

CHINESE CHILDHOOD IN CONFLICT:
CHILDREN, GENDER, AND VIOLENCE IN CHINA
OF THE “CULTURAL REVOLUTION” PERIOD (1966–1976)

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The perceived innocence and vulnerability of children has been a dominant theme in modern conceptualizations of childhood, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War. A growing number of studies suggest however that a notion of children as capable of violent or even lethal conduct has not altogether vanished from post-World War II public discourse in Western Europe and North America, or indeed elsewhere in the world.¹ In the Cold War period in particular, images of children were central to government justifications for the expansion of national defense apparatuses on both sides of the conflict. However, underlying cultural beliefs about the spaces children should occupy in society and the obligations adults carry towards them produced distinct images of childhood and military violence.² In Western liberal contexts, there was a tendency to portray children as victims whose suffering in political and military conflict is undeserved since, in their idealized image, children symbolized purity and innocence.³ In contrast, socialist discourses of the Cold-War era often embraced a vision of children as revolutionary warriors who were already implicated in the politics of class struggle. They were, therefore, not to be insulated from war but should play an active part in the fight for social justice.⁴

China of the “Cultural Revolution” period (1966–1976) is an illustrative case. As noted by several scholars, PRC media productions from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s frequently portrayed children as fierce combatants rather than as weak, angelic creatures. In the political context of class struggle and national liberation struggles against foreign imperialism, Chinese publications normalized and even hailed the actions of combative, murderous youth as models for emulation.⁵ A child’s violence was not viewed as transgressive, nor was there any sense that children’s involvement in brutal acts removed them from the category of “child” altogether, as modern, liberal thinking would have it.⁶ Build-

1 Jenks 1996, 123; Jenkins 1998a, 2; Rosen 2005, 7; see also Martins 2011.

2 See, for example, Stephens 1997; Helleiner 2001; Peacock 2010.

3 Stephens 1997; Jenkins 1998; Helleiner 2001; Gilligan 2009; Kirschenbaum 2002.

4 Peacock 2010; Xu 2011; Naftali 2014.

5 Farquhar 1999; Donald 1999; Donald 2000; Donald 2005; Chen 2013; Zeng 2012; Xu 2011; Zaniello 1974.

6 Jenks 1996, 128; Lebeau 2008, 176.

ing on these previous insights, the present article seeks to examine the portrayal of children as violent actors and the discursive militarization of Chinese childhood in PRC magazines of the Maoist era (1949–1976). However, it also departs from existing literature in that it seeks to highlight the gendered aspects of the “belligerent child” trope in Chinese children’s media, while noting the distinctive depictions of militant boys and militant girls in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution period.

In an illuminating study on Red Guard violence during the Cultural Revolution, Emily Honig notes that on the surface, youth actions seemed to revolve around issues of class identity and political affiliation, and in this sense, were “gender blind”. However, personal accounts and memoirs of the period reveal that the brutal behavior of the Red Guard youth was “in fact deeply gendered ... and enmeshed in contested notions of femininity and masculinity.”⁷ Following this crucial observation and the theoretical insights of Enloe, Lutz, and others concerning the centrality of gender to twentieth-century processes of militarization,⁸ I examine children’s media as a central site for the forging of militant masculinities and femininities in Cultural Revolution China. I analyze representations of combative children in the magazine “Little Red Guard” (*Hong xiaobing* 红小兵), and argue that although children’s media of the period carried abundant depictions of belligerent boys and men, those which centered on militant girls and women were far less common. Moreover, combative children of different genders were represented in a distinct manner and accorded various roles in political and military conflicts.

These findings attest to the ambiguous nature of Chinese thinking about children and their capacities in the late Maoist period. They cast doubt on the frequently-made argument that Cultural Revolution works produced the overall effect of “gender erasure” or, alternatively, of the extensive “masculinization” of Chinese women and girls. They further highlight the importance of critically examining how the different meanings of “being a girl”⁹ were produced, circulated, and, in turn, deployed in public discussions on national collectivity and political conflict in Maoist-era China.

Children, Gender, and Violence in the Cultural Revolution

During the Maoist period, particularly from the 1960s onward, Chinese society witnessed extensive militarization, defined here as “the spread of the military’s characteristic organizational techniques, routines, and attitudes” into civilian realms.¹⁰ In the early 1960s, for instance, Mao Zedong called upon the entire nation to “learn from the People’s Libera-

7 Honig 2002, 256.

8 Enloe 1989, 119; Lutz 2002; see also, Yuval-Davis 1997, 97; Morgan 1994, 165, 168.

9 See Driscoll 2002, 4.

10 See van de Ven 1997; Lee 2011.

tion Army” and to “learn from Lei Feng”, the “model” soldier. The goal of such campaigns was to remake Chinese citizens, including children and youth, “in the image of the military: orderly, disciplined, and instantly mobilized”.¹¹ Already in elementary schools, young children, both boys and girls, were trained for armed battle in defense of the motherland: Instead of simply being taught bodily movement during physical education, they were issued sticks to use as rifles and taught games such as “little people’s militia”, “small air force pilots”, and “learning to be the People’s Liberation Army”.¹² When relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated into armed conflict, children as young as seven or eight were also encouraged to partake in “heroic acts” such as digging deep trenches in preparation for a potential war.¹³

The extensive militarization of children’s education reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. Launched in 1966 by Mao Zedong, who feared that the initial fervor of the socialist revolution was being lost to more conservative, bureaucratic elements within the communist party leadership, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution received its name from Mao’s call to the Chinese people, and in particular youth, to attack all traditional values and “bourgeois” elements and to publicly criticize party officials in order to restore the revolution to its rightful path. Chinese children, who traditionally had been required to respectfully submit to their elders and seniors, received a new status as Chairman Mao’s “foot soldiers” and were now responsible for enlightening the older generation, especially on political matters.¹⁴

Millions of youth heeded Mao’s call to “go out, face the world and brave the storm” and temper and transform themselves through class struggle.¹⁵ They consequently denounced and physically attacked teachers, school leaders, and “bourgeois academics” as counter-revolutionaries. The chaos soon spread outside the schools as well, as male and female students, who organized as Red Guards, mobilized against authorities in factories and government offices and “exchanged revolutionary experiences” in other parts of the country. Throughout China, revolutionary committees seized power from the local government and party authorities, and harassed those suspected of being disloyal to Mao’s thought. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, schooling was halted, industrial production considerably slowed down, the administration was paralyzed, and anarchy and terror reigned everywhere. So-called “struggle sessions” orchestrated by Red Guard youth often turned extremely violent and at times led to suicides or the long-term detentions of

11 Lee 2011; Finnane 2008, 231–240.

12 Honig 2002, 262; See also, White 1989, 205–208; 215–216.

13 See, for example, Xinran 2003, 174; Lu 2004, 762.

14 Lee 2011; Finnane 2008, 231–240.

15 Farquhar 1999; Kessen, 1975, 47; see also, Fang 1974, 2; Wei 1974, 3.

the accused. It was also not uncommon for children as young as eight to “struggle” against their own parents in these mass denunciation meetings, during which individuals were made to dress up like clowns and paraded in their work-units for public amusement.¹⁶ In some cases, young children were even induced to spy on their parents and report them to their radical peers, occasionally with fatal consequences.¹⁷

In 1967, the CCP center finally decided to bring in the military to control the youthful rebellion, which had become too chaotic. Gradually, and in some cases after much struggle, PLA officers and soldiers took over factories, government agencies, and schools. First, primary-school teachers and students were recalled to their classes. Shortly thereafter, middle-school and later college students as well resumed their studies.¹⁸ In the re-opened schools, however, military and political themes dominated the curriculum to an even greater extent. A *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) news report from 1967 on the resumption of classes in Shanghai and Wuhan noted, for instance, that the subjects of math and language in primary school textbooks were revised to “better reflect the themes of class struggle”. Students were to receive lessons on Mao’s quotations and “revolutionary songs”, and the school program was to include both “military training” (*junzheng shunlian* 军政训练) and “military physical education classes” (*junshi tiyu* 军事体育).¹⁹

Some of the older students preferred the more exciting task of making real revolution, however. This meant taking part in violent melees between rival Red Guard gangs. In the summer of 1968, all secondary school leavers and graduates were sent to the rural hinterland to engage in manual labor. This helped the CCP to realize its goal of scattering the Red Guard forces in order to restore order to the cities. Nonetheless, waves of heightened political campaigns and the public persecutions of various “class enemies” continued to plague the country until the mid-1970s. Children of various ages were implicated in these campaigns. For instance, during the 1974 movement “Criticize Lin (Biao), Criticize Confucius” (*Pi Lin pi Kong* 批林批孔), Beijing primary school students were instructed to hold small group discussions on “the military thinking of Mao” and “criticism sessions” against the “bourgeois military line” of the ousted leader Lin Biao. Children also participated in a military training field camp, during which they completed a rapid “military

16 To be sure, not all children acted against their parents in this way. Based on conversations with young Chinese women in the early 1980s, Margery Wolf finds for instance that even those who were participants did not necessarily relate their activism to their relationship with their parents. Far more young people, she suggests, “simply dropped out of school and sat out the Cultural Revolution at home.” See Wolf 1985, 208.

17 Zang 2000, 65; Wolf 1985, 208; Whyte 2003a, 10; Ye and Ma 2005.

18 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 179, 247.

19 *Renmin ribao* 1967a, 3.

march" (*jixingjun* 急行军) and successfully climbed a mountain, reaching their destination with "no student left behind".²⁰

In the general media of the period, reports were rampant of heroic and militant children. For instance, a story published in 1967 in the CCP mouthpiece *Renmin ribao* detailed the account of Beijing primary school students who physically attacked their "counterrevolutionary" teacher in his home.²¹ Other stories extolled children who voiced "lofty aspirations of fighting the enemy to protect the country".²² PRC students were further encouraged to follow the example of children involved in armed conflict elsewhere in the world, including, for instance, North Korea, whose youth "withstood torture and war atrocities but did not yield to the Americans" during the Korean War.²³

A 1971 news story in the *Renmin ribao* described the visit of a Chinese delegation to a factory nursery in the DPRK. The Chinese guests watched a North Korean boy, clad in green military uniform, "mercilessly" and "accurately" practice target shooting while aiming at a cardboard model of an American soldier. The *Renmin* reporter noted that North Korean children's "valiant fighting spirit and deep hatred of US imperialism" was not accidental, but the result of correct "national training and education".²⁴

Cultural Revolution publications which specifically targeted children and youth certainly attempted to inculcate such an education. Public discourse of the period condemned the modern, liberal notion that children should be protected from the brutality of adult life as part of a "bourgeois mode of thinking". Instead, it emphasized the importance of allowing children to forge and develop their character by facing difficulties under tough conditions,²⁵ or as one newspaper writer phrased it: "Loving your children means posing stringent requirements on your children."²⁶ The little amount of cultural works for children that appeared during this time was accordingly stern, militant, and overtly political in its content.²⁷

PRC stories, films, cartoons, and propaganda posters from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s celebrated heroic, aggressive children and frequently situated their young protagonists in the historic settings of the communist fight against nationalist forces or the

20 *Renmin ribao*, Sep. 25, 1974, 3.

21 *Renmin ribao* 1967c, 2.

22 *Renmin ribao*, June 3, 1973, 4.

23 *Renmin ribao* Jul. 27, 1971, 2.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Wu Yuzhang, "Xinnian hua jiachang" [New Year Message on Family Affairs], *Zhongguo qingnian* [Chinese youth], 1964. Cited in Zhao 2003a, 579.

26 *Ren Weixin* 1967, 2.

27 Farquhar 1999, 30, 285; Donald 2005, 33–34; Xu 2011, 382, 392.

War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945).²⁸ The 1974 children’s film “Sparkling Red Star” (*Shanshan de hongxing* 闪闪的红星) is a typical example of the sort of work that was presented to children during this time. In the film, which won critical acclaim in China and later on became a Red Classic, viewers follow the story of a village boy named Pan Dongzi in China of the early-mid 1930s, when the CCP was forced underground. The boy’s father leaves the village to fight with the communist guerilla forces, while his mother chooses to sacrifice her life rather than surrender to an evil landlord and betray the other peasants. Dongzi is cared for by a Red Army captain and, through his struggles, he grows from a member of the Children’s Corps to become a Red Army child-soldier. In one of the scenes in the film, the boy protagonist sneaks into the bedroom of the evil landlord who caused the death of his mother, pours oil over the bedcovers as the man sleeps, and sets the bed on fire. When the landlord awakes and tries to throw off his blanket, the young boy attacks him with a knife and kills him. Dongzi is then praised for his heroic deed by his fellow villagers and by the Red Army captain who has been training him for battle.²⁹

Extolling this and other violent scenes depicted in “Sparkling Red Star” for their “high level of realism”, official PRC media of the early 1970s praised the motion picture for “correctly dismissing the notion of children’s innocence as no more than revisionist rubble”.³⁰ Subscribing to the notion that there is no such thing as “an adult’s standpoint” or “a child’s standpoint”, since “a person’s standpoint is determined by class position rather than by age”,³¹ media producers of the period had no qualms about creating works which sought to inculcate in children “combatant qualities required in revolutionary struggle: bravery and resoluteness to the point of martyrdom”.³²

Female militancy also received praise within this highly politicized discourse. From the mid-1960s onward, magazines aimed at adult women in China began to honor the achievements of female combatants who, to paraphrase a line from a well-known Mao Zedong poem, preferred “hardy uniforms to colorful silk”.³³ Almost all the art, literature, films, operas, and ballets produced during the Cultural Revolution featured women as militant fighters or political activists.³⁴ The emphasis on female military vigilance was particularly

28 Farquhar 1999; Donald 1999; Donald 2000; Donald 2005; Chen 2013; Zeng 2012.

29 Li and Li 1974; for further discussion of the film, see also Farquhar 1999, 287; Xu 2011; Naftali 2014.

30 See, for example Fang 1974, 2.

31 Xu 2011, 389, 393.

32 Farquhar 1999, 30, 285; Donald 2005, 33–34; Xu 2011, 382, 392; see also: Zeng 2012; Zheng 2009; Liu 2009; Wang 2008.

33 Cited in Honig 2002, 263, 255.

34 Chen 2003, 268; Evans 1999, 64.

evident in the eight model operas which dominated the performing arts and films of the Cultural Revolution decade. One of the most famous of these was the 1964 ballet opera (also made into a film) “Red Detachment of Women” (红色娘子军 *Hongse Niangzijun*). The opera centers on a group of courageous female guerillas that successfully destroys a powerful rural landlord prior to the socialist revolution. The piece concludes with the heroines’ vow to abide by Mao’s motto “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”.³⁵

Some scholars have argued that during the Cultural Revolution, the celebration of the “Iron Girls” (*tie guniang* 铁姑娘) – strong, robust, muscular women who boldly performed physically demanding tasks traditionally done by men – resulted in a discourse of “socialist androgyny” or “gender erasure”.³⁶ This argument has come under some criticism however by those who claim that Cultural Revolution discourse is more accurately characterized as one of masculinization, because Chinese women were pressured to act and dress like men, but not vice versa.³⁷ More recently, both of these theses have come under question in the work of scholars such as Rosemary Roberts, who has shown that Cultural Revolution theater pieces continued to carry traditional messages about the nature of masculinity and femininity.³⁸ Harriet Evans, who studied PRC discourses of gender and sexuality between the early 1950s and the late 1970s, has likewise argued that the party-state’s understanding of women’s liberation was ultimately bound by an “essentialist construction of gender difference according to which biology determined that women were by nature weaker, less intelligent and creative, and more susceptible to emotional fluctuations and small-minded interests [...], than men.”³⁹

In what follows, I seek to contribute to this ongoing scholarly debate by critically re-examining some of the existing premises concerning the construction and reworking of gender identities, gender boundaries, and the nature of childhood in China of the Cultural Revolution period. Tracing the meanings ascribed to male and female aggression in children’s magazines, I argue that within the over-arching framework of an ultra-militarized, ultra-politicized childhood, there remained significant differences in the characterization of belligerent boys and belligerent girls. These findings in turn suggest that we must adopt a more nuanced understanding of the historical construction of boyhood and girlhood in Maoist-era Chinese media and culture.

35 Honig 2002, 264.

36 See, for example, Yang 1999a; Chen 1999; Dai 1995; Young 1989.

37 Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002, 251; Honig 2002, 256.

38 Roberts 2004; see also Honig 1999; Edwards 2010.

39 Evans 1999, 64.

Little Red Guard Magazine and the Construction of Exemplary Childhoods

My inquiry draws on an analysis of more than 300 visual and textual items which appeared in a children's publication entitled "Little Red Guard" magazine (*Hong xiaobing* 红小兵). At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the institutions governing children's literature were attacked and libraries were closed down; old popular titles were banned, and writers, illustrators, and editors were imprisoned or banished to labor camps in rural areas. "Little Red Guard" (henceforth, LRG) magazines were one of the few children's periodicals available to young readers.⁴⁰

LRG magazines received their title from a mass children's organization of the same name. The LRG organization, which was oriented toward children and youth aged 9 to 15, operated from December 1967 to October 1978 and replaced the Young Pioneers (*Shaoxiandui* 少先队) movement, which was castigated for "denying class struggle" and promoting "anti-Maoist and anti-revolutionary thinking and activities" among the nation's children.⁴¹ The LRG organization aimed to instill a more "revolutionary, militant" (*gemingxing, zhandouxing* 革命性、战斗性) spirit among children through, among other means, the publication of children's magazines.⁴²

The first LRG magazine was launched in the city of Shanghai on July 20, 1967 as a children's weekly. After the term "Little Red Guards" replaced "Young Pioneers" by the end of 1967, a host of children's magazines, all carrying the revolutionary title "Little Red Guard", appeared across the country. Anecdotes suggest that some schools subscribed to LRG magazines and made them available in classrooms for supplementary reading. At least half of China's provinces and municipalities produced their own LRG magazines which varied in size, frequency of publication, and content. When the Young Pioneers organization was restored in 1978, the LRG magazines either ceased publication or adopted various new names. While all the LRG magazines published in different parts of the country carried an identical title, it is not entirely clear whether they can be regarded as a single children's publication.⁴³

In the present study, I rely on LRG magazine issues published in Guangdong Province and in the municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai in the years 1969 to 1976. I apply both content analysis and discourse analysis to texts and images which portrayed children's involvement in political and military struggle, while considering the following ques-

40 Farquhar 1999, 284–285; Chen 2012.

41 This organization should not be confused with the "Red Guards", which consisted of older teens and college-age youth and played a far more aggressive role during the Cultural Revolution. See Chen 2012.

42 Zhang 2010, 50.

43 On this issue, see Chen 2012.

tions: To what extent did the magazines depict women and/or girls as participants in combative activities? What type of militant activities were women and girls shown to be engaged in, and who was the leader of these activities? What sorts of weapons did boys and girls use in the magazines' stories and images, and did children of both sexes exhibit the same degree of violence? Finally, what can these findings tell us about official notions of childhood and gender in China of the Cultural Revolution period?

My analysis draws on the assumption that the images and narratives presented in the LRG magazines do not necessarily reflect Chinese children's actual thoughts, interests, or practices. Nor do I assume that the messages conveyed in the magazines were necessarily internalized by young boys and girls growing up during the Cultural Revolution. Rather, I regard the magazines as a useful site for examining the production of "ideal types" or "models" of appropriate boyhood and girlhood in Maoist-era China.

As noted by Landsberger, Bakken, and others, the moral education of people, children included, has been historically viewed as a function of good government in China.⁴⁴ Models such as those presented in the *Xiaojing* 孝经 (Classic of Filial Piety) have played an important role in this educational process, serving to constantly make Chinese children aware of norms of correct behavior and acceptable conduct.⁴⁵ In the first half of the twentieth-century, which witnessed the emergence of the revolutionary school of thinking in Chinese art and culture, the extensive use of models persisted – albeit in a dramatically different political form.⁴⁶ Chinese revolutionary culture from the 1920s onward presented young readers with idealized social and political role models by drawing from the Soviet paradigms of Marxist materialism and socialist realism, in which art and literary works were intended to celebrate "the good life" provided by Soviet society and its (working-class) heroes.⁴⁷ In Mao's famous "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" from 1942, which later became the authoritative guideline for the creation of adults' and children's cultural works in socialist China, writers were instructed that "life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life."⁴⁸ During the Cultural Revolution period, the emphasis on the use of ideal-type models in art and literature was further promoted by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, in the context of the *san tuchu* (three prominences) principle, according to which "the good"

44 Landsberger 2001; Bakken 1999.

45 Landsberger 2001, 541.

46 Landsberger 1996, 199–200; Farquhar 1999, 186.

47 Bonnell 1998, 259.

48 Mao 1967 [1942], 82.

should be “more prominent than the bad”, and “the one outstanding figure” should be “more prominent than the very good”.⁴⁹

The ideal-type models held up by the CCP and propagated through school and media channels were also supposed to teach Maoist-era children that “by relying on human will, the concrete obstacles encountered in the physical world can swiftly be overcome.”⁵⁰ As will be shown below, LRG magazine issues published in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution largely abided by this ideological tenet. However, the idealized models of conduct that the magazine writers and editors presented to boys and girls were not identical. In this sense, the magazine functioned both as a site for the construction of the ideal socialist person, as well as for the production of “normative structures of power and exclusion concerning gender hierarchies”.⁵¹

“Emulate the PLA from a Young Age”

Befitting a publication aimed at children, the LRG magazine issues which appeared in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong in 1969–1976 contained colorful cartoons, photos, illustrations, children’s drawings, riddles, puzzles, rhymes, songs, and short stories. Nevertheless, the contents of the magazine reveal the overtly political, militant nature of the publication. A typical example is a poem entitled “Cisha” 刺杀 (“Bayonet”). Published in 1969, the text was accompanied by an illustration of a group of boys wearing caps covered in leaves for camouflage and holding bayonets decorated with red tassels. The poem reads:

Charge bayonets,
 Exercise bayonets,
 Aim at the imperialists, revisionists, and counter-revolutionaries
 Kill! Kill! Kill!
 Reveal the true colors of the paper tigers.
 Lying paralyzed on the ground, they cry like children!

Charge bayonets,
 Exercise bayonets,
 Aim at the imperialists, revisionists, and counter-revolutionaries
 Kill! Kill! Kill!
 Reveal the power of the Little Red Guards.
 Shoot and mount the horse under the Red Flag!⁵²

49 Evans and Donald 1999, 3–4.

50 Landsberger 2001, 542.

51 Evans 1999, 65; see also Chen 2003.

52 Meng 1969; translation is mine.

Another verse, which appeared in a 1970 issue of LRG magazine, carries a similar theme. Entitled “Emulate the People’s Liberation Army from a Young Age” (*Cong xiao xuexi jiefangjun* 从小学习解放军), the poem reads:

Elder Brother joined the military to serve in the borderlands,
 Leaving behind a red-tasseled spear.
 He fights the enemy using a gun; I practice weaponry with the red-tasseled spear.
 The day before yesterday, a letter arrived from my elder brother,
 asking how I was doing in my military training.
 My reply was this: “Emulate the People’s Liberation Army from a young age,
 bury the imperialist counter-revolutionaries!”⁵³

The call for children to engage in political and military struggle was also the focus of a song entitled “Unite and Fight against American Imperialism” (*Tuanjie qilai da Meidi* 团结起来打美帝), which was published in LRG magazine in 1972.⁵⁴ Designed to be sung during a theatrical performance, the piece is accompanied by a musical score and its lyrics, penned by Li Jiang, read as follows:

Come, come, come, and let us stage a play!
 What play shall we stage?
 Ah, strike against American Imperialism!
 You will play a little Vietnamese soldier who shoots enemy pilots with his gun.
 He will play a little African soldier who uses bows and arrows.
 I will play a Chinese Little Red Guard who raises a red-tasseled spear.
 Unite and fight against American imperialism,
 Unite and fight against American imperialism!

The song and musical notation are accompanied by an illustrated red-hued banner which depicts two boys and a girl. One boy is equipped with a spear, the other with a bow and arrow. The girl is holding a rifle. The children take aim at a blue-tinted US soldier, who is portrayed stumbling backwards after the boys’ spear and arrow hit him.

In a photo series entitled “Military Training is Good” (*Junzheng xunlian hao* 军政训练好), which appeared in an earlier 1970 issue of LRG magazine, readers are likewise presented with images of young male and female pupils carrying rifles, while undergoing martial exercises under the guidance of adult soldiers. The photos are accompanied by a rhymed verse which urges Chinese children to “learn from the brave PLA soldiers”, “hold firm to correct political orientations”, and stick to “plain living” and “flexible strategies and tactics”. Members of the LRG organization may be small, muses the author, but they

53 Wang 1970, 7; translation is mine.

54 Li 1972, 2; translation is mine.

nonetheless harbor “large ambitions”. They engage in target practice and bayonet drills “in (the) wind and rain” and “under the scorching sun”, shoot and aim at “the counter-revolutionaries, revisionists and imperialists”, and perform military exercises in order “to defend the country”.⁵⁵

Alongside poems and photos which urge young readers of both genders to participate in political and military fighting, LRG magazine issues are also abundant with stories of military heroism in contemporary and historical times. Notably, some of these stories feature children and youth as the main protagonists. One example is a story entitled “Child Soldiers Fight in the [Shanghai] Race Club” (*Haizibing dazhan paomating* 孩子兵大战跑马厅).⁵⁶ Published in LRG magazine in 1974, the story recounts the tale of a children’s brigade which allegedly played an important role in the battle for Shanghai during the 19th-century Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864). According to the story, in 1853 Shanghai’s Small Swords (or Red Turbans) Society, a local faction that supported the large Taiping Rebellion’s agenda of toppling the Qing dynasty, organized an insurrectionary army which managed to occupy the walled town in Shanghai. Local “working people”, both men and women, “enthusiastically supported the armed insurrection against the imperial forces” and “even youth in their teens rushed to sign up and join the fight.”

To accommodate the young volunteers, the rebels set up a special “children’s brigade” which enlisted 14–15 year olds as armed troops. The young soldiers wrapped red scarves around their heads, which made them look like “little tigers”, and learned combat skills while fighting. At one point, 200 of them charged from outside of the walled city: “Having no fear of difficulty or self-sacrifice”, they rushed ahead and attacked the Qing armed forces, which numbered 1,000 adult men. The little soldiers, the author notes, showed “resourcefulness and bravery”, and even “when pitted one against ten, (they) relentlessly fought on.” When faced with the ferociousness of these little warriors, none of the Qing men dared to go on the attack. Then, a small boy, armed with only a hand-made musket, slowly closed in on the Qing commander and proceeded to shoot him, “splitting his head in half”. When the Qing forces realized that their commander was dead, they scattered in confusion. The children’s brigade, concludes the story, “strengthened the conviction of the rebels and managed to damage the prestige of the Qing reactionary army.”

Militant Girls, Murderous Boys

LRG stories and images not only depicted belligerent boys but also combative girls. Photos and illustrations frequently showed girls displaying fierce looks and standing defiantly with clenched fists, wearing unisex clothes or army uniforms, riding horses on the border-

55 Mao 1970, 13; translation is mine.

56 Shi 1974, 11–12.

lands, or wielding a spear, a grenade, or a gun. Significantly, however, the LRG magazine issues published between 1969 and 1976 included twice as many textual and visual items portraying militant boys or men as those showing militant girls or women. Moreover, even when the story did revolve around the figure of a girl, her actions were qualitatively different from those of boys or men in the same story or in similar accounts elsewhere in the magazine.

The two stories "The Brave Little Militia Solider" (*Yingxiong xiaominbing* 英雄小民兵);⁵⁷ and "Zhan Meixiang" (詹美香)⁵⁸ provide illustrative examples. "The Brave Little Militia Solider" presents the tale of Lan Xiaosan, a 12-year-old boy who joins the communist people's militia in the struggle against nationalist forces during the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949). Little Xiaosan first serves as a messenger but later advances to sentry duty. One day, as the boy stands guard, he spots nationalist soldiers close by. Realizing he has no time to alert the communist troupes, Little Xiaosan decides to brave the enemy on his own and opens fire. When the nationalist soldiers draw near and realize they are only faced with a boy, they attack. At which point, Xiaosan takes the opportunity to gun down several more soldiers before they reach his position and "he sacrifices his life for the revolution."

The protagonist of the second story, Zhan Meixiang, is also a member of the People's Militia. In contrast to Little Xiaosan, however, her story takes place in the early 1960s, after the founding of the PRC. One day, the 13-year-old Meixiang goes out to collect firewood on the beach with her friends. Suddenly, the girls spot a strange-looking boat near the beach and suspicious footprints in the sand. Meixiang and her friends realize that they have stumbled upon "American secret agents" working in cahoots with the Taiwanese government. Recalling "her father's stories about his past struggles against local despots", Meixiang courageously volunteers to run and fetch the local People's Militia forces. She then joins the adult soldiers in hunting after the secret agents (fig. 1). For this act of bravery, she's awarded a full set of Mao Zedong's writings, which she commences to study diligently, while harboring a secret desire to meet Chairman Mao in person (fig. 2). Her life's ambition is realized several years later when, during the Cultural Revolution, she travels with thousands of other enthusiastic youths to Tiananmen Square and finally sees the "Great Leader" in person.

The two accounts share important similarities. In both narratives, the main character – a young boy or girl – acts courageously and resourcefully, and takes part in a struggle against domestic or foreign enemies. The portrayal of Zhan Meixiang arguably challenges conventional pre-revolutionary notions in China concerning the passivity and fragility of

57 *Hongxiaobing* 1971, 34–38.

58 *Hongxiaobing* 1970b, 28–34.

women, and traditional beliefs regarding the type of activity to which girls are best suited or capable of. In this respect, stories such as “Zhan Meixiang” undermined a gender hierarchy that uses as part of its rationale the argument that women are inferior and subordinate to men because they are less mentally and physically able.⁵⁹



Fig. 1. Zhan Meixiang charges ahead with the People's Militia forces.

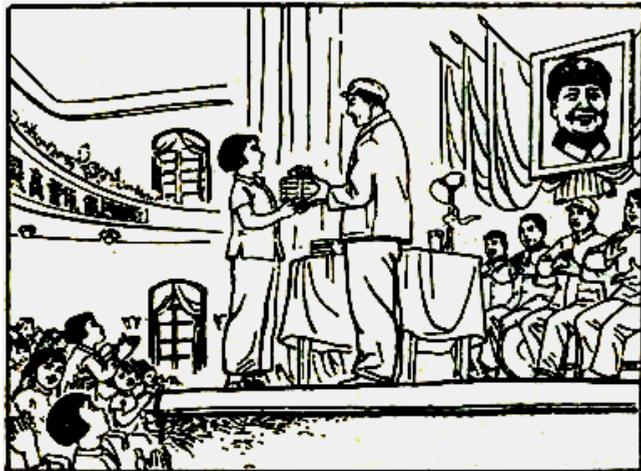


Fig. 2. Zhan Meixiang receives a full set of Mao Zedong's writings.
(both pictures by an unidentified illustrator; from *Hongxiaobing* 1970b, 32, 33)

59 See Roberts 2004, 10.

There are also significant differences between the two accounts, however. In the first story, the boy faces the enemy completely by himself, skillfully uses a gun, and even manages to kill several enemy soldiers before sacrificing his life for the sake of his comrades and the revolution – an act which exalts him to the prestigious status of a revolutionary martyr. In the second account, however, the girl is part of a group and later plays a supportive rather than a leading role in the hunt for the enemy's agents. Her actions are not as heroic and certainly not as violent as those of her male counterpart. Moreover, unlike the first story, which ends with the epic death of the boy protagonist, Zhan Meixiang's story concludes with the fulfilling of her long-held desire to set eyes upon the beloved Chairman Mao.

As suggested by various memoirs of the Cultural Revolution period, such a desire was equally harbored by youth of both genders. However, the choice of the LRG magazine writer and editors to associate this desire with a female figure may carry a special significance in that it creates the symbolic effect of subsuming the character of the militant girl under the power of the patriarchal figure of Chairman Mao. In the Mao cult, which reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution, gratitude to parents – a mainstay of the Confucian notion of filial piety – was to be replaced with gratitude to the CCP and to Chairman Mao, who had "given life" to a new Chinese society.⁶⁰ Indeed, some scholars maintain that the rebel boys and girls of the Cultural Revolution period did not so much assert youth autonomy as follow the authoritarian patterns that had dominated adult-child relationships throughout Chinese history; they dared to rebel against authority "only when given permission by the ultimate authority figure: Mao himself".⁶¹ The story of Zhan Meixiang appears to confirm this observation. The narrative may challenge patriarchal notions by featuring a courageous young girl, but ultimately it subscribes to more traditional hierarchies of age and gender.

The ambiguous representation of militant girls is equally evident in the section "Little Heroes Fighting the Enemy" (*Shadi xiao yingxiong* 杀敌小英雄) published in the LRG magazine in 1970.⁶² In this section, which is based on Xinhua news reports, young readers are presented with two (presumably) true accounts of the actions of militant children during the Vietnam War (1954–1975) and the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945). In a move which promotes the notion of gender equality, one of the stories centers around a boy; the other around a girl. Yet a close examination of the contents of the stories again reveals notable differences between the accounts of the little heroes of each gender.

60 Yang 1994, 259; See also Donald 1999, 85; Donald 2000, 41.

61 Saari 1990, 69; see also Luper 1995; Kinney 1995a.

62 *Hongxiaobing* 1970a, 16–20.

The first tale, entitled “The Brave Cowhand” (*Yonggan de fangniuwa* 勇敢的放牛娃), recounts the experience of a 10-year-old South-Vietnamese boy named A-Wei during the Vietnam War. One day, after all the villagers have finished their work in the fields, A-Wei, who is left to herd the cows, suddenly spots seven American aircrafts flying over his head. A-Wei knows that the aircrafts carry enemy soldiers who intend to bury land mines in the fields in order to “slaughter the people”. Concerned that if he tries to warn “the uncles of the guerrilla forces” about the approaching enemy he might be too late, A-Wei “tightens his fists” and resolutely tells himself that he must “get rid” of the American soldiers on his own. He thus takes an army rifle that was given to him by the guerrilla fighters, and, when he spots the heads of several American soldiers peeping out from a helicopter which has just landed, the boy fires his rifle and single-handedly manages to blow up an enemy helicopter and kill several of its occupants. Panicking, the American soldiers in the six other aircrafts flee to save their lives. After a while, little A-Wei approaches the burning helicopter and notices that the ammunitions box is still intact. Happily, he takes the box back to the village and hands it over to the guerrilla soldiers. Everyone praises the 10-year-old boy for his heroic achievements, saying: “A-Wei is truly an amazing little hero. The first time he ever shot a helicopter, he manages to hit it with such accuracy!”

The second story, entitled “The Resourceful Little Underground Messenger” (*Jizhi de xiao jiaotongyuan* 机智的小交通员), presents the account of A-Ke, a young Chinese girl who aided the communist guerilla forces during the War of Resistance against Japan. The reader learns that A-Ke is leading several party cadres across the difficult terrain of a mountain forest with which she was familiar. Moving “lively and swiftly like a little squirrel”, the young girl enters a river that she and the troops are about to cross. Suddenly, she sees a group of several dozen “puppet army” soldiers (*weijun* 伪军) working with the Japanese military on the opposite bank. Thinking that she “must protect the [CCP] uncles”, A-Ke calls out to warn the communist soldiers and dives underwater for cover. The enemy soldiers spot her and shout: “It’s only a girl. Let’s grab her!” A-Ke is not scared, however: “Her heart is filled with hatred toward the enemy” and she says to herself: “I may die, but I won’t let all the enemy soldiers go back alive.” She therefore awaits the approaching enemy while the communist guerillas prepare to fight. As the enemy soldiers approach the girl, they are shot by the CCP forces, who manage to kill one and wound several others. The rest of the enemy soldiers desperately turn back, “with their tails between their legs”. After these events, A-Ke, who emerges safe and sound, continues her brave service as a messenger, leading the way for the CCP guerrilla soldiers in their fight against the enemy.

It is difficult to determine whether the events presented in these two accounts – a little boy who single-handedly kills adult soldiers and blows up a helicopter, and a young girl who leads guerrilla fighters through the mountains – actually took place. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, this is not the crucial question. Rather, we need to ask ourselves why the writers and editors of the LRG magazines chose to present these two specific stories side by side, and what symbolic impact this juxtaposition was supposed to achieve.

Clearly, both the boy and the girl in the two stories exhibit heroic behavior and extraordinary cool-headedness under fire, an attitude which is more frequently associated with adult fighters than children or even young teenagers. There are nonetheless discernible differences in the nature of their actions and in particular in the extent of violence they exercise. In the first instance, the boy, who is notably alone, employs lethal force: He is equipped with a gun, which he impressively uses to shoot the enemy aircraft. In contrast, the girl in the second story is accompanied by a group of adult soldiers. She leads the way because she knows the terrain and valiantly draws the enemy soldiers into the trap set up by the CCP fighters. However, she does not fire the gun herself nor does she kill anyone. She thus ultimately plays a supportive role when it comes to the act of taking another person's life.

The gender specific portrayals in these examples predominated in the military-themed texts and images which appeared in the LRG magazine issues during the period of 1969–1976. In stories and poems about war and conflict, boys (or adult men) repeatedly play leading roles, engage in hand-to-hand combat, or are directly responsible for the killing of an enemy soldier. In contrast, girls (and adult women) often play a more passive and supportive role in the fighting, and, unlike boys, they rarely use their weapons in actual battle. While girls sometimes join others in an assault, they seldom participate in or instigate the actual killing of an enemy. Instead, they act as aids to the more active male fighters. Furthermore, unlike the boys, girls are rarely shown sacrificing their own lives. In short, LRG representations of belligerent children limited girls to more passive, less hostile roles compared to those of boys. Furthermore, alongside the relatively scarce and considerably less violent portrayals of fighting girls, the magazine articles published during this period also contained depictions of girls and women (but not boys or men) engaged in activities which were traditionally associated in China with women, such as house cleaning, sewing, cooking, and taking care of the sick and the elderly.

This particular representational choice begs an explanation, especially if we recall that in the earlier stages of the Cultural Revolution young girls took part in and sometimes even instigated acts of extreme violence against teachers, fellow students, or indeed anyone marked as a class enemy. Though exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, personal memoirs of the period show that middle-school and even primary school female students participated in physical violence, including: slapping, kicking, burning victims in boiling water, and severely beating bound victims with fists, belts, clubs, or wooden rifles used for militia training. In many instances, girls' violence against others resulted in severe injuries or even in the victim's death.⁶³

In contrast to this harsh reality, the editors of the LRG magazine presented a decidedly less violent image of militant girls, while simultaneously lauding the murderous ac-

63 Honig 2002, 258–260; see also MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 126

tions of belligerent boys. This editorial decision in turn echoes long-held tendencies in China to primarily associate martial prowess (*wu* 武) with men. Women warriors, such as Hua Mulan or Liang Hongyu, have been prominently featured in historical and literary texts for centuries in China.⁶⁴ However, in the abundant folk literature surrounding these exemplary figures, women generally fought as surrogate men or in tandem with their husbands in order to defend their family or the state in times of severe crisis.⁶⁵ As Edwards and Zhou persuasively argue, imperial orthodoxy – which operated along patriarchal lines – welcomed this “crisis femininity” (*weiji nüxing*).⁶⁶ Femininity mobilized in a crisis situation helped shame men into taking military action and amplified the danger of the external threat by highlighting the enemy’s penetration of the “inner quarters” traditionally associated with women. Yet women’s participation in military violence was rarely a threat to the orthodoxy. Indeed, central to this phenomenon’s longstanding appeal to China’s patriarchal order was the fact that the women warriors each returned home to reassume their domestic roles at the end of the war.⁶⁷

In the late Qing and early Republican period, radical Chinese women such as Qiu Jin (1875–1907) attempted to challenge these patriarchal notions, taking violent action in order to bolster their claims to equal citizenship with men. Such endeavors were met with resistance on the part of radical Chinese men, who may have embraced the “virtue of violence” in the struggle for national salvation, but nonetheless refused to grant women equal political rights after the 1911 revolution.⁶⁸ In keeping with the CCP’s rhetoric of gender equality, narratives of female warriors in post-1949 China provided audiences with lessons on the importance of women’s active contribution to the revolution. These accounts, however, also continued to portray women’s violent actions within the context of the ultimate goal of building a better society and strengthening the nation-state.⁶⁹

This ambivalent treatment of female violence likewise finds its expression in the children’s magazine discussed here. Yet in the case of the LRG magazine, the ambiguity surrounding the figure of the militant girl can also be understood as a reaction to the distinct conditions of the Cultural Revolution period. The early, violent years of the revolution produced turmoil not only in the political, but also in the sexual sphere, while dra-

64 Louie and Edwards. 1994, 140–144; Edwards 2010, 214; Edwards and Zhou 2011; and see also Mann 2000.

65 Judge 2002, 41.

66 Edwards and Zhou 2011, 492–493.

67 Edwards and Zhou 2011, 492–493.

68 Edwards and Zhou 2011.

69 Edwards 2010, 202; see also Meng 1993.

matically disrupting intergenerational relations in China.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, in children's magazines of the latter part of the revolution, militant boys and militant girls behaved in distinct ways. While boys became men through the act of killing, girls were decidedly less violent. As the present analysis illustrates, girls were allowed to maintain some of their "traditional" feminine passivity – and with it, a shred of their childhood innocence.

Discussion and Conclusion

During the Cultural Revolution era, Chinese children's media and education underwent extensive militarization. As politics and society became closely aligned, PRC children and youth were conceived as revolutionary actors who could and ought to partake in violent struggles, an idea which was widely propagated in the public discourse of the period. Yet within this ultra-militarized conceptualization of childhood, there remained significant differences in the representation of belligerent boys and girls. The portrayal of violent conflict in children's magazines of the late Cultural Revolution period was ultimately embedded in beliefs about masculinity and femininity, beliefs that were themselves constantly being challenged and negotiated.⁷¹

Stories and images which circulated in the LRG magazines of 1969–1976 may have celebrated the bold determination of children of both sexes, but the figure of the militant girl was more frequently associated with shared rather than authoritative power and fulfilled an auxiliary rather than a central role in political and military conflict. Though LRG magazine editors and writers presented young readers with a stronger, more assertive model of girlhood, they also tended to portray girls as less aggressive and less prone to lethal violence than the boys. In doing so, they projected a dual message, which encouraged young girls to engage in the traditional masculine sphere of public endeavor, while simultaneously reinforcing within that sphere a familiar hierarchy of gendered authority.⁷²

These findings are consistent with those of Rosemary Roberts, who studied representations of women combatants in Cultural Revolution ballet operas. Roberts concluded that depictions of adult female figures in the model operas of the period in many ways corresponded to long-held Chinese notions of "soft" femininity.⁷³ The present study similarly finds that images of militant girls in the children's media of the period were not extreme or aberrant, but rather displayed significant continuity with pre-Cultural Revolution gender norms.

70 Louie 2002, 93.

71 Honig 2002, 266.

72 Evans 1999, 76.

73 See also Roberts 2004, 407.

The narratives presented in the LRG magazine did, however, stand in contrast to girls' actual practices during the earlier stages of the Cultural Revolution, which included acts of extreme and at times lethal violence against teachers and other authority figures. This gap – between a radical reality and a more conservative official discourse – lends support to Gail Hershatter's words of caution against the assumption that social changes in Maoist-era China lagged behind state initiatives in a predictable way, whereby "traditional" norms, or in the terms CCP authorities often used, "feudal remnants", blocked the path to "socialist modernity".⁷⁴ In the case at hand, LRG narratives of militant girls were in fact relatively tame compared to the more radical reality of school girls engaged in acts of lethal brutality on the ground. In physically attacking teachers and other authority figures, Red Guard youth of both genders were undermining long-held hierarchies of age and seniority. However, murderous girls constituted much more of an anomaly than murderous boys since their actions further challenged the existing gender norms. In this context, the demarcation between militant boys and girls in children's magazines of the late Cultural Revolution period may have served as an attempt to "impose a system in an inherently untidy experience",⁷⁵ and to redress the dangerous boundary transgressions performed by female Red Guard youth several years earlier.

That said, the portrayal of belligerent girls in the LRG magazines is further significant because it extolled a new model or a style of female militancy which, according to contemporary and retrospective accounts, many young girls in China sought to emulate.⁷⁶ As in the model operas of the Cultural Revolution examined by Roberts, the distinct representations of belligerent boys and girls in the LRG magazines perpetuated traditional gender hierarchies and roles, and thereby helped to preserve women's inequality in Chinese society. However, they also offered young girls a mode of female empowerment which combined "equality with difference".⁷⁷ The texts and images circulating in children's magazines of the period presented readers with a distinct iconography of the child, not as a victim of political violence, but as an active participant in adult warfare. Assigning girls a role in political and military fighting (albeit a limited one) contained the message that women, at least symbolically, had a valuable place in this militarized national collectivity.

74 Hershatter 2012, 878.

75 Douglas [2002] 1966, 4.

76 See, for example, Honig 2002, 264; Ye and Ma 2005, 63; Chen 1999; Zhong, Wang, and Di 2001.

77 Roberts 2001.

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