

# A Retrospective Analysis of the Impacts of the Cultural Revolution on Childhood Trauma

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## Introduction

By retrospectively analyzing the events of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) through oral histories of people who when through these events 30-40 years later, this article presents a multifaceted inquiry into the traumatic experiences that affected young people during this major milestone in China's historical landscape. Through an exploration of the cultural, political, historical, social, and economic landscape of China during, before, and following the Cultural Revolution, this research explores the methods by which young people were exposed to traumatic experiences and how this impacted them. Furthermore, the long-term psychopathological, social, and cultural impacts of this trauma on young people during this period are critical to understanding the lasting social-emotional impact of the Cultural Revolution.

## Historical Background of the Great Leap Forward

With the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong began transitioning China into a communist state. Mao embraced communism as a means to rapidly industrialize China, aiming to surpass other industrialized nations, including Great Britain and eventually the United States (Yang, 2015). To achieve these goals, Mao implemented policies that included mass collectivization of farmland, the formation of agricultural cooperatives, and the establishment of people's communes, complete with communal dining and bathing facilities. Land ownership was redistributed from landlords to the peasantry within their communities (Asia for Educators, n.d.).

These fundamentally communist practices were designed to lay a strong foundation for industrialization. Mao's focus was on leveraging the power of citizens to accelerate industrialization, with the ambitious goal of surpassing Great Britain

and the United States in manufacturing within three and ten years, respectively (Joseph, 1986). In this way, Mao's early policies were not only an implementation of ideological communism but also a strategy to gain support from the peasantry, which he would soon leverage into a mass industrialization effort (Chang, 1951).

From the perspective of the peasantry, Mao promised redistribution of resources and equitable access to basic goods and services and thus support for communism grew rapidly. Following Mao's collectivization and redistribution efforts rural grain production fell by sixteen percent each year between 1959 to 1961 (Li & Yang, 2005). The death toll resulting from this famine has been quantified as between 16.5-30 million with even the most conservative estimates attributing the Great Leap Forward with the most deaths of any famine in recorded world history (Li & Yang, 2005).

### **Historical Background of the Cultural Revolution**

Following the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward, Mao recused himself from everyday governmental operations and in 1962 allowed for more moderate party members Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to take over policy efforts in China. During this period Maoist ideology made way for more

moderate policies emphasizing slow and steady economic growth instead of rapid industrialization. Mao remained sidelined only until 1966 at which point he launched the Chinese Cultural Revolution by issuing the May 16<sup>th</sup> Circular which called upon the citizens of China to rise against bourgeois individuals and aspects of society (Burton, 1971). By calling upon citizens to take upon the responsibility of cleansing the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) of capitalist members Mao incited the formation of a student-led organization called the Red Guards in August of 1966.

The Red Guards were a group composed of people as young as middle school-aged children, who sought to fight against capitalist tendencies (Wilson, 1970). The Red Guard movement grew increasingly revolutionary and splintered into hundreds of factions fighting not only against capitalist tendencies but also against one another and by 1968 the entire movement was disbanded (Heaslet, 1972). With the Red Guard disbanded the Chinese government began the "Down to the Countryside" movement which consisted of former Red Guards to the rural areas in China to follow in the footsteps of chairman Mao and devoted their lives to the cause of revolution (Perry, 2008).

### **Foundations of Trauma in Children**

Based on existing literature, including the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Treatment (US), 2014), it is well documented that the events of the Cultural Revolution directly contributed to trauma in young people. This trauma arose from witnessing, participating in, and learning about violent acts. To more clearly understand the immediate and lasting impacts of trauma on young people, an analysis of three interviews was conducted. These interviews are part of the University of Pittsburgh's CR/10 project (China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project | Digital Pitt, n.d.), which hosts 10-minute interviews with individuals who experienced the Cultural Revolution directly or those born afterward who describe their experiences learning about this historical event.

Utilizing the DSM-5 as a reference for diagnosing and categorizing trauma, the self-described experiences of young people during the Cultural Revolution can be evaluated against the criteria for the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to Criterion A for diagnosing PTSD, these experiences include: Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
  2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
  3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
  4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.
- (Treatment (US), 2014)

The DSM-5 guidelines for analyzing experiences as potential criteria for the development of PTSD were used to analyze a set of three interviews conducted by the CR/10 (Cultural Revolution: 10) project. Initiated in 2015 by the East Asian Library at

the University of Pittsburgh, the CR/10 project aims to record, preserve, and publish video interviews with Chinese citizens who detail their experiences, memories, and impressions of the Cultural Revolution in approximately 10 minutes.

Three interviews were selected for analysis based on the following criteria:

1. *Age of Participant During the Cultural Revolution:* Only interviews with individuals born between 1948-1958 were considered. This age range ensures participants were between 7-18 years old at the start of the Cultural Revolution, qualifying them as young individuals with mature memories (Reardon, 2024).

2. *Experiences Detailed:* Interviews were selected if the participants shared traumatic experiences, as these were essential for further PTSD analysis.

3. *Translation:* Only interviews translated into English were included to avoid the potential misinterpretations associated with secondary translations. However, it is noted that translations may still carry a risk of misinterpreting the actual words of the interview subjects, which could affect the analysis.

Due to limited resources and time, only three interviews that met all the criteria were analyzed. The analysis involved listening to each interview three times and conducting a thorough examination based on the DSM-5 guidelines for PTSD.

### **Overview of Interview Analysis:**

To analyze the deeply traumatic accounts of those who lived through the Cultural Revolution as young people requires a systematic approach that can link together common themes across all interviews. While each interview brings up different stories and experiences, they all detail traumatic events or series of events. This article will use the DSM-5 as a tool to standardize the traumatic experiences described, in the context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), without aiming to diagnose mental health conditions.

Given the short length of the interviews, it is pertinent to apply only Criterion A of the DSM-5's criteria for labeling PTSD. By categorizing these self-described experiences as potential contributors to the development of PTSD, the lasting impact of the Cultural Revolution can be more fully elucidated.

### **Interview 1:**

*The interview subject was born in the 1950s and lived in an urban area of Tianjin, as well as in a rural area of Heilongjiang, from 1966 to 1976. Her family background was*

*classified as intellectual and her occupations during the Cultural Revolution were student and Educated Youth. The highest level of education she has achieved is college. The interview was conducted in person in Beijing.*

*Note: At the interviewee's request, the video of this interview has been replaced with a still photo obscuring the interviewee's identity.*

(Haihui, 2016)

**Interviewer:** Thank you for accepting my interview. Would you please tell me when you were born? You don't need to say the exact date; just "1940's," "1950's," "1960s" will do.

**Subject:** 1950's.

**Interviewer:** Would you please tell me, during the ten years from 1966 to 1976, in which area of China did you mainly stay?

**Subject:** Tianjin City. I was born in Tianjin.

**Interviewer:** Since you were born in the 1950's, you must have many memories of this decade. Even given several days, you probably couldn't share them all. If we only give you ten minutes, or in other words ...in the first ten minutes of the interview, what would you most want to share with us?

Please speak freely.

**Subject:** I was 14 or 15 years old that time, and I felt the world suddenly changed. I lived in a university faculty residence compound; all of my neighbors were "Misters"

[prestigious intellectuals]. The relationships between us all were bound by etiquette; it was a very polite environment. But suddenly, at this time, it turned into a place where people could just casually be beaten by others. The compound also became a "cow-demons and snake-spirits" compound. I remember an old man in our building, who was very elegant, liked calligraphy, and also liked raising crickets. One day all his cricket jars were broken to pieces, and he was beaten. It was the first time I saw someone be beaten. It was horrible. At the same time, not only did the place where I lived suffer a disaster, but so did the school. What is engraved on my heart is this: one day, I was suddenly made to sit in the middle surrounded by the crowd. [Those of us in the middle] were made to admit that we were "sons of dogs." I was also made to explain my father's "problematic history." It was as if our files were open to the public, and what my father had done before, everyone knew. At that time, there were a few core members of the Red Guards in our class. What was unforgettable was that suddenly people were divided into different ranks. It seemed that [to them] I was no longer a "successor (to the revolution)," but their enemy. This was a horrible thing. Then we could go in and out only through the "dog door," also known as

the “dog hole.” I remembered some “son of a dog” in my class led us in climbing the wall, since by climbing the wall, we could avoid the dog hole.

**Interviewer:** What was the “dog hole”?

**Subject:** It was a small door especially for “sons of dogs,” since we couldn’t just use the same door as everyone else.

**Interviewer:** Who set up that door?

**Subject:** Those students did it themselves. They could do whatever they wanted to torture people. I felt that impact was just like a drowning calamity, because I was so young. If you find out you’re [one of the] “cow-demons and snake-spirits,” you feel such shame, you can’t hold your head up high. You can only cry. That day after being tortured, I went home and picked up some scissors, wanting to slit my wrists. I didn’t want to live anymore. I didn’t end up cutting myself. One reason is that I didn’t know how to do it. Also, my family called me to eat dinner, so I just came out of the bathroom. Even now, I haven’t shaken off that feeling of inferiority. Everywhere, out in the streets, people were shaving other people’s heads, beating people, whatever they felt like doing. I can hardly describe it. This kind of memory is one page in my coming-of-age story. Look, there’s my cat. It’s not afraid of strangers.

**Interviewer:** It’s a pretty cat!

**Subject:** It is pretty. It’s a Scottish fold cat. Afterwards, I had these muddled memories of the Cultural Revolution, of being an inferior class of person, but then suddenly, later, we had the right to set up an organization. We could also establish organizations and could also rebel. Rebel against the Bourgeois Reactionary Line and put the blame on Liu [Shaoqi] and Deng [Xiaoping]’s shoulders. No one was innocent, because we also set up a Red Guards organization. We could also go into the streets, to participate in the so-called rebel movements, plan to persecute other people, and even take part in violent struggle. Although we did so inconspicuously, we were, after all, following along, waving flags and shouting. We attacked people; no one in our group was uninvolved. I don’t believe there were really any “bystanders.” Born in such a family, if you wanted to prove you were revolutionary, the only way was to join the movement. How many people were actually able to completely not participate, not be involved at all, I didn’t pay attention to that; I don’t know. But I knew that I wanted to work hard to do well, to show that I was a member of the movement. What kind of people there are results in what kind of leaders. The so-called Four Greats was made by our uproar. Later, in the activities of crowding onto trains and “great networking,”

we were all fearless fighters. I remember the five yuan [CNY, Renminbi/RMB] I had on me was stolen as soon as I arrived in Beijing. We got free room and board staying in a Beijing hutong [alley], at a “reception station” [for the Red Guards]. We were all members of the Red Guards, all following the crowds. Later, what stayed in my mind were the poor people in our compound, such as the former professors, who were made to unclog human waste from the sewer as a humiliating punishment. These people were academic authorities, people from whom you used to maintain a respectful distance. So in our compound, there were many who hanged themselves, overdosed, or jumped off of buildings to commit suicide. Later, lots of people were expelled, and instead many of the so-called revolutionary masses moved in. They were all workers, peasants and soldiers, who belonged to the red families. The identity of our compound totally changed. Then all of a sudden, it came to an end, and we were sent down to the countryside. Later, as I grew and matured, I didn’t just think that the Cultural Revolution brought me a kind of anger or a trauma that I can’t get over, but I also felt that each person was responsible for it. It’s like the Germans’ reflection. Didn’t we all enthusiastically support [the Cultural Revolution]? Didn’t we risk our lives

expressing ourselves? Human beings cannot choose their own era; this is very sad. In this era, I described myself as the ashes from a volcanic eruption. After the eruption, we were all bits of dust in the falling ashes. Starting out it was burning hot, but after turning to ashes it was a kind of loss. I think it is necessary to preserve this type of memory. If our generation refused to talk about the Cultural Revolution, it would be terrible. This black page is a national shame. Personally, I want to write about it for the rest of my life. One’s writing ability doesn’t matter, but it definitely must be true. Truth is the top priority. Actually, I recently wrote something, and the book I wrote is currently under review due to sensitive content. Some people suggested I write a postscript for the book, so I wrote a piece concerning the importance of memory. Sometimes when I’m in some place, for example, sitting in an American university library, I don’t have any connection to my surroundings, but sitting there, I feel my memory is really rich. I sincerely think over the experience of growing up and every stage of life I went through. Regarding the Cultural Revolution, my point of view is this: try to ponder it as far as possible, not only to vent. Why do we vent? After all, in those days we were all lending our enthusiastic support, for fear that we weren’t revolutionaries

ourselves. For example, when we were participating in the “great networking,” when we were crowding onto a train, my younger brother couldn’t get on. He and his classmates pushed on the train’s window, because they couldn’t get through from the door. It was dangerous, you know? They might have been thrown under the wheels. I remember that my brother said, “Never mind. If I’m pushed down, I can be a hero -- I’m Lei Feng.” He had become fanatical to this kind of irrational degree. Though he was still young, he felt that life was not important. What was important [to him] was: “I am part of it. I’m able to embody the spirit of Heroism.” I think this is so horrible. How could we, in our time of growing up, get into this so-called idealistic, illusory, impersonal era, an era drowned by Groupism? It’s too horrible. Our concept of self-awareness gradually woke up in the 1980s. Slowly we had desires, which was actually a good thing. If you have desires, you understand what is human, what is individual. Having a life is a minimum right. Back then [during the Cultural Revolution,] there was no life; we desperately went into the streets to pass out fliers, to put up “big-character posters.” We even got up in the middle of the night to do these things. We thought we were great, were revolutionary. You might say it’s laughable,

preposterous, but that was what we went through. As teenagers, we were incredibly fanatical, stupid, and rash. If what happened is not narrated in detail, we lived in vain.

**Interviewer:** Very good.

**Subject:** Very unorganized.

**Interviewer:** Oh no, very good. Thank you for accepting my interview.

(Haihui, 2016)

### **Interview 1 Analysis:**

The first interview, given by a woman born in the 1950s (Subject 1), revealed that she was only 14 or 15 years old during the Cultural Revolution. Initially, her living quarters were peaceful, but they eventually became a place where people were routinely beaten (1:12). While this experience can be considered traumatizing, it does not explicitly meet the DSM-5 Criterion A for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

However, Subject 1 goes on to provide a more detailed account of witnessing an old man in her building being beaten. This experience clearly meets the DSM-5 Criterion A, as it involves exposure to actual serious injury witnessed in person as the event occurred to another individual (Treatment, 2015).

Subject 1’s trauma continues with her descriptions of being humiliated and tortured with segregator practices such as forcing her



and others who were labeled “sons of dogs” (1:47) to use a smaller door that was called the “dog door” for entering and exiting school. This humiliation and direct exposure to trauma culminated in Subject 1 having suicidal ideation and describing how she wanted to slit her wrists explicitly stating “I didn’t want to live anymore.” (3:12) While the experiences detailed throughout this interview underscore deeply traumatizing experiences individuals including Subject 1 had almost no choice as to whether they would become involved in the revolutionary activities that had contributed to their own trauma.

Later in the interview Subject 1 explains that she became involved in the violent struggles against the “Bourgeois Reactionary Line, and put the blame on Liu [Shaoqi] and Deng [Xiaoping]’s shoulders.” (4:10) Even though she was following in-line with the status quo as a means of self-preservation she still maintains that the attacks that her group conducted had no bystanders and “no one in our group was uninvolved” (4:48) As a member of her Red Guard faction Subject 1 helped oversee a compound where former professors were humiliated by being forced to unclog human waste from sewer systems. Punishments in this compound were so brutal many of the people who were forced to

reside there “hanged themselves, overdosed, or jumped off of buildings to commit suicide.” (6:26)

This exposure along with the routine beatings and violent struggles Subject 1 witnessed and participated in as a Red Guard (4:41) are directly in line with the DSM V criterion for PTSD as Subject 1 both directly experiences the traumatic events and witnesses, in person, the traumatic events as they happen to others. The final traumatic experience described by Subject 1 involved her experience in the great networking events in 1966 and 1967 in which Red Guard factions across China overcrowded trains going to Beijing to see Mao. Subject 1’s younger brother attempted to get on an overcrowded train, chasing the train down with little regard for his own safety. Subject 1 recalled that to her this action was extremely dangerous but to her brother he saw death in this fashion as a heroic act. “Never mind. If I’m pushed down, I can be a hero -- I’m Lei Feng.” (10:05) She reflected that even at such a young age her brother had become so fanatical that in comparison to the revolutionary cause “he felt that life was not important.” (10:13)

Several of the experiences described by Subject 1 meet the criterion for PTSD as outlined by Criterion A in the DSM V and

though Subject 1 does not explicitly label this condition as being present or not there are several indicators suggesting it is, at the minimum, possible this individual experienced trauma during her childhood as a direct result of the Cultural Revolution. While she never mentions PTSD explicitly Subject 1 does state that “the Cultural Revolution brought me a kind of anger or a trauma that I can’t get over, but I also felt that each person was responsible for it. It’s like the Germans’ reflection. Didn’t we all enthusiastically support [the Cultural Revolution]? Didn’t we risk our lives expressing ourselves?” (7:01) The coexistence of trauma and guilt underlie the youth experience during the Cultural Revolution. Roles of oppressor and oppressed were in constant flux and communities were turned against one another. The testimony of Subject 1 not only explores the trauma she directly experienced or witnessed as a victim but also the trauma she inflicted on others as an oppressor. Both aspects strongly suggest the possibility of Subject 1 meeting the criteria for PTSD.

**Interview 2:**

*The interview subject was born in the 1950s and lived in an urban area of Shanghai from 1966 to 1976. His family background was classified as capitalist and his occupation*

*during the Cultural Revolution was student. The highest level of education he has achieved is graduate. (Haihui, 2019)*

**Interviewer:** Hello! Thank you for accepting my interview. Could you please tell me what decade you were born in? You don't need to say the exact year; you can just say '30s, '40s, '50s, etc.

**Subject:** I was born in 1948.

**Interviewer:** '48. Could you tell me where you were in China in the decade between 1966 and 1976? You can say the main places, such as Beijing and Heilongjiang, or Shanghai and Yunnan.

**Subject:** That is, the main spots. I went through great changes in these 10 years, since at the beginning, I was in Shanghai. Later, we were the "up to the mountains and down to the countryside" generation. I left Shanghai to go to Hubei [Province], then to the Northwest. That was the whole process.

**Interviewer:** So, you must've had lots of experiences, and based on when you were born, your memories of this time must be quite full. However, since this is a series of short videos, in which we collect memories, we can't give you that much time [to describe everything]. Let's say I offer you maybe 15 minutes to half an hour. In this limited amount of time, what memories would you most like to share with us? You can say a

little or a lot, as you wish. You're welcome to share your recollections.

**Subject:** OK. I think my deepest impression – of course it's from... a lot of people's Cultural Revolution memories may be of violent or struggle, things like that. Our family had a capitalist family background, yet we weren't defined with this social status. That's how it was. So at that time, when the Red Guards came, they were the school's Red Guards, not the Red Guards from my father's work unit. After they came, what upset me most was that they were all my classmates. These classmates might've been even nastier than strangers. Especially this one girl. At the time, her father was the assistant principal of a cadre school. Later, he got into trouble. But in the beginning, this girl was very tough. She came to my house and called on me to betray my family, expose my father's "crimes," and on and on. They humiliated my parents right in front of me. This was unbearable. If you humiliate me, fine, but humiliating my parents – I was from a traditional family. We took respecting one's parents very seriously. However, she expected to pressure me to betray my parents right in front of them. I wouldn't cooperate, so they took a really vicious attitude with me. They had come to look for our family's gold. At the time, our parents did not want to involve us. They felt

we were still young and didn't want to tell us too much about these things. So, my father gave the gold we had to his friend, never thinking that this friend would rat him out. The Red Guards came to "search [our] house and confiscate [our] possessions." Further, they use this as a threat, saying, "You took your gold and hid it at someone else's house, so you must have gold hidden in other places. You'd better say where." In truth, my father had already moved all the gold he had saved to that friend's house. However, the Red Guards didn't believe it. Especially [since] my mother might've still had some jewelry that she had kept back to leave to us kids in the future. She absolutely refused to talk. So, they beat her with an iron chain for an entire evening. In the end, my parents told a little about what they'd kept back. They couldn't stand the beating. It was like slowly forcing out a confession, squeezing it out bit by bit. After [the Red Guards] found it, they felt there must be more – it was like squeezing toothpaste [to get information to come out]. My mom was a really kind person, was wonderful to us kids, and thought that in the future we would [need it] -- because [my parents] had been through the chaos of war, the War of Resistance Against Japan and so on, they felt they should have some valuable things in case they needed them later. Even

after being beaten a whole evening, my mother didn't give up everything. So, in the end, [the Red Guards] saw they wouldn't force everything out of her, so they gave up. But the way they humiliated, tortured, and beat my parents right in front of me, especially my mother, truly injured my young spirit. I didn't understand these people. They, too, had parents. Especially that girl who was in charge. She was my classmate. She acted especially cruel, to show that she was revolutionary. However, later on, her father got into trouble and was brought down. She was kicked out of the Red Guards. How did she feel? Probably up until today, she still hasn't come to terms with this issue. I've heard others say that – because I don't go to class reunions now, because of her. Later on, others told me that when she runs into other classmates, [they can tell] she hasn't faced that period, the Cultural Revolution. Quite the opposite – she always says that she was persecuted, that she was victimized, and so on and so forth. So I think that during the Cultural Revolution, a lot of people did bad things, and should acknowledge that. Those who passively got involved should also reflect on it. For example, me. Although my family home was ransacked and my parents were struggled against, I still went to struggle against others. Especially later on, when we

went to May 7 cadre school, we also struggled against people in "academic authority." So now, we ought to reflect on these issues. Otherwise, you only consider this issue from your own family's position. That's too narrow – the scope is too narrow. I believe there must be a genuine concept of right and wrong, that is, how people should respect one another, how people should step in when someone else meets with misfortune, or at the very least, should express sympathy. This comes from going through a kind of reflection. In the future... because in our lives, we will experience all types of upsets and problems. So, from now on, we will better defend the bottom line of human life. We'll better pass on many of China's good traditions, rather than joining in and shouting when others are shouting to bring someone down. Of course, it's possible others are shouting "down with," you'll go shout along, to highlight your loyalty or [prove you] are revolutionary. However, this is indeed misguided. I think this type of thing is also present in the United States. Right now, if someone is labeled a "witch," then everyone will express anger toward that "witch." So, they'll tar and feather the "witch," throw stones at her, and throw her into the river. Although some people have sympathy for these "witches" lives, they don't dare

reveal it; they'll go kick her, throw stones, etc. This is the dark part of human nature. By remembering the Cultural Revolution, we should more clearly recognize, being able to reject these dark parts of human nature becomes a motivation for your own higher pursuits, and will make all of society and the world develop in a better direction, rather than having situations like the Cultural Revolution appear periodically. Have I reached the time limit?

**Interviewer:** That's okay. You may keep speaking if you like. We're at 12 minutes now. If you want, we can stop now – that's fine, too. There's no strict limit. I feel what you said is really good. We could always cut out this bit of our dialogue in the middle.

**Subject:** There are a lot of feelings about the Cultural Revolution. These are just my own [thoughts] since it affected my family. The physical wounds of the Cultural Revolution were just on the surface. If your flesh is injured, it can heal, but if your spirit is traumatized, it is hard to recover. So, we hope that an event like the Cultural Revolution will never happen again. Of course, during the Cultural Revolution, there were also some time when I felt very free, such as when everyone was making revolution, and I was home reading. This determined my future, since later on I didn't go to university; in the

end, I had read enough that my [self] education was greater than the equivalent academic degree.

**Interviewer:** So you went directly to graduate school?

**Subject:** Right. However, during that period of time, I laid the foundation myself. Fortunately, many of my books were not burned by the Red Guards, since they weren't interested in these books, but rather in gold, U.S. currency, and so on. So I read all these books – a lot were in English; I read the original versions. I read a lot and this really opened opportunities. On my own, I studied English, French, German, and this established a good foundation for my later academic life. During the Cultural Revolution, we didn't have to go to school, and no one supervised us. Everyone was busy with written attacks and physical intimidation. In Shanghai they were smashing things up and looting, or there was factional fighting, so no one minded us – it was quite free. During this period, I definitely felt like if I wanted to do something, I could just do it. Of course, it wasn't the same as the Red Guards, taking to the streets, breaking the law and running wild; rather, I was strengthening my own self-cultivation. This is how I felt – through my own hard work, I used this period of idle

time to increase my knowledge and capabilities.

**Interviewer:** Very good, very good.

(Haihui, 2019)

*Analysis of Interview 2:*

Interview 2 was conducted with a man (Subject 2) born in 1948, making him 18 years old at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Subject 2 recalls his experiences during this period, explaining that over the 10 years, he moved from Shanghai to the mountains, then to the countryside, Hubei province, and finally to the Northwest (0:25). Although not explicitly stated, this movement was part of the Down to the Countryside Movement, which involved the resettlement of 17 million young people into rural areas across China to work and understand the value of the proletariat (Down to the Countryside). Later in the interview, Subject 2 recounts his experiences during a violent struggle after being labeled a capitalist. He explains that because his family was labeled as capitalists, Red Guards were sent to raid their home.

These Red Guards consisted of Subject 2's classmates, which deeply undermined his sense of community. While not directly traumatizing as outlined by the DSM-5, this experience forced Subject 2 to choose between betraying his family or his country.

This situation, where individuals felt divided between betraying loved ones for personal safety or inheriting punishment for their family's misdeeds, was frequently shared.

Although this internal conflict does not directly correspond to a traumatic experience, Subject 2 later describes witnessing his mother being beaten with an iron chain (5:29). This experience qualifies as a criterion for the development of PTSD. Subject 2 explicitly states, "the way they humiliated, tortured, and beat my parents right in front of me, especially my mother, truly injured my young spirit" (6:50).

This vulnerability of subject 2 signals that he has processed through much of the trauma he experienced and is now able to talk about these experiences and reflect on the trauma he endured. Later in the interview, the subject explores his relationships with those who struggled against him and explains that the girl who led the struggle against him and his family also felt persecuted during this time. While the author seems to reject this notion, he goes on to acknowledge his role in persecuting others (8:28). While no specifics were provided about the time subject 2 spent struggling against others the possibility that subject 2 witnessed, participated in or heard graphic details about beatings, verbal assaults, or

other forms of persecution is not insignificant but given the lack of stated experience this time cannot be analyzed as meeting the criterion for PTSD.

Beyond the initial description of his mother being beaten, Subject 2 adopts a more reflective approach to exploring the Cultural Revolution, which does not fit the analytical style of this paper but still provides valuable insights. A powerful statement by Subject 2 captures the essence of trauma: “The physical wounds of the Cultural Revolution were just on the surface. If your flesh is injured, it can heal, but if your spirit is traumatized, it is hard to recover” (12:46).

While fewer explicit traumatic experiences were mentioned compared to interviews 1 and 3, Subject 2 still recounted witnessing serious injury to a close family member. This qualifies as a criterion for the development of PTSD under the DSM-5 Criterion A-1 and A-3.

### **Interview 3**

*The interview subject was born in the 1950s and lived in an urban area of Beijing, as well as in a rural area of Heilongjiang, from 1966 to 1976. Her family background was classified as government officer and her occupations during the Cultural Revolution were student and Educated Youth. The highest level of education she has achieved is*

*graduate. The interview was conducted in person in Seattle, Washington.*

(Haihui, 2015)

**Interviewer:** Hi, how are you? Thank you for accepting my interview. Could you tell me which decade you were born in? You don't need to say the exact year. Just “1950s” or “1960s” is okay.

**Subject:** I was born in the 1950s.

**Interviewer:** Which areas of China did you mainly living in during the ten years between 1966 and 1976?

**Subject:** 1966, I was in Beijing. When the Cultural Revolution began, we had just graduated from elementary school, and then we went to middle school for a while but did not receive a good education. In 1969, I went to Heilongjiang Corps with many of my classmates to join a production team. I stayed in Division 4, Regiment 43, for four years.

And in 1973, I was selected to study at Beijing Foreign Studies College, as a Worker-Peasant-Soldier student, majoring in English. From 1973 to 1976, the Zhonglianbu selected me to be translator. So, I was sent to Bengal and studied the Bengali language there for three years. Basically this is what happened.

**Interviewer:** I believe you went through a lot during those 10 years, and probably could talk about your memories for hours or even days. If you are only given about 10 minutes,

what are the most important events you want to tell us about those 10 years? Anything that has impacted your life or that you want to share with us. I want to know exactly what you are most interested in.

**Subject:** Those ten years were long, and I did a lot and went to many places.

**Interviewer:** Just your direct responses -- which memories come up first and which do you most want to share with us? You don't need to consider what we are most interested in; it totally depends on you.

**Subject:** There are so many special memories that are too deep to be erased. But in particular, there is one thing I can never forget. I will talk a little bit about it, maybe it won't take 10 minutes.

**Interviewer:** Sure, no problem.

**Subject:** I went to Yucai Elementary School. I think at that time, Yucai, Yuying, and Jingshan were probably the top three elementary schools in Beijing.

**Interviewer:** Yes -- they are all elite schools.

**Subject:** I don't know how elite they are now, but back in my time they were really for the elites. Most of my classmates' parents were senior revolutionaries, cadres in revolutionary areas, senior intellectuals, and the leaders of important CCP units. So we received the best treatment and protection at school. Lots of my classmates participated in

the large-scale production of "The East is Red." Even during the "[three years of] natural disasters" period, we never starved. The Cultural Revolution shook our world. All of a sudden, many of my classmates' families fell into an abyss, becoming targets of struggle. Several of my classmates' fathers committed suicide within a year or two before 1968. I won't talk about that now. I'll share one of my personal experiences. After the Cultural Revolution began, schools were closed, and everyone stayed at home. Some classmates directed their anger at teachers, thinking teachers turned them into the "seedlings of Revisionism." There was a teacher named Zhao Run; she was our Chinese teacher. She was severely impacted [by students' anger.] Now she is a very well-respected and beloved teacher, who is excellent in literature and has a real love for students. So, how did I meet with misfortune? As a child I was pretty good at writing. Some of my essays were selected by [my teacher] to be read aloud in front of the class. Although I was not the only one [whose essays were selected], ...somehow some of the boys thought I should be punished, too. One day -- I was 14 then -- someone came to my home, saying we needed to go to school to discuss how to join the Red Guards. I had a bad feeling -- I don't know why -- but I felt



obliged to go. So we biked to Yucai Elementary School. After we got there, four boys locked me in a classroom. They took their belts off and whipped me bitterly. My back was covered in wounds. I don't remember what they said; nobody ever told me why they whipped me.

**Interviewer:** Were they your classmates?

**Subject:** Yes, they were all my classmates. I remember very well. They are all very polite to me now. I was really shocked. I felt I could not tell my mom; it would hurt her too much. So I found my classmate, Ping. I showed her the injuries on my back. It was in the summer. Then, we went to the Shichahai Lake to swim and dive. We jumped from a three-meter, then a five-meter, and then finally a ten-meter platform. We felt so scared, looking down. At that time, Ping's father, a senior cadre of the Central Propaganda Department, had killed himself at age 42, by jumping from a building. He left five children behind. Ping was the youngest one. So when we were standing on the ten-meter platform, we felt we must jump into the water. That was such a kind of implacable sadness. We had no way to vent, no way to heal the pain in our hearts. So we jumped from the ten-meter platform over and over. No matter how frightened we were, we knew we had to jump. After that, we felt a little bit

better. The past is the past, right? But I can never forget. I have lived in the U.S. for 35 years. I have gone back home many times. Each time I have met some classmates, but I still cannot face those four students. One of them went to my home and apologized in tears in front of my mom. After we started using WeChat to communicate – especially after I started collecting data on the “Educated Youth” -- they were very respectful of me. I will go back this September [2016]. I think what happened must be put aside. I have to cultivate my mind for forgiveness. Also, it is not all their fault. They were not bad people. They were just around 14 or 15 years old. They were also victims [of the time]. But it is still a challenge for me, I think. I haven't seen them for 50 years. How should I handle this in September?

**Interviewer:** You will go back in September of this year [2016]?

**Subject:** Yes, this September. I am thinking what will first come to my mind when I see them after all these years -- probably still this matter. But I really cannot let this hinder our friendship anymore. I still think there is some affection between us. What happened should fade away -- but it is not easy, especially since feeling that kind of hurt in childhood is so unforgettable.

This is the most important event [I remember]. Is my time almost up?

**Interviewer:** You can still continue if you like.

**Subject:** Then it was about the Corps. I spent four years in the Corps, the last two years in Regiment 43, as a reporter for the Corps propaganda unit. I think those years were a very good time. I was the youngest one there. I went to the countryside in 1969. All my colleagues were older than me. They kindly called me “Xiao Xie” [Little Xie]. We wrote scripts together. Every day an anchor read our writings, broadcasting our words through a loudspeaker, for every company of troops and all the Educated Youth to hear. I have a picture of us 13 people together, taken in front of the doorway of our regimental unit. This year when I went back [to China], surprisingly, I found 7 of those 13 people -- the youth from Harbin, Shanghai, and Beijing, plus our Unit Chief, and the Vice Unit Chief. The other three had passed away, and two were not found. We decided to return to Beijing together this September. We will ask the same photographer to photograph us again, to memorialize that old time. I am so excited about this. I cannot wait for this day to come. You could say the feeling among us “Brothers and Sisters of Heilongjiang” even surpasses that of actual siblings. At least I

have good memories from the experience of being an Educated Youth in the Corps. I think that’s all I want to say.

**Interviewer:** Very good. Very good. Thank you for this interview!

**Subject:** Thank you for giving me the chance to talk about these things.

(Haihui, 2015)

*Analysis of Interview 3:*

Interview 3 was conducted with a woman born in the 1950s who experienced the beginning of the Cultural Revolution after just finishing elementary school. This perspective is valuable as it explores the experiences of a young individual with limited autonomy, highlighting how children bore the burdens of political identity by association.

Subject 3 was a successful student, and her essays were often read aloud by her teacher, Zhao Run. While Zhao Run's experiences were not fully detailed, it was implied that she was targeted during the struggles of the Cultural Revolution. Because Zhao Run saw promise in Subject 3, her classmates believed she was guilty by association. Subject 3 recounts, “Four boys locked me in a classroom. They took their belts off and whipped me bitterly. My back was covered in wounds. I don’t remember

what they said; nobody ever told me why they whipped me" (6:22-6:50).

The experience of being beaten qualifies as a criterion for the development of PTSD according to the DSM-5. Subject 3 explains that the beating was inflicted by her classmates, which further isolated her from her community. She notes that despite returning to China many times since the event, she "still cannot face those four students" (8:37). This lasting impact exemplifies an avoidance pattern related to individuals or situations that remind her of the trauma (What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?, n.d.). The beating, as a standalone experience, meets the DSM-5 Criterion A-1 for the development of PTSD.

In addition to being beaten the knowledge of pervasive suicide among several of her friends fathers (4:34) qualifies as criterion for PTSD in section 1-D of the DSM V. An interesting detail from Subject 3's interview was the way in which she coped with the trauma from the cultural revolution through physical exercise. As an homage to her friend Ping's late father who committed suicide by jumping off of a building she and Ping jumped from a 10m platform into water over and over again.

**Summative Analysis:**

Though this paper explores only three 10-minute interviews, it is clear that all subjects experienced traumatic events that qualify under the DSM-5 criteria for the development of PTSD. These experiences included witnessing violent acts, directly experiencing violence, learning about traumatic events that happened to a family member or close friend, or experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of traumatic events. Each interview met one or more of these qualifications. In addition to being persecuted and victimized, the interviews also revealed how many individuals acted as agents of trauma, causing harm to others. This role reversal not only solidified their trauma, as victims became perpetrators but also made it difficult for individuals to neatly identify themselves as purely good or evil.

The paradoxical nature of this trauma makes it complicated to analyze, but the DSM-5 also specifies that "being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy" are causal factors for PTSD (APA, 2013). The trauma experienced by young people during the Cultural Revolution in China differs from other highly politicized and traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, in that the PRC effectively suppressed public debate and discourse on the topic, thereby

preventing the collectivization of trauma (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003). Consequently, individuals were left to cope with trauma from their roles as victims or perpetrators in isolation. Other analyses have examined traumatic events throughout Chinese history, including the drought and famine that killed over ten million people in the 1870s (Edgerton-Tarpley, 2008), and the Great Famine during the Great Leap Forward (Peng, 1987; Chen & Yang, 2015; The Memory Project Oral History Collection, 2009-2016).

The trauma derived from the Cultural Revolution is unique due to the role reversal of victim and perpetrator, as well as the profound isolation individuals experienced during this time. For these reasons, it has been argued that the Cultural Revolution can be regarded as an "extreme situation" (Thurston, 1985). Using this label and the analysis that every individual interviewed met the criteria laid out by the DSM-5 for the development of PTSD, it is evident that the Cultural Revolution was a deeply traumatizing event for young people.

Future research is needed to fully understand the extent of this trauma, its transmission across generations, and its epigenetic markers. This comprehensive understanding is crucial to grasp the full depth of harm caused during this period.

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