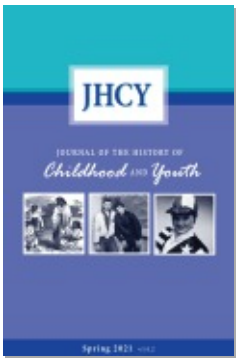
Celebrating Violence? Children, Youth, and War Education in Maoist China (1949–1976)



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CELEBRATING VIOLENCE? CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND WAR EDUCATION IN MAOIST CHINA (1949–1976)

War culture has had tremendous power in shaping modern understandings of the nation in the People's Republic of China (PRC),[1] yet the role of children's education in the creation of that culture has received scarce attention. The few studies that have tackled this issue focus on media and literary works, and they argue that in Chinese publications of the Mao era (1949–1976), youth were typically portrayed as "small soldiers," a trope that all but supplanted indigenous, Confucian notions of children as incomplete human beings or the modern, romantic images of the "innocent child" introduced from the West in the first half of the twentieth century.[2] This claim echoes that of scholars who have looked at Cold War cultures elsewhere in the world and argue that in countries of the eastern bloc, children were generally accorded more aggressive and militant roles than in the West, where the myth of the "defenseless child" predominated mainstream culture of the postwar era.[3] This article seeks to challenge this thesis by highlighting the shifting and complex nature of public discourses about children, youth, and political violence in the PRC.

Drawing on the analysis of war narratives in Chinese textbooks and debates about war education published in pedagogical journals and general media from the 1950s to the 1970s, the discussion reveals considerable variety in Maoist-era conceptualizations of children and their capacities. While school textbooks and educators in Maoist China promoted the idea of young persons as active political agents, this notion was continuously challenged by an alternate vision that regarded children of various ages as vulnerable, immature, and in need of protection from war's brutality. This finding complicates our understanding of the nature of China's modern war culture and of Chinese conceptualizations of children following the 1949 revolution. Further, it calls into question the

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assumption that during the Cold War era, countries on different sides of the political divide upheld starkly contrasting notions of the young.

WAR AND CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

Modern-era Chinese discussions concerning the role of children in military struggle did not begin in the Maoist period. Rather, the roots of these debates can be traced to the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1920s, leading Chinese writers, thinkers, and education reformers rejected traditional texts and approaches grounded in indigenous Confucian thinking. Challenging the existing notion that children are incomplete human beings in need of strict tutoring from elders and seniors, radical Chinese intellectuals of the period insisted on applying modern, "scientific" attitudes toward the young, calling for a recognition of children's "special characteristics" and "distinctive needs" as defined by psychologists.[4]

These new notions reflected the desire of many Western-trained or Western-influenced urban intellectuals to create a new culture and a new social order in an attempt to "save the country" from foreign imperialist interventions as well as from the domestic political chaos that had plagued China since the 1911 revolution. Known as the New Culture Movement or the May Fourth Movement, this intellectual campaign was strongly influenced by romantic notions of the defenseless child and by the ideas of American progressive education movement. In a society that many intellectuals viewed with despair and shame, the figure of the child stood for Darwinian "naturalness" and national rejuvenation, and children's education became a key site for reformers who believed that in children's "liberation" lay China's salvation from foreign attacks.[5]

Sustained periods of military conflict that afflicted China from the late 1920s to the late 1940s further altered the parameters of adult expectations of childhood. During the civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces and the War of Resistance against Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, media, literary, and educational texts in China continued to portray children as vulnerable victims of military violence.[6] Yet amid the acute national crises, children were also increasingly called to resist the foreign aggressors.[7] Following Japan's invasion of China in 1931, the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party actively promoted militarization (*junshihua*) as part of its popular mobilization drive, introducing military training in Chinese secondary schools in order to instill "a martial form of cultural citizenship."[8] After the outbreak of full-scale war with Japan in 1937, the theme of patriotic militarism received further impetus in KMT schools

while educators valorized youth who "dared to die a martyr's death."[9] These themes seemed to stray far from the romantic notions of childhood innocence promoted by liberal Chinese authors in the pre-war years. However, they did reflect the influence of modern Western theories, which, unlike Confucian ideologies, emphasized children's capabilities and the central role of youth in nation-building processes.[10]

As this overview indicates, discourses of childhood in Republican-era China (1912–1949) were characterized by multiple, conflicting viewpoints.[11] Most scholars nonetheless claim that the promotion of youth engagement against foreign and domestic enemies during this period opened the way for a full-scale militarization of childhood in the Mao era.[12] As a number of studies have shown, many of the stories Maoist-era children read both in and outside of school were set during the struggles against the Japanese and the KMT forces in the pre-1949 era. The heroes of these stories—both adults and, notably, children under age eighteen—were formally designated as "martyrs" and their deeds inspired numerous songs, poems, picture books, drama, and films of the Mao period.[13] The Maoist portrayal of youth as principal agents of revolutionary change was further accompanied by the expectation that they actively participate in the political campaigns of the time.[14]

Building on these insights, this article seeks to elaborate on the thesis that the Maoist period was a time of "ultra-militarization" of childhood. Focusing on school textbooks and educational writings rather than on literary and cultural work as previous scholars have done, my analysis traces debates about children's capabilities in the pedagogical arena while documenting the existence of competing views about war education throughout the Mao period. This finding echoes that of studies of other socialist countries, which show how, alongside the trope of the child as self-reliant and always ready to defend the revolution, images of children as innocent, docile, and in need of protection persisted in the 1950s–1970s.[15] In her study on childhood in the Soviet Union, Catriona Kelly shows, for instance, how children were raised to be "constantly vigilant" and often heard stories about sacrificial "war heroes." Yet Soviet work for and about the young also promoted the themes of magic, fantasy, and joyful play associated with idealized "childish" qualities.[16] Meanwhile, Peacock's study of American, Soviet, and North Vietnamese discourses of childhood documents how politicians and propagandists on both sides of the Iron Curtain "manufactured similar visions of idealized and threatened children."[17] Focusing on the PRC, this article likewise problematizes the assumption that during the Cold War era, socialist education system uniformly promoted images of "the belligerent child" or that the notions of

childhood in the socialist bloc were markedly different from those promoted in Western capitalist countries.

DATA AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study draws on two types of sources: war narratives in PRC school textbooks and articles regarding war education in pedagogical journals of the Mao era. Discussion of these sources is further complemented by analyzing selected publications in general media and in children's magazines of the period.

The analysis of school textbooks focused on depictions of military conflict in seven Chinese history textbooks for middle school students (ages twelve to eighteen) published 1956–1973. Following the 1949 revolution, China adopted the educational model of the USSR, with all children following the same course with the same textbook at the same time.[18] The task of producing the textbooks was assigned to the People's Education Press (PEP) (*Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe*), a subsidiary agency of the Ministry of Education (MOE). By 1956, the PEP had rewritten and published the first series of textbooks on all subjects and was the only publisher to produce, print, and distribute textbooks nationally.[19] During the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), however, the history curriculum came under severe attack from the radical leadership group, later known as the "Gang of Four," as well as from Red Guard youth organizations. Chinese provinces were instructed to discard the PEP textbooks and compile and teach their own "revolutionary" textbooks.[20] Consequently, four of the books reviewed for this study were published by the PEP between 1956 and 1964, while the other three are Cultural Revolution versions published in Shandong and Henan provinces from 1970 to 1973.

Apart from curriculum content, the study examines discussions of war education in two major educational journals of the period: *People's Education* (*Renmin jiaoyu*) and *History Teaching* (*Lishi jiaoxue*). *People's Education* is a semimonthly journal, published by China's MOE continuously since 1950. The first editorial board of the journal consisted of left-leaning educators and intellectuals who were active before the 1949 revolution, including figures such as Cheng Fangwu, Ye Shengtao, Liu Wei, Xu Teli, and Sun Qimeng. As the official mouthpiece of the MOE, the aim of *People's Education* was to promote the pedagogical principles and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the MOE.[21] The second journal reviewed for this study is *History Teaching*. Published monthly from 1951 to 1966 by the China History Society (*Lishi jiaoxue she*), *History Teaching* was supervised by the PEP and the MOE. The journal was founded by Yang Shengmao (1917–2010), a pioneering American history professor at Nankai University and the first president of the Tianjin New History

Society (*Tianjin shi xin shi xuehui*), along with six other political historians from Beijing and Tianjin. The stated aims of the journal were to discuss pressing issues in the scholarship of history education while addressing the actual needs and problems of front-line teachers. *History Teaching* was forced to temporarily cease publication, however, at the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966) due to its "revisionist" political line. The journal resumed publication only in 1978, following the end of the Mao period.[22]

In the Maoist-era curriculum, historical materialism was considered the only way to understand past events. Workers and class struggle were regarded as the makers of both domestic and world history.[23] Modern history textbooks portrayed international military conflict as an inevitable product of the excesses of the capitalist system, which requires endless expansion to overseas markets and leads to unavoidable struggles for world hegemony.[24] In a departure from Marxist orthodoxy, however, Maoist-era textbooks consistently portrayed the struggles of Chinese people against imperialist forces as expressions not only of "class contradictions" but also of "righteous patriotic indignation" against foreign invasions.[25] Further, the declared aim of school history teaching in the PRC was to educate children not only for the "internationalist communist world view" but also for patriotism.[26]

Keeping this broader political agenda in mind, this study does not aim to offer a systematic investigation of the historiography of a particular war, but rather it traces general patterns in war accounts to reveal the ordering of pedagogical discourse about military conflict. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the following questions: First, what were the perceived political and educational goals of teaching children about war throughout the Mao period? Second, how did school textbooks present the theme of modern military conflict to students in light of these goals, and to what extent did authors and educators see it appropriate to expose or, alternatively, protect learners from stories of war atrocities? Third, what role did Maoist-era educational thinkers and front-line teachers assign youth in political conflict, and did this role remain constant throughout the period?

Before moving on to address these issues, a brief note concerning the usage of age categories is in order. As Field and Syrett observe, age is never a neutral fact.[27] While it is easy to assume that words such as *child*, *youth*, or *adult* are so rooted in biological developmental processes that their meanings are universal, anthropological and historical evidence demonstrates that even understandings of when life begins and ends are culturally variable.[28] In late imperial China, for instance, the period of "childhood" (in Chinese, *tongnian*: literally "the time of young age") normally ended between the ages

of fourteen and nineteen, when an individual was expected to take on adult responsibilities and roles varying according to era, social class, and gender.[29] Over the twentieth century, however, these age definitions were refashioned, as the social construction of the different stages of childhood and the distinction between "childhood" and "maturity" came to be seen as coinciding with the end of particular stages of the newly instated mass schooling system and/or the point at which an individual leaves home.[30]

The analysis is further complicated by the relatively fluid meanings of the linguistic terms referring to young people during the Mao period. As noted by several scholars, in modern Chinese usage, it is often impossible to define precisely the common age references for the terms *ertong* (in colloquial usage: *haizi*), *shaonian*, *shao'er*, *qingshaonian*, and *qingnian*, all of which may refer to persons under age eighteen.[31] For the purposes of this study, I therefore use the term *children* to refer to those aged between six to eighteen (designated in Chinese as *ertong*), and *youth* for those at the middle school stage (ages twelve to eighteen) (often designated in Chinese as *shaonian*).

TEACHING ABOUT CONFLICT IN THE 1950S

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong declared that the Chinese people had "stood up." The establishment of the People's Republic of China followed more than two decades of intermittent civil war between the CCP and KMT forces as well as prolonged struggle against Japan. A year later, in October 1950, Mao and the CCP leadership sent "Chinese People's Volunteers" (CPVs) to Korea to fight against UN forces moving toward the Chinese-Korean border.[32] In military strength and industrial capacity, China was no match for its opponent, the well-equipped and well-supplied United Nations Command (UNC), under US leadership. What China could rely on, however, was its massive population and its political propaganda apparatus.[33] To galvanize its citizens into fighting "a just war" against American imperialism in the midst of a contentious land reform program, the Chinese government launched a vigorous media and educational campaign under the slogan "Resist America and Aid [North] Korea (*Kang Mei yuan Chao*)"; "Defend the Homeland and Protect Our Country (*Baojia weiguo*)." Propaganda posters of the period typically demonized the American enemy while beautifying the sacrifice of Chinese volunteers on the battlefront. General media articles about the US bombing of China's border cities showed bloody bodies and burned houses, making the war in Korea personal to the Chinese people.[34]

War stories of the period explicitly sought to teach children and youth to "hate the US imperialists" and "beat American arrogance."[35] Magazines for

primary school students, for instance, published didactic texts that sought to justify China's involvement in the conflict by framing it as a struggle to protect "peace, hope and a better future." Notably, such texts were often accompanied by images of defenseless infants and children harmed by the attacks of UNC forces. Articles published in these magazines also encouraged young readers to sympathize with the plight of their North Korean peers and participate in war-related activities, such as preparing propaganda posters, writing letters to Chinese fighters, collecting military donations, and partaking in the nationwide "Patriotic Hygiene Campaign," which called for the systematic extermination of pests in order to ward off "American germ warfare."[36]

While depicting the courageous tales of adult Chinese fighters, PRC magazines of the early 1950s did occasionally feature (North Korean) children—from infants to those in their teens—in the stories. Generally, these youth appeared as innocent victims of American aggression rather than as active fighters.[37] Nonetheless, magazine authors of the period promoted the idea that even primary school children were capable of developing a political consciousness. The following poem, published in 1951 in the children's magazine *Xiao pengyou* (*Little Friends*) illustrates this notion:

> Older brother marches forward; younger brother follows behind / "Older Brother! Older Brother! Where are you going?" / "I am going to military school to learn how to beat the enemy" / "Why beat the enemy?" / "In order to defend peace!" / "Older Brother, you're so glorious, you wear a large red flower on your shirt / please tell all the older brothers and sisters / you're marching forward, I'll study hard / when I finish my studies / I will join you and together we shall defeat the enemy and kill the Americans."[38]

While the schoolchild—notably portrayed as a boy in the accompanying illustration—is presented as a would-be military fighter, the text also stipulates that for now, his duty is to "study hard" while adults engage in the actual fighting. In this respect, the text maintains the idealized notion of childhood as a time of study, not combat, even as it promotes the use of lethal force against China's enemies.

This ambiguous message is also evident in pedagogical discussions of the period. In a series of articles published in *People's Education* in the early 1950s, officials and scholars recommended, for instance, that when instructing middle school students (ages twelve to eighteen) about war, teachers should emphasize the importance of maintaining "world peace" while highlighting the fact that modern military conflicts have "led millions of children in China and abroad to suffer hunger, cold, and death." Front-line educators were also told that they should do their best to avoid exposing students to descriptions

of extreme violence in order to protect them from war's brutality.[39] In the 1952 article "What does peace mean for our children?," Kang Keqing (1911–1992)—a veteran of the CCP's 1934 Long March and leader of the All-China Women's Federation (*Fu Lian*), asserted, for example:

> Defending children (*ertong*) is the lofty task of humankind. . . . Parents are eager to protect their children's safety, growth, and happiness rights, but today, mothers are greatly saddened by the threat to the safety of their children. War in North Korea, Vietnam, and Malaya is ravaging and destroying children's lives. Therefore, it is the most urgent requirement for mothers around the world to defend the lives of children and to wipe out the wars that endanger the safety of children.[40]

Other articles in the same journal promoted a different view, however. A 1952 account authored by a teacher in the city of Beijing, relates, for instance, how a thirteen-year-old boy named Zhang Fengxiang had drawn a picture at school on International Children's Day. According to the teacher, the boy's drawing depicted a child looking at an aircraft while thinking, "When I grow up, I want to become a pilot so that I can carry children to play in other countries. When there are no wars in the world, airplanes will only be used as a means for transport, not combat." Though this article praises the boy's spirit of "cherishing peace," the author also emphasizes, "Chinese children (*ertong*) are far from naive." They know it is not enough "to beg for peace . . . they know how to fight for their ideals . . . and harbor great hatred for the [capitalist] invaders who are trying to destroy human happiness by waging war."[41]

Another report from the same year, published in the CCP's official mouthpiece, the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), cautions against "conceptual confusion" regarding children's "capabilities and level of awareness." Whereas some authors and educators erroneously "believe that writing about war . . . is beyond the life experiences of children (*ertong*)," notes the author, others depict them as "superior little heroes, while overlooking children's age limitations or mental and physical immaturity."[42] The report recommends a compromise between the two approaches. Notably, during this period Mao himself seemed to have held an ambiguous view of the sort of demands that the party should make on youth. For instance, in a 1953 talk before the Second National Congress of the Communist Youth League, Mao warned against making excessive demands of young people, noting that those "between the ages of 14 and 25" are in need of "more time for play, recreation and sports. Otherwise, they won't be happy. . . . In all this they are different from older people."[43]

The ambiguity surrounding the conceptualization of youth education continued well after the conclusion of the Korean War and was evident not only in

the remarks of CCP leaders but also among the country's teachers. For instance, in a 1956 *People's Education* column that addressed queries sent by front-line educators, one history teacher raised the following question: "In carrying out patriotic education, should we expose primary school children to the full extent of the enemy's [war] crimes?" The answer began as a clear "yes," with the editor explaining thusly:

> The purpose of patriotic education . . . is to teach children (*ertong*) to love the motherland and hate the enemy, so that they can be strong and brave, and contribute to the future construction and defense of the motherland without reservation. In order to achieve this goal, we should . . . expose children to knowledge about enemy brutality. In this way, they not only learn about the bright side but also about the dark sides of the world.[44]

The editor's reply arguably reflects the notion that children should not be shielded from the horrors of war if they are to be trained for their role as future revolutionary fighters. However, the rest of the response carries a different message. It advises teachers to "properly educate children according to their age and psychological features," adapt the class materials to the child's school grade, and, most notably, "avoid excessive depictions of violence." "We can all recall," notes the editor, how

> [d]uring the Korean War, American imperialists committed the cruel act of killing Korean women and children in an area that they themselves had designated as "no-man's land." Our newspapers did not elaborate too much on these crimes, not because we did not want to face reality but because back then, people were afraid of the Americans and lacked confidence in our ability to achieve victory. If we had exposed the full scale of the facts, it most likely would have increased fears of the cruelty of war . . . and resulted in psychological terror. Now, if our newspapers hid these atrocities from adults, how could we expose children to such information? [45]

Further equating the act of offering children detailed information about war crimes with serving them "unhealthy and inappropriate foods," the *People's Education* editor proceeds to compare such practices to the use of "scare tactics" by "uneducated mothers" who try to frighten young children into submission by warning them to "go to sleep, or the tiger will come!" or "I'll call a bear to come and eat you!" Such tactics may satisfy the mother in the short run, observes the editor, but might lead to a dangerously timid personality in the child later.[46]

As reflected in this mid-1950s column that appeared in a journal representing the official stance of the MOE, both teachers and pedagogical thinkers continually deliberated over the proper way of fostering a correct political

orientation in students and the distinct developmental characteristics of children. An examination of war narratives in history textbooks of the mid-to-late 1950s reveals that this dynamic view of childhood shaped the contents of schoolbooks as well. Thus, 1950s PEP textbooks for twelve- to eighteen-year-olds typically described war as the business of adults. In the rare cases in which the texts referred to youth, they were invariably portrayed as victims of military conflict rather than as active fighters. Notably, the textbooks addressing adolescents also lacked graphic depictions of violence.

During the first decade of socialist rule, mainstream educational discourse in China did not carry a uniform message. Throughout the 1950s, pedagogical articles conveyed the belief that primary school children and middle school youth should be taught about the politics of war—yet the texts did not necessarily cast the young in the role of "small soldiers." Some authors and educators conveyed the notion that exposing children of all ages to military atrocities could weaken their characters and willingness to fight, thereby damaging their sense of national pride. Subjecting children to stories of human vulnerability in the face of the enemy may have also seemed dangerous for a fledgling socialist government attempting to establish its image as protector and savior of the people.[47] Other authors promoted a view of childhood couched in the modern science of developmental psychology, according to which children are different from adults: they are more vulnerable emotionally and therefore must not become involved in—or exposed to information about—war brutality.

Arguably, this particular stance could be explained by the fact that in the early years of the People's Republic, the field of children's education and media was still led and populated by Republican-era and May Fourth intellectuals. These prominent educational figures may have adopted the socialist ideology but nonetheless held to imported liberal and psychologized notions of childhood or even to indigenous, Confucian perceptions of children as "incomplete" human beings.[48] As the next section will show, however, an ambiguous view of children and their capacities was also evident in the next two decades of the Mao period, even as Chinese society as a whole became more militarized.

WAR LESSONS IN THE 1960S–1970S

The early 1960s witnessed a shift in the way PRC authors and educators regarded war education, a transformation that can be traced to broader developments in both the global and domestic arenas. Amid the China-Soviet dispute in 1960, Chiang Kai-shek had launched several commando raids into southeast China as part of Taiwan's plan to retake mainland China. In 1962, China also became involved in a border war with India, and in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split,

the USSR had stationed hundreds of thousands of troops on China's northern border. On the domestic front, Mao Zedong was concerned that policies issued by the CCP's center after the debacle of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) exhibited "signs of Soviet revisionism" and that his colleagues in the CCP leadership were "steering China towards a Soviet-style capitalist resurgence."[49]

It was in this context that Mao decided to launch a "socialist education program" in 1963. A massive propaganda campaign aimed at reversing "capitalist trends" in Chinese society by promoting "collectivism, patriotism, and socialism," the campaign used militant heroes and models to reintroduce "socialist values" into Chinese society. The most famous model-hero to emerge during this period was Lei Feng (1940–1962), a soldier whose dedication to Mao and attitude of self-sacrifice epitomized the values the CCP sought to inculcate in the nation's citizens, particularly youth.[50] Educational discussions and media reports of the early 1960s expressed the notion that children should be inducted into their political roles as early as possible.[51]At school, these calls were translated into the introduction of military training activities as part of physical education classes.[52] As memoirs of the period reveal, when relations between China and the Soviet Union further deteriorated into armed conflict, children as young as seven or eight were also encouraged to dig deep trenches in preparation for a potential war.[53]

The growing militarization of children's education was evident in the pedagogical journals of the period. A 1963 article in *People's Education* insisted, for instance, that teachers keep in mind that children "are not only their parents' progeny," they are also, and more importantly, "successors of the revolution, the hope of the motherland, and the masters of future society." Therefore, "the responsibility of teachers is not only to care about the life and health of students," but also to train them to "become strong revolutionary fighters." Further criticizing middle school educators who "erroneously believed that they should exhibit "motherly love/kindness (*mu'ai*)" and "protect children from harm," the author cautions that teachers should under no circumstances "spare children's feelings while neglecting ideological education":

> We can no longer focus on children's lives and emphasize maternal love while ignoring "class love." . . . We must expose the deceptive and reactionary nature of "maternal education" . . . and let children recognize early on that our enemies are the imperialists, especially US imperialism, modern revisionism, and reactionary feudal forces. . . . Teachers who shed sympathetic tears for the suffering of "little bunny rabbits" together with students or express tender warmth towards the petit bourgeois will not be able to cultivate strong revolutionary offspring.[54]

A 1965 report in *History Teaching* gives a further sense of how PRC teachers attempted to practice such recommendations. While instructing junior middle school students (ages twelve to fifteen) in Zhengzhou, Henan province, about the history of the Japanese occupation, one teacher relates how he provided "full details" of war atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. Thus, the lesson included graphic depictions of "rape, shooting civilians on sight, and burning them alive." The teacher observed that such descriptions helped his students realize "who they should love and who they should hate, what they should support, and what they should resist."[55]

In another 1965 report in the same journal, a teacher in Zhejiang province described taking junior middle school students to meet residents of two villages that had been occupied by the Japanese during the war. Recounting students' emotional reactions to the stories they had heard during these on-site visits, the teacher recommended the use of oral history methods for their effectiveness in conveying "the sheer scale of Japanese war atrocities," deepening "students' hatred" toward the enemy, and strengthening their resolve "to continue the struggle against imperialist forces" in the present.[56]

As China's leadership was gearing for a potential conflict with both US forces in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in the north, middle school textbooks produced by the PEP during the early-to-mid-1960s also reflected a growing emphasis on the allegedly active role of youth in past military conflicts. Compared to previous versions, history textbooks of this period included lengthier discussions of military battles, as well as greater details of war brutality. Unlike earlier textbooks, schoolbooks of this period also highlighted historical incidents in which teenagers of each gender reportedly aided in the fight against domestic and external enemies. It is worth noting, however, that in PRC textbooks of the early-to-mid-1960s, young people were still depicted in auxiliary capacities—for example, fetching food and water for adult combatants.[57]

The launch of the "Cultural Revolution" in 1966 brought Chinese youth to the forefront of domestic political struggle in a very real sense. Initiated by Mao Zedong, who feared that the initial fervor of the socialist revolution was being lost to more conservative, bureaucratic elements within the CCP, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution received its name from Mao's call to the Chinese people, particularly 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.

In May 1966, the Cultural Revolution (hereafter, CR) started with the posting of the first *dazibao* (big character poster) at Beijing University. By August 1966,

the movement had extended to senior and junior middle schools as well, where the first groups of Red Guards (*Hong Weibing*) were formed. Students moved outside of their campuses and into the streets, violently attacking real and imagined "class enemies."[58] Red Guards mobilized not only against school staff but also against authorities in factories and government offices while "exchanging revolutionary experiences" in other parts of the country. Throughout China, "revolutionary committees" seized power from the local government and party authorities, attacking those suspected of being disloyal to Mao's thought. At the height of the CR, schooling was halted altogether, industrial production considerably slowed down, the administration was paralyzed, and anarchy reigned as Red Guard groups as well as "revolutionary worker organizations" began to weigh armed struggle against each other.

In 1967, the CCP leadership decided to bring in the military to quell the chaos. Gradually, and in some cases after much struggle, the People's Liberation Army forces took over factories, government agencies, and schools. Beginning in 1968, millions of middle school graduates and university students who had participated in the revolutionary movement were voluntarily or forcibly moved to the countryside to be "reeducated" by peasants. Younger children were recalled to their classes and shortly afterward, middle school and college students resumed their studies.[59] In the reopened schools, however, military themes dominated the curriculum to an unprecedented extent.[60] Middle school history textbooks, now produced by various provinces rather than the politically discredited PEP, highlighted the leading role of "youth (*shaonian*)" in military fighting. One example is the account of how Chinese peasants had fought British forces in Guangdong during the first Opium War (1839–1842). When describing this incident, known in Chinese historiography as the Battle of *Sanyuanli* (1841), earlier textbooks of the 1950s had merely stated that the "common people" had valiantly laid siege to British troops. In contrast, the 1966 textbook, published just prior to the CR,[61] makes special note of the fact that "many youth" had also participated in the siege on the British by aiding adult fighters. Subsequent CR textbooks assign youth an even more active position. For instance, a 1973 textbook produced in Henan province describes in poetic detail British soldiers "escaping in shame" and "kneeling on the ground begging for mercy" from Chinese militia forces, which, as the text emphasizes, included both "youth (*shaonian*)" and adult fighters.[62] CR textbooks produced in Henan and Shandong also underlined the crucial role of youth (*shaonian*) in other historical conflicts, such as the anti-imperialist Boxer Uprising of 1900, when Chinese youth "equipped with merely knives and spears" vowed to "kill all the ocean devils [derogatory term for foreigners]."[63]

Regardless of the veracity of such claims, these stories are significant in that they convey the notion that rather than being passive, incomplete human beings awaiting adult indoctrination or resourceful aides to adult fighters, youth possess the ability to wage war and ought to enact their agency through performing politically legitimate acts of violence.[64] This view, which came to dominate textbook narratives of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was equally prevalent in media and cultural works targeting children of all ages.[65] Yet while the "small soldier" trope was rigorously promoted in school textbooks and media publications of the CR period, it would nonetheless be wrong to extrapolate that ordinary educators across the country embraced this view. This point is illustrated in a June 1, 1966, editorial in the *Beijing Guangmin ribao*, a major government newspaper targeting the country's educated elite. Published on International Children's Day, the editorial warned:

> Some people are afraid that teenagers and children, being young, lacking in education and inexperienced, cannot take part in the Cultural Revolution, which is a class struggle in the ideological sphere. This viewpoint is incorrect. The great socialist Cultural Revolution is of vital significance to the tempering and growth of teenagers and children.[66]

Urging readers to let go of the notion that political maturity is linked to an individual's age and instead accept that children with the correct attitude could serve as fighters, this editorial's publication at the early stages of the CR indicates that the "small soldier" trope was not in fact universally embraced. Indeed, at the height of the revolution, in 1968, Mao himself had made statements that attested to his continued ambivalence about young people's efficacy as political actors.[67] The ambiguous stance regarding children's militant role was further reflected in repeated reprimands in media publications of the CR period against the stubborn tendency of "some educators" to "over-protect" students of all ages from "horrific war stories" due to the "false notion of children's innocence."[68] Demanding that readers discard this idea as nothing more than "revisionist rubble," such admonitions circulated in Chinese official media up until the end of the Mao era.[69] These warnings indicate that an idealized notion of childhood as a time of vulnerability persisted among some educators, even as middle school students, including those in their early teens, participated in extreme acts of violence against their teachers and other authority figures during the Cultural Revolution.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of textbooks, pedagogical writings, and media publications of the Mao period highlights the existence of divergent ideas of both childhood

and war education. As noted here, debates about war pedagogies—and about the political roles of children and youth—were particularly evident in the first decade of socialist rule. However, competing notions on how to teach the young about military violence persisted into the 1960s and did not disappear even in the ultra-militarized decade of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the idea of children and youth as "small soldiers" was never an unstated, assumed truth in the field of Mao-era education. Instead, it constituted what is best described as a locus of continual debate between disparate views of childhood and political violence.

This article's focus on government, pedagogical, and media rhetoric does not allow us to reach definitive conclusions regarding the effects of this discourse on everyday notions and practices of childrearing or education. This crucial issue warrants separate inquiry that would need to explore distinct notions of children and their capacities among urban and rural populations in different parts of China. Despite this caveat, the article's findings are significant in that they challenge the assumption that the Mao era constituted a complete break with pre-1949 pedagogical concepts. They help to fill a vacancy in our understanding of the complex effects of the socialist revolution on public conceptions of children as particular types of subjects.[70] They also demonstrate that idealized—and often contradictory—notions of the child maintained by politicians, authors, and educators in socialist countries were not in fact that different from those found on the other side of the political divide.

NOTES

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13. Kauffman, "Imagining the New Socialist Child," 12; Farquhar, *Children's Literature*, 275, 291.

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