

**THE POWER OF WORDS:  
LABELS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES IN MAO'S CHINA  
(1949-1976)**

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When Confucius was asked what he would do if he were a ruler, he said that his first step would be to rectify the names or labels given to things, because “If names are not rectified, the language will not flow smoothly. If language does not flow smoothly, then social acts cannot be carried out”.<sup>1</sup> More generally, thinkers in the Confucian tradition believed that the proper regulation of terminology would provide the categories for an agreed and correct perception of reality, which would in turn provide the basis for moral self-cultivation, good government and social harmony. In accordance with this doctrine, successive emperors sought to control language by issuing lists of banned characters and promoting standardised linguistic formulae that encouraged ‘correct’ thought.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) inherited this tradition of linguistic engineering and greatly extended it. Inspired by the example of the Soviet Union, the CCP taught the whole population a new political vocabulary, gave old words new meanings, used traditional terms for revolutionary purposes, suppressed words that expressed

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Ori Tavor, “Naming/Power: Linguistic Engineering and the Construction of Discourse in Early China”, *Asian Philosophy*, 24, 4 (2014): 313-329; and Fengyuan Ji, “Language Planning and Policy in China: Unity, Diversity and Social Control”, *Language Planning in the Post-Communist Era: The Struggles for Language Control in the New Order in Eastern Europe, Eurasia and China*, ed. by Ernest Andrews (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 67-92.

‘incorrect’ thought, and made the whole population recite slogans, stock phrases and scripts that expressed ‘correct’ views in ‘correct’ linguistic form. This language, it was assumed, would transform people’s minds, helping to produce large numbers of new, revolutionary human beings; and because everyone had to speak the new language to avoid suspicion, it also operated as a conformity-inducing instrument of social control.<sup>3</sup>

## I. Labelling, Class and Revolution

At the heart of this new language was a labelling system for the friends and enemies of the revolution that had brought the CCP to power in 1949, and at the heart of that labelling system lay the language of ‘class’. The members of every household were given a collective ‘class of origin’ or ‘family background’ (*jiating chushen*), based on the occupation, wealth or political affiliation of the male head of the household between 1946 and 1949. These class designations were described as ‘good’, ‘middle’ or ‘bad’, depending on whether their members seemed more or less likely to support the revolution. The main ones can be classified as in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

Because the new class system was intended to distinguish the friends of the revolution from its enemies, it sometimes used political criteria, rather than economic ones, to distinguish classes – as when it classified CCP officials, soldiers and party members as good-class, while consigning officials, soldiers and party members associated with the Nationalists to the bad classes. These political criteria trumped economic ones, so everyone who joined the CCP or the People’s Liberation Army before 1949 became a ‘good class’ revolutionary cadre or revolutionary soldier irrespective of social origin; and everyone linked to the Nationalists became a member of the ‘bad classes’ on the same basis.<sup>5</sup>

The new class system completely inverted the pre-1949 social order. The lowest stratum consisted of the country’s former rulers and socioeconomic elite, while the highest stratum consisted of workers, peasants, and the CCP cadres and soldiers whom the Nationalists had labelled as ‘bandits’. All class labels were printed on people’s identity cards, and the CCP used them as a guide as it went about turning the social order on

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed treatment, see Fengyuan Ji, *Linguistic Engineering Language and Politics in Mao’s China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004). See also Michael Schoenhals, *Doing things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Source: adapted from Richard C. Kraus, *Class Conflict in Chinese Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew G. Walder and Songhua Hu, “Revolution, Reform, and Status Inheritance: Urban China, 1949-1996”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 114, 5 (2009): 1395-1427, see 1403.

**Table 1 – China’s New Class System after 1949**

‘Good’ classes ( <i>chengfen hao</i> )					
Revolutionary cadres (pre-1949 Party members)	Revolutionary soldiers (pre-1949 members of the People’s Liberation Army)	Revolutionary martyrs (descendants of those who died for the revolution)	Industrial workers	Poor peasants	Lower-middle peasants
‘Middle’ classes ( <i>yiban chengfen</i> )					
Middle peasants	Petty bourgeoisie, peddlers	Professionals, teachers, white collar workers			
‘Bad’ classes ( <i>chengfen buhao</i> )					
Landlords	Rich peasants	Nationalist government officials, military officers, and party members.	Bureaucratic comprador capitalists (linked to the Nationalist government and imperialists)	National capitalists (not linked to the Nationalist government and imperialists)	

its head, ruthlessly and systematically crushing the bad classes and elevating the good classes. Moreover, until the class system was abolished, the labels remained hereditary in the male line, blighting or blessing the lives of hundreds of millions of people who had not even been born when the CCP came to power.

The transformation of China’s social structure to make it match the new hierarchy of the class labels began with the great revolutionary campaigns of the early 1950s. The first campaign involved land reform, and it began with the process of identifying and labelling the landlords who were to be dispossessed through class struggle. There was a problem here, because in many villages there were few or no people who met the CCP’s definition of a landlord, which meant that to fill their quotas the local cadres had to *invent* them. They did this by the simple expedient of pinning the label ‘landlord’ on the required number of politically vulnerable people – rich peasants, people with links to the Nationalists, troublemakers, or those who had fallen out with local revolution-

aries. Similarly, if there were not enough rich peasants, the cadres just labelled as ‘rich peasants’ the more politically vulnerable people who matched the official criteria for middle peasants. In this way they found or invented an enemy in every village – a small pariah class against which they could rally the poor and lower-middle peasants who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. The Party was then able to achieve its objective of using class struggle to teach every inhabitant of every village three revolutionary truths: that the bad classes were oppressors and social pariahs, that the Party was the champion of the poor and lower-middle peasants whom the bad classes had oppressed, and that the Party had the power to mobilise the ‘revolutionary masses’ to crush everyone who opposed it.<sup>6</sup>

Having identified and labelled the landlords, the CCP did not simply use its cadres and soldiers to dispossess them. Instead, it got the revolutionary masses to do it through carefully orchestrated class struggle. Party cadres started the process by seeking out people with grievances or grudges against the landlords, and then getting them to expose their targets’ real and alleged crimes at public ‘struggle meetings’ in which the whole community participated. Activists forced the landlords to hang their heads as their accusers ‘spoke bitterness’ against them, while the villagers chanted the slogans of class war and demanded savage punishment. Nobody spoke up for the accused because nobody wanted to be labelled a class enemy. In this way the CCP turned China’s peasants into active participants in the class war, implicating them personally in the execution of perhaps a million or more members of landlord families.<sup>7</sup> It also implicated them in the impoverishment, vilification and maltreatment of the members of landlord families who survived, and in the persecution of their descendants. This shattered forever the bonds of kinship and deference that had often existed between landlords and their communities. Moreover, through this reform and the subsequent dispossession of the rich peasants, the CCP completely crushed the prominent families that had run the villages and distributed welfare through the clans. This left its own cadres unchallenged as the new rulers and the sole distributors of welfare.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This account of the labelling process is based on Philip C.C. Huang, “Rural Class Struggle in the Chinese Revolution: Representational and Objective Realities from the Land Reform to the Cultural Revolution”, *Modern China*, 21, 1 (1995): 105-143, see 111-125; Yang Su, *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 97-113; Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 92-98.

<sup>7</sup> Ji, *Linguist Engineering*, 69-71, 320 n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> This account of class struggle during the land reform is based on Huang, “Rural Class Struggle in the Chinese Revolution: Representational and Objective Realities from the Land Reform to the Cultural Revolution”; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 92-110; Su, *Collective Killings*

The same pattern of popular mobilisation was repeated, with variations, in the other major campaigns that followed the CCP's victory. The 'bureaucratic comprador capitalists', who had wisely fled, were expropriated as soon as the CCP gained power, but the 'national capitalists' (the 'least bad' of the bad classes) were not dispossessed until the period 1953-1956.<sup>9</sup> The CCP needed their cooperation and skills to ensure economic stability, but it also placed them under 'proletarian leadership' through the Five Antis campaign of 1951-1952. As usual, the Party started by sending teams of cadres into factories and offices where they encouraged the workers to 'speak bitterness' against their employers and managers, accusing them of unfair treatment, corruption and malpractice. The cadres then got revolutionary activists to drag the accused before meetings where they were denounced and humiliated by their subordinates, forced to confess their crimes, and made to beg the revolutionary masses for forgiveness. As a result 500 employers and managers were executed, 34,000 were imprisoned, and a further 2000 were driven to suicide.<sup>10</sup> China's national capitalists had been taught that they were at the mercy of the urban good classes – the cadres and workers who had interrogated them, accused them, and all too often dragged them out and delivered judgment.

The class labels that were central to these campaigns were complemented by more flexible political labels or 'hats' that were imposed for particular offences. These labels were recorded in the official dossiers of those to whom they were applied and they were widely publicised; however, they did not appear on people's identity cards and were not passed on to their children. The most important 'hat' in the early period was 'counterrevolutionary', a term associated with the campaign for the Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries in the early 1950s, which targeted bandits, as well as armed groups, spies, political operatives, and others associated with the Nationalists. This campaign, like all the others, started with attempts to get people to show their revolutionary commitment by informing on their friends, colleagues and enemies; it provided intimidating demonstrations of the Party's power to mobilise millions of people who demanded that the accused be punished; and it led to the often arbitrary labelling and sentencing of several million people, of whom at least 712,000 were executed, often

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*in Rural China*, 100-113; Ch'ing-K'un Yang, *A Chinese Village in Early Communist Transition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1965); and the sources listed in Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Because the national capitalists had no ties to the Nationalist government, they had been admitted to the National Front that swept the CCP to power in 1949. Their cooperation was essential to a smooth economic transition after 1949 and even after they had been dispossessed the CCP used their skills to run their former businesses. During the Cultural Revolution, however, they were persecuted viciously like other members of the bad classes.

<sup>10</sup> Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 318; Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 47.

simply to meet the quotas that Mao had specified.<sup>11</sup> The campaign eradicated all active resistance, but it was followed in 1955 by a further campaign to Uproot Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, which was intended to purge and intimidate a group that Mao mistrusted – those whose possession of at least a full secondary school education qualified them as ‘intellectuals’.<sup>12</sup> This campaign led to the formal labelling of another 81,000 people as counterrevolutionaries and the subjection of a further 1,400,000 to criticism and class struggle.<sup>13</sup>

The other main political ‘hats’ in the 1950s were ‘Rightist’, a highly damaging label, and ‘bad element’, a less serious tag attached to common criminals and other miscreants whose actions undermined the building of socialism. For convenience, Rightists, bad elements and counterrevolutionaries were lumped together with landlords and rich peasants as the Five Black Categories (*heiwulei*). They were singled out for class struggle in every political campaign, and were routinely subjected to humiliation and discrimination. More generally, in some rural areas people with bad-class backgrounds were paid less than people with good-class backgrounds; in all areas they were usually passed over for the best jobs; with only rare exceptions they were denied membership of the CCP; their children were often deprived of educational opportunities; and their young men, especially, had limited marriage prospects because their bad-class status would be passed on to their children.<sup>14</sup>

The Five Black Categories were contrasted with those whose family background gave them elevated status as revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary martyrs, workers, and poor and lower-middle peasants. These latter five groups were known collectively as the Five Red Categories or ‘five kinds of red’ (*hongwulei*). They had all the privileges that the Five Black Categories were denied, and their members had a sense of

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<sup>11</sup> Kuisong Yang, “Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries”, *The China Quarterly*, 193 (2008): 102-121.

<sup>12</sup> The use of the term ‘intellectuals’ in this extended sense was a legacy from imperial times, when graduates of the imperial examination system qualified as intellectuals eligible for employment in the imperial civil service. In China today, the term ‘intellectual’ is defined much more narrowly because secondary school education is now the norm.

<sup>13</sup> Fengzheng Yu, *Gaizao: 1949-1957 nian de zhishifenzi* [Reform: Intellectuals in the Years 1949-1957] (Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 2001), 417; Ningkun Wu, *A Single Tear* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 34-46.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Unger, “The Class System in Rural China: A Case Study”, *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. by James L. Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 121-141; Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger, “Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou (Canton)”, *The China Quarterly*, 83 (1980): 397-446; Martin K. Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 245; Kraus, *Class Conflict*, 133-136.

superiority based on their ‘red’ class origin. The CCP encouraged them to take pride in their family background, and by the 1960s their children had begun to see themselves as ‘revolutionary successors’ who would safeguard China’s socialist future.

There was potential here for the development of a caste system based on the patri-lineal transmission of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ class labels, but for a time the CCP was determined to ensure that this did not happen. Indeed, by late 1956 Party leaders believed that classes as functioning economic or political entities were becoming a thing of the past. All actually existing counterrevolutionaries had been killed, imprisoned or terrified into inactivity; the holdings of the landlords and rich peasants had been redistributed to the poor and lower-middle peasants; collectivisation was proceeding rapidly; and the capitalists had been dispossessed. In other words classes in any real sense had vanished. Party leaders freely acknowledged this. In September 1956, for example, Liu Shaoqi reported that the exploiting classes – the bureaucratic comprador capitalists, the national bourgeoisie, the landlords and rich peasants – had been eliminated or were being rapidly transformed; in the same month Deng Xiaoping argued that occupations were changing rapidly, that “the former classification of social status has lost or is losing its meaning”, and that most intellectuals had “come over politically to the side of the working class”; and the CCP’s 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress declared that the major contradiction was no longer between workers and capitalists but “between the advanced socialist system and the backward social productive forces”.<sup>15</sup> In future, the revolution would be driven forward, not by class struggle, but by economic development and comradely criticism and self-criticism. Mao agreed with all this and in February 1957, speaking “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People”, he told a Party audience that class struggles in China had “basically come to an end”.<sup>16</sup> Class labels and class struggles, the Party’s leaders agreed, were now largely irrelevant, and would soon disappear.

## II. Entrenching the Labelling System

Class labels and class struggles did not disappear. Instead, the Party soon found good reason to emphasise them, even though the economic relationships and political networks designated by the language of class no longer existed. This change of sentiment

<sup>15</sup> Kraus, *Class Conflict*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Schoenhals, “Original Contradictions – on the Unrevised Text of Mao Zedong’s ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People’”, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 16 (1986): 99-112; Stuart R. Schram, “Classes, Old and New in Mao Zedong’s Thought”, *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. by James L. Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 29-55, see 35-36; Kraus, *Class Conflict*, 39-58.

occurred because the CCP was suddenly confronted with evidence that huge numbers of people resented both the conduct of its cadres and many of its policies. The Party's leaders then reverted to their traditional method of dealing with dissent: blame it on a minority of 'class enemies' or people who disseminated the ideology of class enemies, and then mobilise the 'overwhelming majority' of the population in a class struggle to identify them, label them, and demand that they be punished. And, of course, everyone who was not targeted joined in this class struggle because anyone who did not was sure to be labelled a class enemy.

The event that led to the revival of class struggle was the disastrous final act of the Hundred Flowers campaign. From May 1956, in response to de-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union, Mao tried to prove that he was no Stalin by urging intellectuals to help build socialism by engaging in constructive criticism in the spirit of the slogan "Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend". At first the intellectuals were afraid to speak up, but in May 1957 some finally took him at his word. When they were not at first punished, there followed a torrent of criticism of the Party's cadres, policies and methods, along with demands for intellectual freedom and even democracy. Students mounted protests, workers mobilised and went on strike, there were disturbances in many villages, in some regions there were mass revolts against collective farming, and some people even criticised Mao himself.<sup>17</sup> All of this went far beyond the boundaries of what the Party was prepared to regard as 'constructive criticism' and it had the potential to develop into a challenge to the CCP's supremacy. All Mao could do to save face was to claim, disingenuously, that he had intended all along just to "lure the snakes out their holes", and then to crush the Party's critics with a savage revival of labelling and class struggle.<sup>18</sup>

The new round of class struggle took the form of the Anti-Rightist campaign, which made an example of all those who had criticised the Party or its policies but was aimed mainly at the intellectuals whose 'bourgeois ideology' was blamed for infecting others. Teachers and students had to prove their revolutionary loyalty by identifying critically minded or ideologically suspect friends, colleagues and teachers, who were then subjected to mass criticism and officially labelled as Rightists. Those who suffered most were people with bad-class backgrounds, who were the easiest targets when work units could not find enough genuine Rightists to meet their assigned quotas.<sup>19</sup> The campaign led

<sup>17</sup> Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 139-148.

<sup>18</sup> Walder, *China under Mao*, 150-151.

<sup>19</sup> The quotas ranged from one percent to ten percent of each work unit's members. See Perry Link, "Introduction: Writers in the People's Republic", *Roses and Thorns: The Second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese Fiction 1979-1980*, ed. by Perry Link (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 12.

to the labelling of over half a million people, most of them members of the country's intellectual elite. Many were sentenced to labour camps where they were worked to exhaustion, forced to study Mao Zedong Thought, and compelled to 'remake' their minds through endless criticism and self-criticism.<sup>20</sup> The CCP had given the country a lesson, demonstrating that it was still prepared to mobilise the 'revolutionary masses' to label and destroy everyone who criticised it.

Mao took another step towards the entrenchment of class labels and political 'hats' in 1959 when the Great Leap Forward, which he had claimed would transform China into a leading industrial nation, instead plunged the country into famine. When the Defence Minister, Peng Dehuai, told Mao privately that the Party had made mistakes, Mao furiously attacked him and his supporters as "Right Opportunists" who had launched a "frantic attack on the Party".<sup>21</sup> He then doubled down on the policies that were causing the famine and launched a campaign against Right Opportunism that led to the labelling and expulsion of many lower level cadres in some provinces.<sup>22</sup>

As the death toll rose towards 30 million or more, Mao stepped into the background, allowing more pragmatic leaders like Liu Xiaohu and Deng Xiaoping to end the disaster that he had created.<sup>23</sup> They did this by abandoning or moderating key policies of the Great Leap Forward – reducing the scale of collective production, allowing some cultivation on private plots, and taking advice from the experts whom Mao had scorned. They also rehabilitated many Right Opportunists, eased restrictions on intellectual debate, and gave the country a respite from labelling and class struggle. However, Mao believed that the reforms had gone too far, and once the crisis had passed he attacked them openly at meetings with other Party leaders.<sup>24</sup> Liu staged a partial retreat, but for Mao it was not enough. He no longer trusted Liu and by January 1965 he had resolved to crush

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<sup>20</sup> Hongda H. Wu and Carol Wakeman, *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag* (New York: Wiley, 1994), 73-175.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and Decline of Party Norms, 1958-1965* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1993), 325.

<sup>22</sup> Teiwes, *Politics and Purges*, 335-342.

<sup>23</sup> While many current estimates put the death toll at around 30 million, some put it much higher, with Frank Dikotter arguing for a figure of 45 million or more. For a range of estimates and a discussion of the evidence, see Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: the History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* (London: John Murray, 1996); Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: the Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Walder, *China under Mao*, 182-185, 188; and more generally, Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 3: the Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961-1966* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Columbia University Press, 1997), 261-296.

him – along with all the CCP leaders, intellectuals, technical experts and cadres who shared his ‘revisionist’ views.<sup>25</sup> He decided to do this, moreover, not through a simple purge, but through a revolution that would enable him to create a new socio-political order based on obedience to his will.

### III. Mao’s Cultural Revolution: Labelling and Violence

Mao launched his revolution from above and below. From above, he executed a series of brilliant manoeuvres in late 1965 and early 1966 through which he placed his personal supporters in control of the country’s capital, its military, its propaganda apparatus, the media, and the newly formed Central Cultural Revolution Group. Then in May 1966 he started the revolution from below by getting the Party (which was still uncertain of his ultimate intentions) to mobilise millions of Mao-worshipping students in attacks on the intellectuals, the Black Categories, the cultural apparatus and the education sector. The students soon began to form Red Guard units, and when they were powerful enough Mao turned them against the Party, calling on them to destroy the capitalist roaders who existed at all levels. The revolution finally became irresistible in late 1966 when Mao’s lieutenants encouraged workers and administrators in state and collective enterprises to overthrow the bureaucrats and cadres who ruled their lives. At that point many younger cadres sensed the inevitable and joined the revolutionaries, and by early 1967 the Party had imploded. Mao had become the only ruler in history to carry out a revolution against his own party.<sup>26</sup>

The onset of the Cultural Revolution signalled the start of a golden era of labelling, and at first those most active in applying the labels were the student Red Guards, who were drawn exclusively from the red classes. They desperately wanted to serve Mao but many were also anxious to consolidate their own privileges as ‘revolutionary successors’ to their red-class parents by turning their red-class labels into the markers of a hereditary ruling class. To rationalise this attempt, they adopted a theory of ‘natural redness’ whose assumptions were expressed in verses that they recited to humiliate their social inferiors:

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<sup>25</sup> Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 110-112.

<sup>26</sup> The account of Mao’s revolutionary strategy in this paragraph is based on Walder, *China under Mao*, 180-242; Andrew G. Walder, “Rebellion of the Cadres: The 1967 Implosion of the Chinese Party-State”, *The China Journal*, 75 (2016): 102-120; MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 381-465; Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), chapters 1-10; and Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 109-149.

A dragon begets only dragons,  
 A phoenix begets only phoenixes,  
 A rat's descendant knows only how to dig holes.  
 A hero's child is a brave man, a reactionary's child is a bastard.<sup>27</sup>

The erection of a caste system based on class labels, however, was almost the reverse of what Mao wanted. His objective was to punish the majority of the CCP's impeccably red-class leaders and largely red-class cadres, so he grew increasingly frustrated as the main Red Guard units avoided a direct confrontation with the Party, preferring instead to direct their attacks at individual cadres who had made political mistakes or had non-red backgrounds. In October 1966 Mao finally lost patience and his lieutenants denounced the mainstream units for taking a 'reactionary line'. They also condemned the doctrine of natural redness and endorsed minority-faction 'rebel' units that had clashed with their CCP supervisors. These units promptly opened their ranks to non-red students (nearly always from the middle classes) and grew rapidly in size and power. These were the Red Guards who played a significant role in the destruction of the Party.<sup>28</sup>

The divisions within the Red Guard movement were just one aspect of a many-sided conflict in which all the combatants used labels as weapons. Local Party leaders tried to survive by sponsoring armies of sympathetic workers or forming alliances with Red Guards opposed to the rebels, while the motley coalition of different rebel groups soon disintegrated acrimoniously. Amidst the confusion, Mao and the Central Cultural Revolution Group backed whichever local factions seemed most likely to advance their cause, sometimes sending in the Army to tip the balance in their favour.<sup>29</sup> So the country descended into a low-grade civil war in which rival groups in every province engaged in a Hobbesian struggle for power as the key to survival. All sides in the conflict quoted Mao and claimed to be his true supporters, and they all labelled their opponents as class enemies to justify attacking them in pitched battles, beating them, locking them up, and sometimes killing them in cold blood.

Although the existing labels for suspected class enemies were still used during the Cultural Revolution, many new labels made an appearance. The Five Black Categories were revised and extended to become the Nine Black Categories, which now included not only landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements and Rightists,

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<sup>27</sup> Zhenhua Zhai, *Red Flower of China* (New York: Soho Press, 1992), 79-82; Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 133-136.

<sup>28</sup> This account is based on Walder, *China under Mao*, 219-230; and Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 134-139.

<sup>29</sup> Walder, *China Under Mao*, 231-242.

but also renegades, enemy agents, capitalist roaders, and intellectuals. The labels ‘capitalist roader’, ‘renegade’ and ‘enemy agent’ were included because they were applied to top Party leaders, and in particular to Liu Shaoqi, while intellectuals were added as the ‘stinking ninth category’ because they were seen as the source of the ‘bourgeois ideology’ that had corrupted the Party.

Political ‘colour’ had always been a feature of the CCP’s labelling conventions. ‘Red’ (*hong*) was the colour for everything revolutionary and good, and during the Cultural Revolution its use as a colour-label was all-pervasive. Mao himself was the reddest red sun (*sui hong de hong taiyang*) in the Chinese people’s hearts, his revolutionary words were red words (*hongzi*), his revolutionary line was a red line (*hongxian*), and the Red Guards inflicted a red terror (*hongse kongbu*) on class enemies.

By contrast, the colour-label for class enemies was black (*hei*). Taking their cue from the official press, the revolutionaries described their targets as black gangs (*heibang*) whose members belonged to a black party (*dixia heidang*), spoke black words (*heihua*), issued black instructions (*heizhishi*), and published black books (*heishu*). They disguised themselves by waving a red flag (*hongqi*), but owed allegiance to a black flag (*heiqi*).<sup>30</sup>

As Lowell Dittmer has pointed out, the colour red symbolised the World of Light with Mao (the sun) as its source, while the colour black symbolised the World of Darkness. This dichotomy between light and darkness was linked to another crucial polarity, that between appearance and reality.<sup>31</sup> The inhabitants of the World of Darkness were hidden class enemies, who appeared to be human beings when they masqueraded in the World of Light, but in reality were demons and savage beasts. As the Mao-controlled *Liberation Army Daily* put it:

The enemy in daylight look like men, in darkness devils. To your face, they speak human language, behind your back, the language of devils. They are wolves clad in the skins of sheep, man-eating smiling tigers [...].<sup>32</sup>

Such enemies were ‘poisonous snakes’ that could disguise themselves as beautiful women, ‘jackals’ and ‘wolves’ that emerged from their lairs to attack unwary revolutionaries, and ‘injurious vermin’ that silently sapped their victims’ strength. These labels were used to suggest hidden evil and deception, the characteristics that Mao attributed to Party members who had professed loyalty to his Thought while setting China on the capitalist road.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For a more extended account of colour-labels, see Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 189-193.

<sup>31</sup> Dittmer, *China’s Continuous Revolution*, 83-90.

<sup>32</sup> *Liberation Army Daily*, 23 August 1966, quoted in Dittmer, *China’s Continuous Revolution*, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 193-194.

Mao's own speeches and writings were the model for the animal labels, and they also inspired the identification of class enemies with the evil spirits of Chinese tradition. It was Mao, for example, who in 1957 had used the term *niugui sheshen* to describe the intellectuals who were unmasked as Rightists when they spoke out during the Hundred Flowers campaign. This term is usually translated as 'ghosts and monsters' or 'monsters and demons', and it referred to a class of spirits that took on human shape to perform evil deeds and then reverted to their ghostly form. It became the standard label for intellectuals whose demonic natures were exposed during the Cultural Revolution. Other class enemies were labelled as devils (*muogui*), demons (*guiguai*), vampires (*xixie*), and apparitions and spectres (*wangliang guimei*). Again, it was Mao himself who fostered this imagery, partly by organising the publication of a collection of traditional ghost stories in which he suggested that class enemies had a ghostlike ability to assume human form, and that they had to be wiped out.<sup>34</sup>

In labelling their targets not only as class enemies but as hostile animals and evil spirits, Mao and his linguistic engineers deliberately framed them in ways that denied their humanity. This stance had its roots in Mao's longstanding refusal to acknowledge that members of different classes shared a common human nature. "In class society", he had said in 1942, "there is only human nature of a class character; there is no human nature above classes". He dismissed the notion of love of humanity, asserting that "there can only be class love" and that "we cannot love enemies".<sup>35</sup> This doctrine supplied the theoretical rationale for the systematic promotion of labels that dehumanised class enemies throughout Mao's rule. It also underpinned the revival of the ancient art of curse sorcery during the Cultural Revolution, as revolutionaries hurled ferocious curses at opponents whom they had labelled as animals and demons. The old curse "Deep fry the devils!" rang out once more, along with modern variants like "Deep fry the black gangs!" and "Set fire to the black city government!" Revolutionaries chanted "Smash the dog's head!" as they forced victims' heads to the ground; and they warned the "traitor, renegade and scab" Liu Shaoqi that "We will ferret you out, pull out your tendons, strip off your skin and kick your head like a ball".<sup>36</sup>

These images explicitly linked the labels for class enemies to violence, and the linkage was reinforced by the all-pervasive language of war. Mao set the theme early in the

<sup>34</sup> Simin Guo, *Wo yanzhong de Mao Zedong* [Mao Zedong through my eyes] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei People's Press, 1990), 189-190.

<sup>35</sup> Zedong Mao, "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art", *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 256, 276-277.

<sup>36</sup> Nianyi Wang, "'Dapipan' yu zuzhou wushu: Wenge xiang yuanshi wenhua 'fanzu' de shizheng yanjiu" ['Mass criticism' in the Cultural Revolution and ancient China's curse sorcery], *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, 7, (1996), 122-139.

Cultural Revolution by using the slogan “Bombard the Headquarters!” in his call for a revolutionary assault on capitalist roaders at senior levels of the Party. The Red Guards took their cue, adopting names like 8.28 Fighting Squad, First Brigade of the First Army Division of the Red Guards of Number Four School. Their newspapers were filled with nouns like headquarters, swords, foe, gunfire, mobilisation, encirclement and block-house, and with verbs like strike, hack, batter, fight, defeat, annihilate, exterminate and destroy. Their language was dehumanising and savage:

The handful of diehard capitalist roaders [...] make threatening gestures with their bare fangs and claws, vainly attempting to swallow all the revolutionaries, fully revealing their wolves' natures!<sup>37</sup>

Aiming at the heads of the capitalist roaders, fiercely hack! Aiming at their throats, shoot! We must give them a deadly blow.<sup>38</sup>

In such a conflict, no compromise, no armistice, no humanity was permissible. It was a fight to the death against class enemies with the natures of demons and savage beasts, and if the revolutionaries believed even half of what they said any cruelty was possible.<sup>39</sup>

Because class enemies were sub-human and a mortal threat, the codes of conduct that governed behaviour towards fellow revolutionaries did not apply. The CCP had established precedents for how to deal with them in previous class struggles, beginning with the campaigns against landlords and counterrevolutionaries in the early 1950s that made local communities complicit in the deaths of over two million people. So when the red-class Red Guards degraded, beat and sometimes killed ‘bourgeois intellectuals’ and members of the Black Categories early in the Cultural Revolution, their actions were based on precedent. When Mao turned the labelling process and revolutionary activism against class enemies *within* the Party in 1966, it was predictable that the rebel Red Guards and revolutionary workers would humiliate, abuse and imprison them. And when rival revolutionary factions labelled each other as class enemies, they felt justified in attacking, beating and sometimes killing those whom they labelled.

The bloodiest phase of the labelling process, however, occurred from 1968 as China was brought under the rule of Revolutionary Committees consisting of the Army, locally dominant revolutionary factions, and rehabilitated cadres. With Mao’s

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<sup>37</sup> *Shoudu hongqi chiweijun xuanyan*, 21 January 1967, quoted in Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 203-204.

<sup>38</sup> *Zhi nong hongqi*, 7 January 1968, quoted in Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between language and violence, see Fengyuan Ji, “Language and Violence during the Chinese Cultural Revolution”, *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 11, 2 (2004): 93-117.

support the Revolutionary Committees labelled rival revolutionary groups as class enemies, and then the Army and armed workers crushed them. The targets were sometimes executed in cold blood after they had surrendered, and in some rural areas the slaughter was extended to the Black Categories as local cadres established their revolutionary credentials by wiping out the class enemy. This was followed by the murderous Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign in 1968-1969, which cleared the way for a new political order by targeting the Black Categories and people who had made political mistakes. Overall, according to a recent estimate based on a conservative methodology, between 1.1 and 1.6 million people were killed between 1966 and 1971, three-quarters of them as a result of repression by the Revolutionary Committees and the Army after April 1968.<sup>40</sup> In all these cases the victims were people who, through the labelling process, had been denied recognition of their human nature and then reimagined as class enemies with the natures of savage beasts and malevolent demons.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV. Labelling in the Later Mao Era

With the restoration of centralised control, Mao set about reconstructing China so as to ensure that he would never again feel challenged by rebels or by political, technical or intellectual elites. The Red Guards, who had quoted Mao while acting as a law unto themselves, were demobilised and exiled to scattered rural locations. Between 60 and 80 percent of the cadres had been purged,<sup>42</sup> and they were now sent to “May 7 Cadre Schools” where they were subjected to a reform process that involved hard labour, criticism and self-criticism. They were released and reinstated only if they were judged to have reformed, and they knew that if they made further political mistakes they would be

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<sup>40</sup> Andrew G. Walder, “Rebellion and Repression in China, 1966-1971”, *Social Science History*, 38, 34 (2014): 513-539.

<sup>41</sup> The account of mass killings in this paragraph is based on Walder, “Rebellion and Repression”; Yang Su, “Mass Killings in the Cultural Revolution: A Study of Three Provinces”, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, ed. by Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 96-123; Su, *Collective Killings*; Xiaoxia Gong, “Perpetual Victims: Persecution of the Bad Classes during the Cultural Revolution”, *China Information*, 11, 2/3 (1996): 35-53; and Jonathan Unger, “Cultural Revolution Conflict in the Villages”, *The China Quarterly*, 153 (1998): 82-106. The pattern of mass killings in Mao’s China is consistent with recent research on mass killings elsewhere, which emphasises how powerful actors label the victims, frame them as a deadly threat, and organise the killing. For a recent summary, see Benjamin A. Valentino, “Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17 (2014): 89-103.

<sup>42</sup> Dittmer, *China’s Continuous Revolution*, 96.

sent back. They understood that under Mao's new, revolutionary order "All who disobey get sent to May 7 Cadre Schools for labour".<sup>43</sup>

Mao complemented the reconstruction of the Party with three further reforms designed to disempower every group that could accumulate enough intellectual or technical knowledge to challenge his judgment. Firstly, workers Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams were placed in charge of all universities, schools, and literary or cultural institutions. Uneducated workers then supervised meetings, lessons and performances to ensure that every word was politically correct. Secondly, to prevent the re-emergence of intellectual and cultural elites in the next generation, Mao broke the nexus between academic excellence and career paths. School leavers were assigned to jobs without considering their academic records; almost all high school graduates were sent to labour in the countryside; and the universities were shut down for six years and after reopening enrolled only small numbers of students, all of them chosen for their red-class background and political excellence without considering their academic ability. Thirdly, medical doctors, who as 'bourgeois intellectuals' had often been imprisoned by the Red Guards, were subjected to labour and thought reform alongside the cadres in May 7 Cadre Schools. On their release, they were still mistrusted, and in Maoist ideology, although not in practice, they ranked far below the untrained but celebrated 'barefoot doctors'.<sup>44</sup>

These reforms established that conformity to Maoist norms was the only path to success and ensured that even the most able students from bad-class backgrounds remained workers or peasants. They were a devastating assault on the meritocratic elements in Chinese society, and they transformed the country into a "virtuocracy" in which Mao Zedong Thought served as the overriding criterion of virtue and truth. People now had to succeed by inheriting or acquiring political labels that displayed political virtue, by engaging enthusiastically in revolutionary activities, and by saying all the correct revolutionary things.<sup>45</sup> In the functioning of this virtuocracy, class labels and political hats were used to mark the polar opposites of good and evil, to distribute rewards and punishments, and to impose patterns of privilege and disadvantage.

The creation of a virtuocracy reflected Mao's vision of a society ruled by his Thought and responsive to his will. It was not, however, enough to make him feel secure. By 1970 he believed that he had become too dependent on the radicals of his inner circle, led by his wife Jiang Qing, and on the Defence Minister Lin Biao. He addressed this problem

<sup>43</sup> The words are those of Mao's lieutenant Wang Hongwen, quoted in Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 227.

<sup>44</sup> For more on the above reforms, which were known collectively as the "Newborn Things of the Cultural Revolution", see Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 223-227.

<sup>45</sup> Susan L. Shirk, "The Decline of Virtuocracy in China", *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. by James L. Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56-83.

by distancing himself from Lin (who died as he fled the country) and by playing off the radicals against moderates led by Zhou Enlai. Those who fell from favour were labelled and targeted by political campaigns. Lin Biao, for example, was declared a ‘traitor’ and subjected to a sustained posthumous attack, and the moderate Deng Xiaoping (a rehabilitated ‘capitalist roader’) was sacked again and condemned at mass rallies as ‘the unrepentant capitalist roader’.

### **V. Labelling: its Power, its Failures, and its Abolition**

The use of labels in inner-Party power struggles in the 1970s was symptomatic of their use throughout the CCP’s history. In every case positive labels were used to enhance the status of allies, while negative ones were used to stigmatise enemies, both real and invented. The labels always served power. The CCP used them as tags to identify friends and target enemies after its victory in 1949; it used them to create a new class structure that stood the old one on its head; it used them as it displayed its ability to instigate mass mobilisation to crush real or imagined enemies through savage class struggle; and it used them to destroy the ‘Rightists’ who spoke out during the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1957. When Mao felt that his dominance was threatened in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, he manipulated the labels to organise a revolution against his own Party; he gave his revolutionary shock troops the labels that they used to attack Party in his name; and when his shock troops used those same labels to fight each other instead, he labelled many of them as counterrevolutionaries and suppressed them. Finally, Mao used the main class and political labels as an organising principle in establishing a ‘virtuocratic’ socio-political order that made his Word the ultimate criterion of revolutionary virtue and truth. In all these cases, the labels were the weapons and tools of the powerful, and of Mao above all others. Their application structured and restructured the socio-political realities of Chinese society, determining the fate of hundreds of millions of people.

As heirs to the Chinese and Marxist traditions of linguistic engineering, Mao and other CCP leaders well understood the power of words. They also became increasingly aware that words had their limitations. A lot of the damage was self-inflicted because after 1966 Mao and his wordsmiths applied the labels in flagrantly contradictory ways. During the Cultural Revolution nearly all of the CCP’s leaders, who had hitherto been praised as models of revolutionary commitment, were suddenly unmasked as ‘capitalist roaders’, ‘traitors’ and ‘man-eating smiling tigers’; less than two years later many of the Red Guards who had destroyed those leaders in Mao’s name were labelled as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and brutally suppressed; and in 1971 Lin Biao – Mao’s ‘best student’, his ‘most loyal follower’ and his designated successor – was unmasked as a ‘traitor’ who

had plotted an armed uprising. One young peasant spoke for many: “We came to see that the leaders up there could say today that something is round; tomorrow, that it’s flat. We lost faith in the system”.<sup>46</sup>

Even when words were no longer believed, they retained their coercive function. To avoid suspicion and collective criticism, people still had to mouth the correct slogans, recite the correct political scripts and apply the correct labels, and every time they did this they modelled correct beliefs and attitudes. It was their voices, not their thoughts, that kept the ‘virtuocratic’ order in place. This coercive function of an obligatory discourse explains why labelling and other aspects of linguistic engineering were so effective in sustaining Mao’s rule, even as their effectiveness as a form of persuasion declined. It also helps to explain why, after Mao died in September 1976, there was no immediate change. One of the first acts of his successor, Hua Guofeng, was to secure his position by arresting Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and her radical supporters and labelling them, in true Maoist fashion, as ‘the Gang of Four Anti-Party clique’, as revisionists, and as representatives of the bourgeoisie who wanted to ‘restore capitalism’.<sup>47</sup>

By 1978, however, reformers led by Deng Xiaoping had gained the upper hand. Most of them had been labelled as capitalist roaders during the Cultural Revolution, and they had long since rejected Mao’s use of the labelling system to underpin the ‘class struggles’ that he used to intimidate potential critics and eliminate both real and invented opponents. The reformers’ vision of society was meritocratic, not ‘virtuocratic’, and like the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people they wanted to end political disruptions and focus on economic growth. In short order, they denounced the Cultural Revolution as a ‘complete mistake’; they rehabilitated cadres who had been labelled, persecuted and dismissed; they launched an investigation into the labelling, sentencing and persecution of many other innocent people; they quickly removed the designations of ‘landlord’, ‘rich peasant’, ‘counterrevolutionary’, and ‘bad element’ from all but a few; and then in 1984 they abolished those labels altogether.<sup>48</sup> This marked the end of an era in which labels were used to single out minorities who could be targeted by the majority in orchestrated class struggles that showed the fate of anyone who failed to conform to the Maoist model of a true revolutionary.

The abolition of bad-class labels caused some grumbling among dedicated Maoists and some older members of the red classes, but former bad-class households were quick-

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted by Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 231.

<sup>47</sup> Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 307.

<sup>48</sup> Hong-Yung Lee, *From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 163-192.

ly reintegrated into their communities. Even in marriage decisions their children soon suffered little or no disadvantage.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, Mao's word ceased to be holy writ, his virtuocracy was dismantled, the meritocratic elites that he had suppressed re-emerged with a vengeance, and his totalitarian goal of remaking people's minds through class struggle, linguistic engineering and obligatory revolutionary role-modelling was abandoned.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these changes, the power of words expressed in the application and inheritance of class and political labels has left its mark. China is still ruled by the descendants of the revolutionary cadres who used the labelling system as a tool to invert the social order and establish themselves as the new elite after 1949; and, while the children and grand-children of the bad classes now frequently join the Party, they are still under-represented in elite administrative and policy-making positions.<sup>51</sup> The descendants of former landlords, rich peasants, capitalists and counterrevolutionaries, however, are no longer socially disadvantaged, impoverished, and consigned to the bottom rung of society by the power of words. On the contrary, their relentless pursuit of education under the meritocratic systems of post-1978 China has enabled them to re-emerge in other spheres, especially the professions.<sup>52</sup> The labelling system that for some thirty years condemned their families to penury and persecution is becoming a distant memory.

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<sup>49</sup> Unger, "Class system", 138-141.

<sup>50</sup> Fengyuan Ji, "Language, State, and Society in Post-Mao China: Continuity and Change", *Legacies of Totalitarian Language in the Discourse Cultures of the Post-Totalitarian Era*, ed. by Ernest Andrews (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 183-208.

<sup>51</sup> Walder and Hu, "Revolution, Reform, and Status Inheritance", 1420-1421.

<sup>52</sup> Walder and Hu, "Revolution, Reform, and Status Inheritance", 1420.