

## **Failure of Charisma** by Wang Shaoguang

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SIS590 Professor Dong

Men changed the conventional meanings of words as they chose. Irrational daring was held to be loyal courage; prudent delay, an excuse for cowardice; sound sense, a disguise for unmanly weakness; and men who consider matters in every aspect were thought to be incapable of doing anything else. . . In a word, it was praiseworthy to strike first, while your enemy was meditating an injury, and to incite a man to strike who was not thinking of it. Furthermore, the tie of party came to be closer than the tie of kinship because the partisan was more audacious and made fewer excuses. For party associations were formed, not for men's good under existing laws, but in defiance of them, for sheer aggrandizement; and mutual pledges were sealed, not so much in accordance with the divine law as by collaboration in some breach of law . . . Revenge was dearer than self-preservation." Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars*

---

In 1966 Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution to prevent a feared capitalist re-trenchment in the Chinese Communist Party and in society at large. Today the movement is widely regarded as a disaster and a holocaust both within and without China, but for different reasons by different people. Some blame Mao for taking advantage of naïve Chinese citizens who knew not what they did. Others blame the Chinese people as a whole for falling victim to a vast mass hysteria. It is easy to resolve historical monstrosities by asserting they were caused by demonic forces- preferably contained in a single person- because doing so excuses the writer from addressing the monstrous capacities of normal human beings. Alleging insanity, on the other hand, simply removes the behavior from the realm of rational analysis. It is, in its way, another form of unenlightening excuse, as it posits that whatever "reasons" there were for a given action were essentially outside the realm of reason; the subject can be committed to the asylum instead of prison. Wang Shaoguang's work rejects these approaches to the Cultural Revolution and proposes to explain the actions of common people in terms of game theory. He asserts that your average Chinese participant in the Cultural Revolution acted as they did not out of some deranged enthusiasm, but rather by calculating how to best maximize their self-interest. On the other hand, he also asserts that your average Chinese participant also unswervingly believed in the absolute correctness of the Great Helmsman, Mao Zedong. How one can believe in a charismatic leader and yet conduct your actions according to the pursuit of one's self interest is the question that informs every aspect of Wang's detailed, descriptive, enlightening, and quite frightening narrative of the Cultural Revolution in Wuhan.

The Cultural Revolution, according to Wang, was borne out of an essential paradox of Chinese society in the 50's. "The state might be able to socialize private ownership of the means

of production, but it could not socialize the human capital possessed by the old elites.” Thus both within and without the communist party, most of the people running the country, and receiving high salaries because of it, were not the ideological nomenklatura Djilas condemned in his critical *The New Class*, but rather persons who had enjoyed high status prior to the communist victory: nationalist officials, former capitalists (who still received dividends on their investments), and intellectuals. This “residual cleavage “ was complemented/exacerbated by cleavages of more recent manufacture among those of better class origin; “structural cleavages” between the old political cadres and the working classes caused by the administrative structure of production units, and behavioral cleavages between workers based on the assignment of internal class labels such as “activist” and “backwards element.”

Initially the last cleavage appears less important than the first. Wasn't the communist ideology based on class and class origin? But Wang takes care to illustrate the problems caused by the system of carrots and sticks implicit in the behavioral labeling system. Since Chinese society was still very poor, and possibly for ideological reasons, the Chinese communists did not believe they should reward party activism or punish backwardness or apathy with overt financial incentives. Instead they created a symbolic pecking order in which good workers were given a behavioral class as well as a class origin (which Wang asserts was fading into irrelevance prior to the Hundred Flowers campaign and the ensuing reaction against it). Wang points out that these classes engendered serious conflicts within production units. Backwards elements had nothing to lose by acting up since they still could not be fired. And the dual levels of class origin and behavioral class created an environment where everyone was ideologically left in a vague way, but in which it was critical to define and prioritize labels in order to gain economic and political advantage. This, to Wang's view, was pure social poison.

For those with good class origin, the system as it existed before the Cultural Revolution worked well, therefore their interests were conservative in that they wanted to preserve the status quo. Throughout the rebellions, the conservative class, allied to an extent with the bad-class origin technocracy that they had subordinated and assimilated, constantly attempted to preserve the status and functions of their origin-based class, and their authority to control the society. In this they were constantly foiled by Mao himself.

Mao's great mistake, in Wang's view, was to remove the reins of social control from the local party authorities (which eventually included the army) and instead allow for an unprecedented liberation of Chinese society that unleashed the forces of self-interest, factional

competition, and jealousy that ran counter the public good. In essence, Mao deliberately removed the “enlightened” part of enlightened self-interest by creating a society in which displays of enlightenment and restraint ran *counter* to self-interest. He did this in several ways. First, he allowed that “it is not necessarily illegal to attack the local party authorities.” He tolerated and supported the initial waves of naïve and fanatic students who attacked their teachers, allowed them to form independent horizontal organizations between schools and production units, and generally gave them a pass to destroy the reputation of the party for control. Mao allowed them to destroy the party’s monopoly on information by permitting the destruction of the propaganda press and allowing for radicals to create their own channels of information exchange and organization. Through *chuanlian*, he allowed “revolutionary tourists” to visit other provinces and commit antisocial acts in the absence of their own community peer group. Thus the children of conservative cadres in Beijing visited Wuhan to throw radical temper tantrums in the streets, and students with bad class backgrounds could visit nearby cities and throw their weight around like they were the children of peasants.

Mao lowered the threshold that restrains people from group action by reducing the risks of group membership. Finally it became more risky not to join an organization than to stay at home. While those of the worst class origins were rarely welcome anywhere (and their treatment at the hands of Chinese society is treated slightly in the book), the politics of jealousy created by the labeling systems of origin and behavior pushed even party activists towards the rebellion (where they joined “backwards elements” and opportunistic conservatives in a free-flowing associative mash) if those activists felt they had been slighted or mislabeled. Thus if you had a poor behavioral label, or felt you had been mislabeled in terms of origin, you wanted to attack the status quo, and would make alliances of convenience to do so.

However, where the conservatives could unify easily, as they all stood to benefit equally from victory over the rebels, and were already experienced administrators, the rebels, whose primary competence was incendiary actions and propaganda, could not. There was not enough room at the table of power to fit in everyone who had been slighted by the status quo, nor were their interests necessarily identical. Thus once warfare had abated between the conservatives and the rebels, the rebels began fighting each other over the spoils of control and authority.

By this time Mao had become the voice that everyone heard but no one listened to. For one thing, by the third cycle of Mao throwing his weight from one side of the struggle to the other, everyone had grown used to interpreting his vague pronouncements in the way that best-

served their interests. Thus when he finally began to give direct orders to abate violence or disarm, he was, at long last, directly disobeyed because the environment he had created was such that the most active people on both sides- the ones who had taken the strongest stances and made the most enemies in the process-saw only two alternatives; to go on the offense, or to wait passively for the axe of revenge to fall. Mao's followers were ready to die for him, but on their terms, not his.

The catalog of mistakes goes on and on, although it is difficult to perceive where Wang would place the originating error, or whether he would categorize it as structural or as the result of Mao's decision-making. Was it a mistake to allow the Hundred Flowers campaign in the first place, or in stamping it out? Wang's sympathies clearly lie with the conservatives, not the rebels; he asserts that the political cadres were largely popular in Wuhan prior to the revolution. Did Mao attack a problem that was not a problem? Because what he unleashed was not an ideological purification, nor did it consolidate his power over the party bureaucracy. Since everyone agreed that Mao was right on everything regarding policy, ideology rapidly became a meaningless contest of Halloween-like labels—and a raw struggle for local power and privilege. “What really mattered for most participants were issues in their units, not grand ideological issues.” And what bureaucracy his successors inherited was disillusioned, corrupt, and/or craven as a result of surviving nearly a decade of cynical power politics masquerading as idealism.

In a way, it is Mao's decision-making that is hardest to fathom. Wang asserts that most other works studying the Cultural Revolution focusing on elite decision making. Allowing that viewing such a widespread phenomenon through a telescope focused only on Mao is limiting, I believe Wang's thesis would have been more thoroughly explored had he applied his game theory to Mao's actions. As it is, Mao is a sort of tectonic force in the book; he moves against the party bureaucracy, then moves against the rebels he himself authorized when they plunge the country into chaos. He does this over and over again over the course of some eight years, and while it may have been comprehensible the first time around, I am left puzzled as to why Wang believes Mao continued to play Janus so long after the essential untenability of the strategy was laid open. Was Mao so powerful as to have no rational game theory himself? Were his interests so well-protected by his status that he had no need to protect his interests, and could thus act according to whimsy? Or was he simply isolated and acting on insufficient information? Given that the Gang of Four seems to have recognized the tactical error of Mao's

approach: “radical central leaders had come to realize from past experience that whenever the country was thrown into chaos by a radical drive, the moderate leaders had to be brought in to clean up the mess.” Wang does not take a position on what Mao was; his focus is on what Mao’s followers perceived him to be. I don’t slight the book for not containing facts that are covered elsewhere but I do believe Wang’s work had room for a bit more about the Beijing elites. Nevertheless, I look forward to “gaming” the elite decision making in Zhongnanhai.

However, the focus on “perceived Mao” is nevertheless critical as it bears on the very nature of charismatic leadership. Mao was, per Wang, good at inspiring but very poor at communicating, which allowed everyone to interpret his edicts in light of their own self interests. In this way the Cultural Revolution is best viewed through a prism of religious interpretation or confessional conflict than as a secular phenomenon. Despite the rational self-interest of his followers, the entire structure of rationality was constructed on an irrational premise, the worship of a distant and mystical personality. Had Mao been a Deng Xiaoping, had he allowed himself humanity, would he have lost his cult of personality but gained more direct control and obedience? His desire for demigod status did not permit him specificity or humanity. Thus he could energize and unleash forces but he could not steer them. We are left with an image of Mao that is specific in one respect; there are few poorer titles for him than “Great Helmsman”. He was, perhaps, more like a wind that allows two ships to sail into each other.

My reaction to the work as a whole is positive almost without qualification (my qualification, in parentheses, is that Wang perhaps overdoes his emphasis on rational behavior to the extent that one might conclude he doesn’t allow for the significance of irrationality at all). First, it is not essentialist; it posits a view of human political behavior that coordinates across cultures and periods, which is why I included the quotation from Thucydides in the beginning of this paper. Despite the obvious layer of a foreign political culture that makes some of the slogans, titles, and factions appear “Halloween-like” to me, this is a matter of malleable culture, not permanent essence. I am not implying an essential difference between Chinese, Yugoslavs, ancient Greeks, or Rwandans in this sphere. Second, it is not ghoulish. The work illustrates a tragedy but it does not indulge the Western rubber-necker who wants gory details of lives destroyed. Nor does it waste time haggling over body counts and other grim statistics. Third, it coordinates with my gut, which is not entirely rational. The work, the author, and I may be cynical about human motives, but the question remains, how to predict? Wang’s thesis

is testable. It requires no giant conspiracies, real monsters, or a belief in ghosts. It rejects the insanity defense, it destroys the racist image of the crazed Chinese, slave to slogans, and it discusses social control without advocating fascism or endorsing a yet-to-be realized/unrealizable benign anarchy.