
Reviews of Books

Li Zhensheng, *Red Color News Soldier*

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In 1961 Li Zhensheng, a novice newspaper photographer, was told by his mentor that a photojournalist should not be only a witness, but also a recorder of history. He had recently been employed at the Heilongjiang Daily newspaper in Harbin, north-east China, and had little idea of how history was composed. Though Li could not have known it at that time, his chosen vocation would be both a blessing and a burden to him, for it was to task him with the documentation of one of the most turbulent periods in China. He was employed as an official photojournalist during the period between 1966 and 1976, the years of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution was intended by Mao Zedong as a sweeping, top-to-bottom force of evolutionary change in the hierarchy of the Chinese Communist Party. Its aim was to erase all traces of political revisionism, eliminate bureaucratic regression, and ultimately thwart the restoration of capitalism by “summoning to the fray the revolutionary energies of the entire society, from the youngest to the oldest”. Education was to focus solely on agricultural and industrial production, and all schools and universities were to be closed for the duration. Students would form the backbone of a new political and revolutionary force known as the Red Guards. These would be instrumental in the destruction of the previous order, with its ingrained ways of thinking and its negative habits. The Red Guards were free from all governmental restraints, and were tasked with implementing any change which they deemed appropriate in the name of Mao Zedong. Li Zhensheng captured this time from its idealistic outset to its violent, lawless apogee – then he saw it dwindle away after Mao’s death in 1976 when most people had run out of anger and tears and simply wanted to get on with their lives.

Li photographed numerous aspects of the Cultural Revolution, sometimes positive, more often overwhelmingly negative. Some of the images were dangerous in their content, and these he hid under his floor-boards in his house until he was able to send them to the US nearly 40 years later. Li was eventually denounced for ‘opposing the local revolutionary committee’ – an ill-defined crime which appeared to mean that he was not popular with the other rebel factions in Harbin and they wished to see him punished. He and his wife were sent to a rehabilitation camp, where they underwent a three-year course of ‘re-education’.

What is Li’s primary image of the Cultural Revolution? It is a mosaic of frenzied leftist nationalism, of cult – worship, of a social and political environment on the brink of total chaos. As Aldous Huxley points out in *Ends and Means*, nationalism may be compared to an idolatrous religion, in which the god is the personified state, and is often represented by a “more or less deified” king or dictator. This is certainly the over-riding premise in Li’s book, where innumerable likenesses of Mao – taken from pamphlets, portraits and big-character posters - gaze beatifically from page after page. Mao’s presence is as all-pervasive in Li’s account as it doubtless was in the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. The slogans of the day underscore this fact: Mao’s

works are “more precious than gold, his every sentence a war-drum, his every utterance a truth”; Mao is the “Red Sun which shines in our hearts”. Such adulation inevitably had both positive and negative facets, and Li’s photographs and recollections of the time present a juxtaposition of these elements that is both fascinating and disturbing.

Ostensibly, the affirmative aspects of the cultural revolution are there for all to see, captured by Li in his capacity as official photographer. Images of this type have been presented to the world: the slogan-shouting, fist-pumping zeal of the young Red Guards; the mass-rallies with their ubiquitous Mao imagery; the tender depictions of families reading the Little Red Book together. Revolutionary operas and loyalty dances are framed as the entertainment of the day, performed by ardent model-citizen dancers, PLA soldiers and small children alike. One slightly kooky shot even depicts a smiling, newly-wed couple decorating their bedroom with numerous pictures of The Chairman. When they were later criticised for making love under the eyes of their Dear Leader, they insisted they turned out the lights first. These are the romanticised pictures that the world saw of the Cultural Revolution, an inspiration to student activists in Paris, Budapest and across the USA.

But it is the stark, ugly, negative images that remain in the mind after perusing Li’s work. The Red Guards are painted as brutal thugs who destroyed churches and temples, demolished ancient treasures, looted houses, and attacked one another in internecine struggles to prove which of them were the ‘real’ Red Rebels. One series of photographs portrays a mob of Red Guards ransacking the Jile Buddhist Temple in Harbin, wrecking statues, and burning all the temple’s holy scriptures. We are left with a sour impression of Red Guards, who have as much ardour for wanton destruction of property as for cultural reform.

Even more telling are the photographs of the vicious and humiliating denunciation sessions that Li attended in his role as an official photographer. As part of Mao’s dramatic strategy for internal restructuring of the Communist Party, provincial governors, top party officials, city mayors, landlords, the heads of Work Groups and other ‘counter-revolutionaries’ were paraded in front of mass rallies. Their hair was shorn off, their faces smeared with ink, and enormous ill-fitting dunce caps placed on their heads. Placards were hung from their necks accusing them in broad strokes of various political crimes. Hordes of people came to watch and hurl abuse. Li notes that the accused were often shunted from one rally to another, to be vilified hundreds or even thousands of times. One of Li’s subjects was later thrown out of a third-floor window. Others committed suicide or were tortured to death. Li recorded everything he saw, noting with poignant irony that black-and-white film cannot distinguish between blood, tears and ink.

From the disquieting to the macabre: Li several times photographed execution sequences. Some of the condemned were common criminals, some ‘counter-revolutionaries’; another was convicted of embezzlement. The most striking feature of these sequences is the numb, expressionless faces of the prisoners as they knelt, hog-tied, awaiting their fate. It is as if they were patiently anticipating death as a blessed release from the mayhem.

The denunciation and execution photos are some of the most affecting images in the book, because they are a savage and explicit portrayal of the powerlessness of the individual against an orgiastic mob. These pictures force us to ask how intelligent, capable people (the Red Guards drew their ranks from schools and universities) were able to behave in such a destructive, amoral fashion when immersed in a group. It may simply be that while individuals are normally good and adhere to high moral standards, a mob is without conscience and without guilt. Nietzsche once said that although madness is rare in individuals, it is the standard in groups and political parties. Li might well have agreed.

The book suffers some limitations. Firstly, repetition is a regular occurrence: what is said in the textual sections is often repeated, sometimes almost verbatim, in the dialogue accompanying the photo sequences. Secondly, the extent of Li Zhensheng's participation in the Cultural Revolution raises some questions as to how objective his judgment was. Li was, after all, himself a card-carrying Red Guard. He led criticism sessions, attended mass rallies and headed a rebel group called the Red-Color News Soldiers (from whence the book derives its name). He was the official photographer for a state-controlled media outlet. Given this, it is feasible that some of his actions were borne out of genuine fervour for the bizarre movement to which he was witness. One wonders whether Li's 'Red-Color News Soldier' armband may have enabled him to manipulate the outcome of some of the events to which he was privy. But Li insists that his aim was to capture the moment from a largely dispassionate point of view: "When I took a photograph..., consciously or unconsciously I frequently tried to choose angles or compositions that showed it was all a bit crazy to me". Ultimately, of course, it may not matter whether Li acted as a detached observer or a member of the mob: the photos show what they show.

The overall impression one gets from the book is that Li is quietly determined to show the viewer more human nature than his function as an official photographer would normally permit him. He did what any serious-minded journalist would do when forced to work in a restrictive milieu: he smuggled the real goods in along with the stock orders. Jonathan Spence notes in the introduction that "as an official photographer for a state-controlled newspaper he was...to some extent doing no more than obeying orders...but as a young man with an acute eye, he was also achieving something far more complex: he was tracking human tragedies and personal foibles".

Perhaps, though, Li was tracking more than just the recent history of the Chinese. He may also have been demonstrating how, through immersion in a crowd, the individual may be released from the limitations of personality and society, able to mingle with what Huxley would call "a sub-personal, sub-human world of unrestrained feeling and uncriticised belief". If so, then it is important to recognise that Li manages to achieve the complete opposite of this, retaining his individuality and his journalistic drive to not only witness but to record history at a time when others were simply following the mob out of ardour or fear.

