



The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China (Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian In)

Guobin Yang

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Raised to be “flowers of the nation,” the first generation born after the founding of the People’s Republic of China was united in its political outlook and ambitions. Its members embraced the Cultural Revolution of 1966 but soon split into warring factions. Guobin Yang investigates the causes of this fracture and argues that Chinese youth engaged in an imaginary revolution from 1966 to 1968, enacting a political mythology that encouraged violence as a way to prove one’s revolutionary credentials. This same competitive dynamic would later turn the Red Guard against the communist government.

Throughout the 1970s, the majority of Red Guard youth were sent to work in rural villages. These relocated revolutionaries developed an appreciation for the values of ordinary life, and an underground cultural movement was born. Rejecting idolatry, their new form of resistance marked a distinct reversal of Red Guard radicalism and signaled a new era of enlightenment, culminating in the Democracy Wall movement of the late 1970s and, finally, the Tiananmen protest of 1989. Yang completes his significant recasting of Red Guard activism with a chapter on the politics of history and memory, arguing that contemporary memories of the Cultural Revolution are factionalized along the lines of political division that formed fifty years before.

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