

Alison Campion

Carleton College: HST 153

A Clash of the Classes in a Classless Society

In Philip Kuhn's article titled "Chinese Views of Social Classification" he says that "Chinese social theory would be somewhat uncomfortable with idea of hereditary and immutable class status." And he goes on to elaborate on the idea that Chinese society is not organized in grouping of different social classes but in more individual ladder like organization. However, the clashes between Red Army guards of differing backgrounds during the Cultural Revolution seem to contradict this observation. We can amend this contradiction if we look closer into Kuhn's argument as well as the specific situation created by the Cultural Revolution. Due to the extreme youth of the students involved in the Red Guard makes it so that they have yet to truly begin to climb this "social ladder" and are still at the base point from which they started. This base point is close to a class construct yet can still be fit into Kuhn's argument.

Kuhn describes the Chinese social hierarchy as being quite different to the one we are used to. Instead of large classes of people who share a similar socio-economic standing he claims that the Chinese culture places individual people on a scale of highs and lows. He draws this notion largely from the Chinese word which is currently used to translate 'social class': jieji. "Originally the ideograph jie seems to mean steps, like rungs on a ladder; and ji is the order of threads in a fabric. The term thus connotes heretical degrees on a continuum, rather than groups of people." [1] A large part of the ladder theory is the fact that individuals have the opportunity to climb into higher "rungs" of

society. This differs greatly from many other cultures social organizations, such as the Indian caste system where people are born and die in the same caste and have no chance for upward mobility. But the place in which a person is born and raised in society, or their 'social origin,' is still a factor in determining where they might end up along the social continuum.

Taking into account the role 'social origin' plays in a person's life may make it easier to understand the animosity between groups of Red Guards. Although upward (and in some cases downward) social mobility is present in China the station at which a person starts this movement has an impact on how far up he can climb and how hard he must work to reach that height. The young students who participated in the Cultural Revolution as Red Guards had just begun their climb. In normal social situations they most likely would spend the majority of their time with other youth who began in the same social station, and therefore their climb might seem of average difficulty and duration.

However, when thrust into the diversity and chaos which surrounded the life of a Red Guard they might have seen for the first time the discrepancy between their "starting point" and those of differing backgrounds. And because they are young and have not yet had the time to fully develop their individual personalities they would be more prone to buying into a radical group mentality.

In conclusion, although Kuhn is correct in his assessment that Chinese culture works against the idea of absolute social classes there are incidences, such as the clash of the Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution which seem to carry the underpinnings of class struggle. When you take into account the age, 'social origin' and current political

atmosphere of the time it is easier to see how these class clashes could occur in an otherwise 'classless' society.

[1] Kuhn, Philip A., "Chinese View of Social Classification", *Language, History and Class*, Basil Blackwell, 1991, 228