his enemies to perpetually become an “eternal survivor.”¹⁸

Lifton utilizes a variety of sources, including endless quotations from Mao; Mao’s written works, including essays and poems; and interviews with the Chairman. Notably, Lifton does not engage with other historians on this topic, but this makes sense considering Lifton was one of the first historians to write on the subject, considering his work was first published immediately following the violent excesses of the revolution, which some would contend extended until the book was re-published in 1976. Known as the foremost psychohistorian, or as he prefers, “a historically minded psychiatrist,” Lifton has frequently examined the

¹⁷ Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*, 8.

¹⁸ Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*, 93.

psychological causes and effects of wars and political violence and the concept of thought reform throughout his works. The psychohistorical lens Lifton utilizes is carefully used as merely a framework, rather than an attempt to singlehandedly assign a cause/culprit to the Cultural Revolution. Lifton does appear to speak in conversation with other psychiatrists and psychologists, for instance, drawing upon Erik H. Erikson's concept of ego psychology, and visibly makes use of his formal psychiatric education and experience.

Although psychohistory has often been criticized as mere speculation due to lack of evidence,¹⁹ Lifton preemptively refutes these claims by noting that he has actively avoided the frequent error in psychohistory of "viewing large historical events as nothing but manifestations of someone's individual psychopathology."²⁰ Lifton utilizes his psychohistorical framework to suggest that the Cultural Revolution "can be understood as a quest for revolutionary immortality."²¹ Lifton does not attempt to pathologize or diagnose Mao, but merely attempts to understand him and the role the man, his legend, his Thought, and his cult, took part in for the "historical discontinuity" of the Cultural Revolution. The revolution is regarded as ultimately being cannibalistic and self-destructive in nature to the power and longevity of the Chinese Communist Party, which, of course, has since been proven incorrect.

In 1985, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guards Generation* by Anita Chan was published. As its title suggests, Chan takes an intimate look into the personality cult by examining several case studies of some of Mao's most devoted youthful followers.²² Chan characterizes the personality cult, namely the widespread and fervent

¹⁹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of History* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015).

²⁰ Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*, xviii.

²¹ Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*, 7.

²² Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1985).

participation of Chinese youth, as a product of the concept of the “authoritarian personality,” as conceptualized by the Frankfurt School. This personality is namely a product of the “political socialization” found in the formal education system in China. Chan derives her assertion through a series of interviews with former Red Guards who were teenagers during the Cultural Revolution, conducted in Hong Kong between 1974 and 1976. Chan herself is a Hong Kong native and found herself fascinated with her friends’ tales of their former exploits, and how passionate the former Red Guards once were, and how disillusioned they had become. While Chan interviewed fourteen former Red Guards, *Children of Mao* focuses on four specific case studies. Although these former Red Guards all came from a bourgeois background, and were all active Red Guards in one manner or another, they all had different experiences. Through these four case studies, Chan outlines four principle types of activists: the conforming activist (who was, coincidentally, the only female of the group); the purist activist; the rebellious activist; and the pragmatic activist.²³

Although the title would suggest the focus would be on the decade of the Cultural Revolution, Chan’s study begins in the 1950s and concludes post-revolution. Chan begins by chronicling the group’s primary school experience, in which character formation and political education were considered paramount. As the children entered adolescence, the demands of political socialization became increasingly demanding, and their education shaped the behavior of the students through peer pressures and a strictly controlled social environment. The students expressed their loyalty in differing manners, resulting in the different categories of activists.

²³ Romer Cornejo Bustamante, review of *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation*, by Anita Chan, *Estudios de Asia y Africa*, April-June 1986, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40313010>.

Although education and upbringing had once been largely familial, by the 1950's, the authority of the family was superseded by the authority of the state and school-learned socialization.

Children of Mao is an outlier amongst the early scholarship of the Cultural Revolution, and is more concerned with how Red Guards became so zealous and agitated during the tumultuous period, rather than immediately pointing blame at Mao. Chan asserts that the Chinese youth were indoctrinated by a carefully curated and centralized state education, rather than placing blame on the families. This assertion is noteworthy considering the fact that much of the previous scholarship viewed the Cultural Revolution as a “specifically Chinese” phenomenon. However, Chan aligns with later scholarship which argues that this feverish personality cult can be found in any society, not just China, and not even just in totalitarian nations.

The “authoritarian personality” is defined as someone who ‘admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time... wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him.’²⁴ Erich Fromm, a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, found that the authoritarian personality could be found in both Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. While the concept of the authoritarian personality was originally conceived by Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, also amongst the humanist Marxist Frankfurt School of philosophers, refuted Fromm’s earlier assertions, and argued that the authoritarian personality was a “latent character structure” that could be found anywhere, “not only in countries experiencing authoritarian convulsions.”²⁵ On the other side of the spectrum, political scientist and sinologist Lucian Pye, and former ambassador, Richard Solomon, argued that such authoritarian personality characteristics were commonly found in China due to the traditionally authoritarian family structure, as well as Chinese culture. However, Chan directly refutes this contention, instead arguing that it is the

²⁴ Chan, *Children of Mao*, 204.

²⁵ Chan, *Children of Mao*, 205.

school and not the family who mainly socializes Chinese children.²⁶ Overall, Chan uses the four case studies of former Red Guards to demonstrate the political socialization of Chinese youth, which was enacted by the centralized state education, not the family. Chan also refutes Orientalist perspectives, and argues that the authoritarian personality was neither an inherently Chinese quality, nor is it only found in authoritarian states.

Published in 1996, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* chronicled the resurgence of Mao's popularity in the late 1980's and early 1990's.²⁷ This resurgence of popularity, known as *Maore*, or "Mao craze," was largely influenced by the impending centenary of Mao's birthday in 1993. Influenced by his experiences as an exchange student at Fudan University in Shanghai during the last few years of the Cultural Revolution, including several direct experiences with "criticism sessions," Barmé traces the ironic revival of interest in Mao during the late 1980s and early 1990s in China. Particularly popular with the youth who had never lived under Mao, the unique "MaoCraze" of this period was marketed in distinctly capitalist ways – ranging from trendy, Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants where cosmopolitan diners would "eat Mao," to cheaply mass-produced Mao badges, reminiscent of the original "object of passionate devotion during the Cultural Revolution." Despite "the vacuum created by officially-enforced silence," all throughout the country, propagandists, commentators, and academics, were now passionately reaffirming, condemning, or questioning Mao's legacy, with a surprising frankness not found, or perhaps possible, during Mao's heyday. Unlike the personality cult of the Cultural Revolution, this newfound obsession with the late Great Leader was devoid entirely of its original class, ethical, and political dimensions. Despite Deng Xiaoping's extended repudiation of both Mao's legacy and the Cultural Revolution, Deng lived

²⁶ Chan, *Children of Mao*, 211.

²⁷ Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

to witness not only the decline of his own popularity, but also the resurgence of the legend of the man he tried so fervently to disavow and erase from China's past. Barmé analyzes this revival through a rich and diverse collection of news articles, memoirs, poetry, fiction, and Communist Party documents.

Barmé traces the evolution of the original personality cult to its revival in the 1990's through memoirs, poetry, fiction, and Communist Party documents. In this anthology of translations, Barmé is attempting to demonstrate the contradictory attitudes of ordinary people towards Mao in the posthumous cult, thus attempting to grant agency similar to later historians. Barmé also offers valuable insights to the scholarship on the Mao cult, continuing the history from the end of the Cultural Revolution to present day. Barmé found that the resurgence of popularity within those who lived through the Cultural Revolution was largely representative of both the deep dissatisfaction of the status quo and a nostalgia for the power and leadership of Mao. For youth, however, Mao represented a "homebred luminary,"²⁸ a powerful symbol of China that took on new youthful forms outside of the carefully curated persona that had been devised by the CCP in earlier years.

Published in 2001, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Consumption of a Personality Cult* details the "biography" of the heavily commodified, envied, and potentially subversive Chairman Mao Badges that proliferated during the Cultural Revolution.²⁹ Melissa Schrift traces the history of Mao badges, from the crude, rudimentary ones created by students in the 1930s, to the increasingly complex and ornate ones fought over at the height of their popularity during the Cultural Revolution, to the precious but few sought-after

²⁸ Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, 47.

²⁹ Melissa Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Mass Consumption of a Personality Cult* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

badges that proliferate now in Chinese markets catered to Westerners and badge collectors. Schrift categorizes the badges chronologically – Yenan badges, during the Yenan period of the Chinese Communist Party; postliberation badges, following the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949; and Cultural Revolution badges, from the early period of the Cultural Revolution. Although Schrift also delineates the Cultural Revolution as occurring from 1966 to 1976, the “Cultural Revolution” period of the badges ends at 1969, following the excesses and violence of the early period when the badges began to be recalled and melted down by the government. The badges would later be recalled again following Mao’s death in 1976.

Although Schrift’s main focus is during the height of the Cultural Revolution, she traces the badges and the personality cult to contemporary China. Published at the turn of the millennium, Schrift is influenced by her firsthand experiences of Mao’s “iconic reemergence in contemporary China following the *Maore* (Mao craze) in the early 1990s,”³⁰ which marked the centenary of Mao’s birthday. Influenced by her personal experiences in China in which she witnessed first-hand the resurrection, or at least the resurfacing, of the personality cult, albeit in a much more openly satirical and “tongue-in-cheek” manner, Schrift details the myriad ways Mao’s image has been repurposed and represented – from sacrilegious pop art, to wildly popular Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants.

Schrift draws upon a wide variety of sources, notably numerous anecdotes from those who lived during the Cultural Revolution, including former Red Guards. These anecdotes are utilized to gain an understanding of the variegated nature of the personality cult and how people maneuvered these relationships. Asserting that there exists a “dialectical relationship between centralized propaganda and public consumption,” Schrift “examines the scope of propaganda

³⁰ Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 155.

strategies and the people's ability to mediate national forces through the consumption of Mao badges." Schrift maintains that "Mao badges provided a way for people to define themselves and to internalize and negotiate a dogmatic nationalist ideology during the Cultural Revolution." Mao badges were initially intended to symbolize the people's devotion to and support of Mao Zedong. However, despite their original intentions, Mao badges, and how they were worn and perceived, took on a life of their own and expanded into other arenas of meaning.³¹ Both the nature of her sources, and her ability to cast doubt upon the homogeneity of the personality cult that so many other scholars insist upon, Schrift demonstrates attention to the agency and autonomy of Chinese citizens otherwise unseen in other scholarship. Schrift grants agency to those who wore these badges, and participated in the Cultural Revolution, not as crazed personality cult members, but as historical actors who worked within, often confining, boundaries of acceptable political behavior and display. This analysis demonstrates Schrift's antithesis to the rigid distinctions between official and popular culture, which she instead views as symbolic exchange.³²

Influenced by her anthropological background, Schrift's first work, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, could be well defined as cultural history. If "cultural history attends to meaning and representation,"³³ Schrift's historiographical inclination is evident through the analysis and history of the Mao badges, and not only what they represent in their iconography, but also what they represented to both the wearers and the, often envious, spectators. Beyond representation, Schrift's work is representative of cultural historians' interest in the sheer nature of the *type* of object she analyzes. Schrift attempts to fill the void in discussion of propaganda

³¹ Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 4.

³² Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 7.

³³ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 205.

medium during the Cultural Revolution, noting the baffling absence and omission of Mao badge analysis in Western scholarship. Although Schrift notes two Chinese scholars, Li Xuemi and Zhou Jihou, whose work have been tremendously influential in her research, she clarifies that “both [texts] are primarily descriptive, without any lengthy critical analyses of the political implications of badges... and [are] often couched in praise of the Communist regime,” which “reflect the difficulties of doing work on Mao propaganda in China.”³⁴ Despite the obvious limitations presented to Li and Zhou, Schrift is unfettered by fears of censorship, and is able to expound the significance of these badges in both Cultural Revolution propaganda and Chinese material culture. Cultural history “coincided with the rediscovery of sites and objects which have considerably enlarged the repertoire of historical documents,”³⁵ and Mao badges are now amongst the “many objects previously considered as mere curiosities or unimportant souvenirs [which] became the subject of historical research.”³⁶

Exploring the iconography, or “the reading of art in relation to the intellectual world in which it was commissioned and created,”³⁷ of the badges, Schrift also connotes the significant art history influence upon cultural history. This influence upon cultural history is also evident in Schrift’s analysis of the badges as a propaganda medium; cultural historians have also been interested in examining “art in the service of the state or its opponents.”³⁸ Also telling of Schrift’s historiographical inclination is her interest in contemporary museums, whether official or ad hoc, which display precious collections of Mao badges. “The museum reinforces the trend towards according a new importance to objects, the organization of which in space creates its

³⁴ Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 30.

³⁵ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 28.

³⁶ Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, 28.

³⁷ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 207.

³⁸ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 208.

own narrative,”³⁹ and Schrift examines how the desire to place Mao badges in museums is an attempt to professionalize and standardize badge collecting, as well as celebrate it.

Daniel Leese asserts *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* as the first work to “scrutinize the cult of Mao and the massive worship that was fostered around him at the height of his powers during the Cultural Revolution.”⁴⁰ Published in 2013, *Mao Cult* distances itself from other scholarship by “analyzing previously secret archival documents, obscure objects, and political pamphlets.” Despite Leese’s access to formerly unavailable resources, Leese presents the same, rehashed opinion found in most Western scholarship – Mao was to blame for the emergence of the personality cult, and thus for the factionalism-fueled violence of the Cultural Revolution. The problem with this assertion is clear – it raises Mao as some omnipotent and impenetrable being, absolves other party members of any culpability, and largely erases the autonomy and agency of those who participated in the chaos. Although Leese may assert that his argument deviates from other scholarship, really Leese is only confirming and falling within the acceptable boundaries of official party rhetoric.

Unlike the other scholarship, Leese utilizes a transnational approach and likens Mao’s personality cult to those of other totalitarian leaders, pointing to Fromm’s scholarship that Chan was attempting to *refute* back in 1985. While Leese is overwhelmingly concentrated on Mao and his personality cult, the closest Leese ever approaches to considering autonomy within the Cultural Revolution is dubbing the ensuing chaos as “cult anarchy.”⁴¹

Perhaps the most fruitful analysis of the Cultural Revolution, Pang Laikwan’s *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China* (2017) is one of the few works to take a more

³⁹ Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, 28.

⁴⁰ Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Leese, *Mao Cult*, 87.

realistic stance falling somewhere in the middle between the agency of the Mao cult and Mao's power and grip over the party and his followers.⁴² According to Pang, the Cultural Revolution was not simply "pure top-down control, but an alternative model of cultural economy, enabling people to engage in the political participation through the production and consumption of the artwork."⁴³ In this statement we see the progression of autonomy outlined in earlier works. Although largely concerned with artwork and cultural production, it is clear that Pang's narrative of autonomy is largely different than the majority of scholarship which is overwhelmingly focused on Mao.

The Art of Cloning is most similar to Melissa Schrift's *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Mass Consumption of a Personality Cult*. Despite being published nearly two decades before Laikwan, Schrift was one of the few scholars taking interest in the autonomy of Red Guards and Mao cult followers during the Revolution. Perhaps what is most interesting about the two works is their shared focus – Laikwan views the Cultural Revolution through the myriad of different art works that proliferated during the period despite the official condemnation against such bourgeois interests, and how artistic endeavors were a means to exercise some degree, albeit limited, of agency in an aggressively conformist society. In a similar vein, Schrift's focus is on the endless varieties of badges that were created during the revolution and how their adornment represented different meanings for different people in different contexts, often as a means to outwardly proclaim loyalty and devotion to Chairman Mao without having to resort to other displays or rituals.

⁴² Pang Laikwan, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2017).

⁴³ Yanping Guo, review of *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution*, by Pang Laikwan, *China Review*, October 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676372>.

Pang utilizes a tremendous variety of sources, including author-conducted interviews of those who lived and participated in the Cultural Revolution. While Chan focused her attention on former Red Guards, Pang is interested in those who created and produced propagandistic artwork during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Pang also employs Chinese newspaper articles, biographies, first-person accounts, and the art and propaganda itself. Pang draws upon a wide array of scholarship, from classic sinologists, such as MacFarquhar, Schoenhals, and Maurice Meisner, to sinologists with more localized interests, such as Emily Honig, who was interested in the role of women during Cultural Revolution. Pang draws upon very recent scholarship, including both *Mao Cult* by Leese, and *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* by Yiching Wu. Pang also utilizes a work similar to her own – Barbara Mittler’s *Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*, which examines the popularity and continuing legacy of artwork created during the Cultural Revolution. Other diverse sources include primary documents by Jiang Qing, Mao, and Zhou Enlai, as well as Althusser, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Half a century later, China still lives within the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and Chairman Mao. Even with the *Maore* of the 1990’s, and the resurgence of “Red Culture” in 2011, there is still a palpable silence regarding China’s recent violent history. The founding father of the People’s Republic of China is perhaps still just as ardently venerated as he is abhorred. Even Xi Jinping, the current president of the People’s Republic of China, has been unable to evade comparisons to the former leader. Of all of Mao Zedong’s accomplishments and failures, perhaps the most well-known aspect of Chairman Mao’s legacy is the Cultural Revolution. But as the decade fades from public memory, many of those who lived during the

Cultural Revolution are passing away and there exists a larger chasm between them and youth who are disconnected and uninformed on the tumultuous period.

In a field dominated by Western scholars, often through a narrow, simplistic, and Orientalist lens, the personality cult has been left largely unexplored by Chinese historians in the mainland. Mao's legacy remains as compelling and as divisive as ever, despite, if not fueled by, state-sanctioned censorship, secrecy, and silence. Despite the many obstacles being presented, there doesn't seem to be any indication that Western fascination with the Cultural Revolution will end any time soon. Hopefully, perhaps in the near future, there will be greater autonomy to publicly discuss and analyze the Cultural Revolution within China. Although openly discussing Mao and subverting his legacy is a critical first step, it is not the only nor most significant action that needs to be taken. This theoretical scholarship has the capacity to both heal the decades of painful silence but also grant a voice to those of the past who persecuted and were persecuted. With conversation, analysis, and transparency, the historiography of the Cultural Revolution can undermine the non-truths of conformity and compliance and reveal how ordinary people maneuvered within the period of cruelty and repression.