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Review by Xiaowei Zheng, University of California, Santa Barbara

The First Uprising of the Cultural Revolution at Nanjing University” is a detailed case study of Nanjing University’s wall poster incident which occurred on 2 June 1966. The author aims to shed new light on what the Cultural Revolution meant to ordinary Chinese people and how they “chose or were forced to play a role in the movement” (31). Dong argues that the poster incident at Nanjing University was very different from the famous poster incident at Beijing University on 25 May 1966. Having no direct connection with inner-party purges, the Nanjing incident resulted from intra-campus conflicts and misunderstandings of those conflicts.

Dong begins the article by providing readers some background knowledge on Chinese politics. He emphasizes the two key principles of politics during the Mao era—“party leadership” and “democratic centralism.” Dong believes these two principles helped formulate the unchallenged authority of the Communist Party of China and the centralization of decision-making under the highest leader of each party committee. But because the leadership of party committees involved hundreds of thousands of individual cadres and the center in Beijing only gave vague guidance, feuds between the local party leaders and their subordinates were possible. Thus, whenever a new political campaign proceeded, people would show “unconditional obedience to the highest authorities” while at the same time, they would “take strong initiative in defining the campaign’s direction” to avoid being a “sacrificial lamb” (33).

Dong then turns to the “2 June Incident” itself. The “2 June Incident” started with students and teachers at the Liyang campus of Nanjing University putting up wall posters endorsing the launch of the Cultural Revolution. Most posters simply supported the actions of Beijing University students criticizing their party leaders. However, there were also a minority of posters targeting the party authority of Nanjing University, in
particular, the party leader Kuang Yaming. Appearing in the same enthusiastic tone and unconditionally obeying the highest authorities, the true intention of this small group was to vent their frustration against Kuang for making them live in rough conditions and requiring heavy labor from them at the Liyang campus.

A veteran party member and an Anti-rightist Movement survivor, Kuang angrily rejected the charge and harshly suppressed the dissidents. He quickly singled out his “enemies” and organized meetings to struggle against them. But Kuang’s counterattack did not last long. The Central Cultural Revolution Group in Beijing intervened and reversed the situation radically. The dissidents were praised as being “revolutionary,” and Kuang was criticized as being “anti-party, anti-socialist and anti-Mao” (42). Empowered by state propaganda machine, this fictionalized description of the “2 June Incident” got wide exposure across the nation and a complex intra-campus confrontation became a struggle between “revolutionary” and “anti-revolutionary” forces. Kuang was exiled and “revolutionary” students and teachers were put in power. After the fall of Kuang Yaming, the provincial authority in the university sent a work team and by 1968, most of the “heroic rebels” against Kuang became “conservative” red guards defending the work team (47).

Using this detailed case study, Dong successfully shows us how ordinary Chinese people in the Mao era responded to a political movement. The author unmistakably demonstrates that ideological indoctrination did not eradicate true desire and self-interest of students and teachers. Even during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, they still were able to express their self-interest in the disguise of a revolutionary tone. The author is also to be commended for trying to understand the Cultural Revolution in conjuncture with the first seventeen years of the PRC regime, showing us the political structure, administrative principles, and pattern of communication in Mao’s China. All these are excellent contributions of Dong’s article.

But still, there are some missing pieces in Dong’s story. First, who were the “heroic” rebels against Kuang? Primarily basing on one interview source, Dong identifies three important “rebels heroes”—Hu Caiji, Sun Jiazheng and Zhu Yingcai. What did these people do so that Kuang Yaming singled them out? Did they put a poster on the wall? Did they say something? In his conclusion, the author asserts that “political expediency” was the reason that Kuang selected certain people as targets, which is a vague statement. The author does seem to hint that the fact that these students were cadres led to such political expediency. But the author also makes it clear that the students used by Kuang to conduct the counterattack were student cadres too. One wonders why these two kinds of student cadres received different treatment.

Another missing piece is the relationship between Kuang Yaming and his fellow members in the university party committee. The author writes that Kuang’s handling of the Liyang poster incident caused disagreement within the university party committee and “someone on the party committee (it is not known who) gave a report to the provincial party
committee (42).” This is a critical piece of information that is worth exploring because it was only after this “someone” gave the report to the provincial party committee that the Central Cultural Revolution Group in Beijing knew about the poster incident and intervened. Only by fully understanding this part of the story can the author demonstrate the power dynamic in a local party committee of Mao’s time with accuracy.

Finally, the author heavily relies upon interviews as primary sources to construct his story and sometimes takes interviews as his sole evidence. Interviews are certainly sound sources for studying the Cultural Revolution, but collections of wall posters, red guards newspapers and chronologies compiled by different red guard factions are equally indispensable in understanding the Cultural Revolution.

In sum, the author has convincingly and vividly demonstrated the world of Nanjing University students and teachers and one can readily agree with his conclusion that “Long-term ideological indoctrination did not in fact eliminate self-interested considerations (48).”

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