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The Conclusive Scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968

Alessandro Russo

In the very early hours of July 28, 1968, some of the most famous figures of the subjective turbulence that in the two previous years had invested the fundamental conditions of politics in China—the Red Guards and the Maoist leaders—met in a long and dramatic face-to-face meeting, a transcript of which was kept in such a deliberately meticulous way that even the emotional tones of the dialogue were recorded.¹ The result, thanks to compilers endowed with a remarkable literary culture (probably one or more of Mao’s secretaries), is much more than the bare proceedings of the meeting. One would be inclined to call it rather a theatrical *pièce* whose “authors” are the “characters” themselves. These characters were subjective figures who met in the final moment of the political situation in which their existence is grounded. As of the next day, the situation would be totally different—the Red Guards would not exist anymore as independent organizations, and

in the following months they would be dissolved, with consequences that would unavoidably rebound on Mao and on his allies.

The meeting was held in a hall at Zhongnanhai, the small lake in the center of Beijing, around which the headquarters of the party-state are situated. On one side were Mao and the “Central Group for the Cultural Revolution,” the restricted group of central leaders that had remained politically active in the last two years (most of the high ranks of the party-state had been paralyzed since the summer of 1966). On the other side were the five most important leaders of the Red Guards in the Beijing campuses. The meeting’s main topic was the consequences of the political exhaustion of the Red Guards. In August 1966 they had been greeted as “new forms of organization created by the masses” that were to have a “permanent character” of political and institutional innovation (as declared in the *Decision in Sixteen Points*, the main programmatic document of the Cultural Revolution). However, especially during the last year, they had decomposed into small paramilitary groups lacking any political distinction, engaged in increasingly grotesque brawls to establish the absolute supremacy of their own faction.

In the last few months most of the militants, bewildered by the political crisis of their organizations, had quit all forms of activism and swelled the ranks of the so-called faction of the disengaged (*xiaoyaopai*), which in fact was not a real “faction.” On the other hand, the more the number of militants decreased, the more the clashes became violent on some Beijing campuses, in particular at Qinghua University, where with crude, but equally deadly, weapons, the “hardliners” of the two factions (a few thousand people altogether) continued to fight.

The day before, July 27, on Mao’s initiative, and following crowded meetings in several factories, tens of thousands of disarmed workers invaded the Qinghua campus peacefully, shouting slogans against the armed struggle, with lines of demonstrators standing between the two factions to prevent them from fighting.² The workers had been violently attacked by the students (five workers were killed and hundreds wounded), but, with an extraordinary sense of self-discipline, the workers’ only reaction was to continue to shout slogans against the armed struggle. The workers finally were able to disarm the two factions and occupy the key spots of the campus. At

the moment of the meeting in Zhongnanhai, which began at 3 a.m. and lasted until 8 a.m. (the preferred working hours for Mao and other Chinese leaders), the fighting at Qinghua had just ended.

The exceptional archival condition of the meeting's transcript, which allows a close reflection on that event, crystallizes a singular political intervention. Mao himself had required the recording and had also decided to distribute its contents on a large scale, for a reason that he clearly explained to the Red Guard leaders: "Otherwise, at your return, you will interpret what I have said today as you like. If you do so, I will have this tape be listened to."³ The issue at stake was how to deal politically with the end of the political sequence that had begun two years before. The public diffusion of the exact terms of that meeting, held at the apex of a month of crucial initiatives from the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution (July 1968 is a decisive month for the years 1966–76), was therefore considered essential for the success of Mao's initiatives.

The Black Hand and the Red Guards

The accuracy was hence a prerequisite, but not the only quality of the document. Sensitive to the subjective details, the transcript is, from the first sentences, an accurate record of the style of the various figures' enunciations and reciprocal interactions.⁴ Although it deserves to be reproduced in full, at least some passages of this dense and long piece of "documental theater" should be quoted extensively. To follow the interlacing of the dialogues is a good introduction to the tangle of the matter. Here is the starting point of the document, witnessing and at the same time integrating part of the conclusive scene.

(Nie Yuanzi, Tan Houlan, Han Aijing, and Wang Dabing [four leaders of the Red Guards] walk into the meeting room. The Chairman stands up and shakes hands with each one of them.)

Chairman: All so young!

(Shaking hands with Huang Zuozhen [a military leader].) Are you Huang Zuozhen? I have never met you before; were you not killed?

Jiang Qing *(addressing the four leaders of the Red Guards)*: Have not

seen you for a long time. You certainly are not putting up big characters posters anymore.

Chairman (*addressing the four Red Guards*): We only met at Tiananmen [in the summer of 1966], but we did not talk. This is not good. You do not come up to the Triratna Palace unless there is important business [*wu shi bu deng Sanbaodian*, “you never come to see me”]; but I have read all your newspapers and I know your situation. Kuai Dafu [another student leader] has not come. Is he unable to come [from Qinghua campus] or unwilling?

Xie Fuzhi [vice-premier]: I am afraid that he is unwilling.

Han Aijing: Impossible. In this moment, if Kuai knew that there is a meeting with the Cultural Revolution Group of the Central Committee and could not meet the president, he would cry. For sure, he is unable to come.⁵

With the exception of Nie Yuanzi, a cadre of the philosophy department at Beida and the author of the famous first *dazibao* of the Cultural Revolution, who was in her forties, all the other Red Guard leaders who attended the meeting were in their early twenties. The seventy-five-year-old Mao, who stands up and shakes hands, begins with “All so young!” almost amazed at something that he is surely aware of but that, nonetheless, he shall take into serious consideration in addressing them. The “Triratna palace” (*Sanbaodian*, from the name of a Buddhist “trinity”—the three jewels: the Buddha, the Law, and the Community of monks) is one of those learned references pronounced with a popular tone with which Mao loved to color his spoken style, especially when he meant to be polemical. Here he seems to use a joke to attenuate hierarchical relationships. The words spoken to Huang Zuozhen (“were you not killed?”), a military leader who accomplished the difficult task of keeping in touch with the leaders of the Red Guards as well as organizing their coming to Zhongnanhai, may exemplify the climate—fights at Qinghua had been bloody and even an “ambassador” like Huang had taken serious risks. Mao’s remark is probably intended to dedramatize, exaggerating.

Jiang Qing opens with sarcasm. “You certainly are not putting up big characters posters anymore” implies: “Now all you do is fight.” She will

keep this tone also in her following interventions, showing much anguish and disappointment, too. She says to them: “We are all in great anguish,” “I am deeply grieved for you,” and even “I have spoiled you,” “spendthrifts” (*baijiazhi*). Mao will interrupt her several times, admonishing her not to translate her anxiety into hierarchical superiority (“do not get so puffed up,” he tells her at one moment, almost revealing a small *scène de ménage*). He will do the same with the other Central Committee leaders, often insisting that they should not underestimate their interlocutors because of their youth and not to suffocate them with criticism: “Do not give yourselves airs like veterans.”

Together with Nie Yuanzi, the leader of the majority faction of the Beijing University, called “New Beida (Commune),” three other “little generals,” as the student leaders are affably called during the meeting, enter the hall. They belong to the two opposite factions ferociously struggling for “power” in the Beijing University campuses: the “Earth” faction (*Dipai*) and the “Sky” faction (*Tianpai*). These names, which sound so imaginative, were in fact rather bureaucratic: two university institutes (Sky was based at the Institute of Aeronautics, Earth at the Institute of Geology) whose majority factions wove a complex tangle of opposite alliances in other campuses, by then lacking any difference in principles. At a certain point Mao will admit, “All this Sky and Earth stuff is not clear to me.” Moreover, the names of the organizations symptomatically overlapped each other, creating bizarre homonymies.⁶

Wang Dabing, a student of the Institute of Geology, heads the Earth faction: he is fully absorbed in his “little general” role, like the others, after all. Mao will address him with good-natured irony, which remains, however, completely unperceived.

Tan Houlan leads the majority faction at the Normal University, which belongs to the Earth faction, too. She is quite young, but rather feared by her adversaries: “Comrade Tan Houlan has two small braids,” says Lin Biao. But “she has cannons pointed against Nie Yuanzi [of the opposite Sky faction],” Mao says, commenting also: “Two of you are women [Tan and Nie]—extraordinary indeed!”

During most of the meeting, one among the invited student leaders, whom Mao is impatient to meet, is absent: Kuai Dafu, the most famous Red Guard

in the country, leader of the Jinggangshan faction of Qinghua University that led a deadly attack on the workers (the opposite faction, by contrast, welcomed them). Kuai Dafu will arrive at the meeting after a long delay, and this increases the already considerable tension: “Is Kuai Dafu unable or unwilling to come?” Mao and the others of the Central Group ask repeatedly.

It is often Han Aijing who speaks in Kuai Dafu’s place, defending Kuai in heroic-dramatic overtones. Han, a student at the Institute of Aeronautics and leader of the Sky faction, is the only one, among the four “little generals,” who intervenes with some determination and often with an overflowing pathos, although with weak arguments. He says: “I love Kuai Dafu. Since we have done many things together, I know that I will be compromised; I feel that I must do everything to protect him and not allow him to be overthrown. His destiny is linked to that of the country’s Red Guards.”

With the exception of Mao, who addresses Han both strictly and sympathetically, the others of the Central Group show him their impatience: “You always think you are right,” “Kuai is the commander and Han the political commissary” are their ironic comments.

Kuai Dafu enters the scene in a theatrical way, toward the end of the meeting, crying out as predicted since the very beginning by his friend and ally. But even if Kuai is absent at the start of the meeting, he is the one whom Mao addresses first. The day before, Kuai had sent an urgent telegram to Mao and to the Central Group to denounce that the workers, “unconsciously manoeuvred by a Black Hand” (that is, by a hidden power that planned to quench the Cultural Revolution), “had surrounded and invaded Qinghua University.”⁷

Chairman: Kuai Dafu wants to capture the Black Hand. All these workers sent to “repress” and “oppress” the Red Guards. Who is the Black Hand? He has not been captured yet. The Black Hand is nobody else but me! And Kuai has not come yet. He should have come to take me! It was I who sent the Security Guards of the Central Committee and the workers of the Xinhua Printing Plant and of the General Knitwear Mill. I asked them how to solve the armed fighting in the universities, and told them to go there to give a look. As a result thirty thousand of them went.⁸

It is also obvious that this meeting with the student leaders was the only one in which Mao spoke to them directly. When he says that at Tiananmen they had only met without talking, he refers to the great mass manifestations of the Red Guards held in Beijing in the summer of 1966. It is well known that Mao did not deliver any speech but only pronounced a laconic “long live the comrades” (*tongzhi men wansui*), in reply to the numberless “long live the Chairman Mao” cheers cried out in the square.⁹

This “last meeting” of July 1968 shows also that the relationships between the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards had been rather discontinuous and contradictory. During the meeting Mao regrets not having spoken directly with the students before, but he also says that he has tried to avoid any interference with the situation. The mobilization of the workers was decided on after taking into account other possibilities, among which was the opportunity to let the students solve their own problems.

What do you think?—Mao continued—What should be done with the armed struggle in the universities? One way is to withdraw completely and have nothing to do with the students; if someone wants to fight, let him. So far, the revolutionary committees and garrison commands have not been afraid of disorder caused by armed struggle in universities. They have not exerted any control or any pressure, and all considered this was right. Another way is to give them [the students] a bit of help. The workers, the peasants, and the majority of the students have praised this method. There are more than fifty institutions of higher learning in Beijing, but only in five or six there were fierce clashes and your ability was put to the test. As far as solving the problem is concerned, some of you should go live in the South, and some of you in the North. All of you are called “New Beida,” with “Jinggangshan” or “Commune” between parentheses, just like the Soviet Communist Party calls itself “Bolshevik.”¹⁰ . . . If you cannot solve the problem, we may resort to military control and ask Lin Biao to take command. We also have Huang Yongshen [the chief of general staff]. The problem has to be solved, one way or the other!¹¹

On the first solution (some go South, others North), Mao will presently explain the meaning: the factions had to be dispersed. Personal animosity had become so exacerbated that the two factions could not remain in the same college or the same city without being involved in new fighting. (This was one of the main reasons why “educated youths” and cadres were sent to the countryside as of the following year.) Far worse, the violence was inversely proportional to any serious distinction of principle between factions. Mao was quite ironic on the formalism with which the opposite student factions obstinately quarreled over the ownership of the great revolutionary names, mutually treating each other as counterrevolutionaries. On the second possible solution, it was obvious that, in Beijing, it was quite easy to resort to military control, considering the reduced number of students effectively involved in the fights. However, the difficulty was how to deal with the problem as a political situation, that is to say, not just in terms of law and order—it was, in fact, a rare example of a nonmilitary solution for a crisis of that kind—but as an outcome of a subjective process that Mao described as follows:

You have been involved in the Cultural Revolution for two years: struggle-criticism-transformation [*dou-pi-gai*]. Now, first, you are not struggling; second, you are not criticizing, and, third, you are not transforming. Or rather, you are struggling, but it is an armed struggle. The people are not happy, the workers are not happy, the peasants are not happy, city residents are not happy, students in most schools are not happy, most of the students in your schools are also not happy. Even within the faction that supports you, there are unhappy people. Is this the way to unify the world? [*tongyi tianxia*, “unify everything under the sky.”]

(*Addressing Nie Yuanzi*): In the “New Beida,” you have the majority, you “Old Buddha” (*Laofoye*). You are a philosopher; do not tell me that in the “New Beida (Commune)” [the majority faction] and in the Revolutionary Committee of the University [under Nie’s control] there is nobody against you. I do not believe it at all! They will not say anything to your face, but then they make snide remarks behind your back.¹²

The two student leaders purposely addressed by Mao with sarcasm had been central figures in the last two years. The one whom he called “Old

Buddha,” in the sense of “a person who gives himself/herself an air of higher authority,” was Nie Yuanzi, whose *dazibao* had sparked the student movement at Beida and had been exalted by Mao in 1966 as a crucial political declaration, praising it as “the first Marxist-Leninist *dazibao* of China,” or even “the declaration of the Chinese Commune of Paris of the sixties of the twentieth century.”¹³ Two years later, Nie was, among the five “little generals” present at the meeting, the one who irritated Mao the most, maybe because she lacked any extenuating circumstance because of young age.

The one to whom Mao mockingly revealed himself as the Black Hand was Kuai Dafu, the Qinghua student who led the resistance to the “work teams” sent by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to liquidate the newborn student movement in the Beijing campuses in 1966. Kuai had shown personal courage that Mao continued to esteem (“Kuai—said Mao—is the one who takes personal risk”). However, the situation was radically different as compared with two years before: the Red Guard organizations were at an impasse from which no one among their leaders was able to find a way out.

Despite the irritation expressed by Mao and the other members of the Central Group, the discussion was carried out in conditions of extraordinary equality. Mao deals with the issues with strictness, but, in many moments, he shows himself to be rather affable, given the circumstances. He addresses his young interlocutors with severe criticisms, but he treats them all as comrades with whom he has shared many positions in the last two years and with whom he continues to sympathize. Mao accuses them of having become petty militarist politicians incapable of any original thought about the singularity of the situation. However, during the meeting, Mao refuses any role of “master” or “higher authority” possessing the solution of subjective dilemmas (“Do not say that I am giving ‘instructions,’” he says, addressing his colleagues).

The current images of this turning point in the relationship between Mao and the Red Guards, found in historiography as well as in the memoirs of the former Red Guards, speak of a charismatic chief who used the mystical infatuation of ingenuous adolescents to overthrow his adversaries at court.¹⁴ At some time, it is said, he decides to get rid of those uncomfortable supporters, liquidating their radicalisms in the name of the reason of state. However, the record of the meeting we are discussing, thanks to the

realism of its unknown writer, shows that their relationships were infinitely more real.

The student leaders, all well versed in public speech and redoubtable polemicists, could offer only inconclusive excuses in response to Mao's criticism—not because of hierarchical inferiority but because, in the pursuit of an imaginary armed struggle for “power,” they had politically exhausted the organizations that they had been able to constitute two years before. They prove themselves unable to understand the meeting's ultimate meaning, considering that some of them continue, more or less directly, to ask for an army intervention on their behalf in order to overwhelm the opposite faction. The “little generals,” stiff and dazed, are not even able to perceive the friendly skepticism with which Mao deals with the so-called contrasts between Left and Right, and the way he replies to them when they pretend not to be involved in fighting at all. Here they are in a scene where the dialogues are particularly dense.

Chairman: Wang Dabing, is your situation easier [compared with that of Nie Yuanzi]?

Wang Dabing: There were some who opposed Xie Fuzhi, but they fled. [He means that in his university the fighting is over, and he probably also wants to show his allegiance to Xie Fuzhi, of the Central Group, who, however, reacts sarcastically].

Xie Fuzhi: His second-in-command wants to seize power, and says he is a rightist.

Chairman: Is he [Wang's second in command] then so much of the Left? So Marxist?

Wang Dabing: They are trying to sow discord between us. He is a good comrade, with good social origins. He suffered bitterly and nurses deep hatred. This man is very straightforward, and full of revolutionary energy, with a strong revolutionary character. He is only a bit impatient, he is not capable of uniting people, and his methods are a bit rigid.

Chairman: Could you unite with him? One is Left, the other Right, it should be easy for you to unite. Come here; sit by my side.

Lin Biao: Come over!

Xie Fuzhi: Go! Go! (*Wang goes to sit down by the side of the Chairman.*)

Chairman: Sit down; sit down.

In these matters, we should have some leeway. After all, they are students, not criminal gangs. . . . The key point is the two factions that are totally engaged in armed struggle have given all their heart to armed struggle. Such a struggle-criticism-transformation does not work, perhaps struggle-criticize-quit [*dou-pi-zou*]. Are not students talking about struggle-criticize-quit or struggle-criticize-disperse [*dou-pi-san*]? There are so many students in the faction of the disengaged. Increasingly unpleasant words are said publicly about Nie Yuanzi and Kuai Dafu. Nie Yuanzi does not have so much cannon fodder, nor does Kuai Dafu. Sometimes 300, other times 150 men. How can this be compared with the troops of Lin Biao or Huang Yongshen? This time, in one shot, I sent in 30,000.¹⁵

The formula “struggle-criticism-dispersion” parodied the slogan of the two previous years, “struggle-criticism-transformation” (*dou-pi-gai*), that identified the targets of the Red Guards in the universities. It was never officially quoted, but it was the one actually adopted after the meeting: the factions were “dispersed” and the Red Guard organizations, which most of the students had already abandoned, were dissolved. As for the transformation of universities, a different path was tried.

Very remarkable in this meeting, where a political and not a simply military solution is attempted (the power of the repressive machine is obviously exorbitant), is that Mao often emphasizes the subjective relations at stake in that moment, including those expressed within the meeting itself. Several times he puts a stop to the most irritated comments of the other members of the Central Group, reminding them that they are facing students who have shown themselves unable to go beyond a heroic and militaristic imagery of politics but who should not be disregarded just because of their young age. The severity they deserve should be limited to the solution of the impasse in which that imaginary drift has brought them to. However, to all the meeting’s participants, finding an adequate solution is in that moment equally hazardous. Neither the hierarchies founded on age nor those founded on

state functions would have been enough to warrant a set of right decisions to face the situation's singularity.

Here is another passage during which this kind of tension is manifest. Mao asks himself, absolutely perplexed, what really led to that impasse, how to explain ("historically," he says) the degeneration into factions.

Chairman: What has happened must have historical reasons; it should have a history. These things do not happen accidentally. They do not come suddenly.

Chen Boda: Follow the Chairman's instructions closely; act resolutely in accordance to them.

Chairman: Do not say instructions.

Yao Wenyan: The Chairman's words today are sincere and earnest.

Chen Boda: The first half of 1966 was relatively good. The colleges and the universities of the capital did fan the flames throughout the country. Touching off the revolutionary storm was right. Now, they have swelled up in their heads, they think they are extraordinary. They want to unify the world [*tongyi tianxia*, as above, but likely in a sarcastic sense: they want to keep everything under their control]. The hands of Kuai Dafu and Han Aijing reach everywhere, but they are ignorant.

Chairman: They are only twenty years old. Do not despise young people. Zhou Yu [AD 175–210, famous general of the Kingdom of Wu] started as a cavalryman, he was only sixteen years old. Do not give yourselves airs because you are veterans.

Jiang Qing: We took part in the revolution when we were teenagers.

Chairman: Do not swell up; when the body swells, one has dropsy.

Chen Boda: Han Aijing, you have not reflected duly on the thought of the Chairman Mao and on the opinions of the Central Committee, you have not pondered them. You have called secret meetings relying on hearsay. Placing yourself first, you are on a dangerous road.

Chairman: The first point is my own bureaucratism; I have never met you before. If they had not wanted to capture the Black Hand I would not have asked you to come. Let Kuai Dafu wake up.

Lin Biao: Kuai Dafu, wake up, stop your horse at the edge of the cliff. Admit your mistakes!

Chairman: Do not say, “Admit mistakes.”

Chen Boda: Kuai Dafu does not respect the worker masses. If he still refuses to listen to us, it will mean that he disrespects the Central Committee, that he disrespects Chairman Mao. This is a dangerous road.

Chairman: Quite dangerous. Now is the time for the little generals to make their mistakes.

Zhou Enlai: The Chairman has been saying “now is the time for the little generals to make their mistakes” for a long time. [This seems to mean, now it is time to help them correct those mistakes].

...

Chairman: Tan Houlan’s opponents are only two hundred people, but one year later she has not subdued them yet. In other schools, opponents are even more, how can they be subjugated? Cao Cao tried to use force to conquer Sun Quan but was defeated. Liu Bei used force to conquer Sun Quan; he lost Jieting and was defeated. Sima Yi failed to conquer Zhuge Liang by force. The first battle lasted a long while, but Zhang He had only one horse left at the end.

Ye Qun: That was the loss of Jieting.¹⁶

In the discontinuous flow of the dialogues, several passages echo remote references. The last sentences contain a dense series of historical references (about the collapse of the Han dynasty and the rivalries among the Three Kingdoms at the beginning of the third century), surely known to the participants, quoted as examples of military tactics that failed because they were centered on attack. In his military writings of the 1930s Mao had subtly argued the strategic superiority of defense over attack—a line of thought shared by other great dialecticians of the war like Sun Zi and Clausewitz—and such a theory had been effectively pursued in the Liberation War. However, political situations are unique and unrepeatable. Further evidence of this general rule is given by the fact that, although the names chosen by the Red Guards bannered the glories of the “people’s war” that had characterized its founding moment (like the Jingtangshan red bases), their “military” style reproduced an insurrectional imagery based on attack. Instead, the Jingtangshan bases were made possible only when, at the end of the 1920s, Mao abandoned the insurrectionary vision, by then dominant in the Chi-

nese Communist Party (CCP), and elaborated a military strategy based on the supremacy of defense.

Here it seems that Mao was musing on the situation and that he did not mean to give a lesson of military history to the Red Guards; he considered the fighting in Beijing campuses totally absurd even on the military plane: “What kind of war are you fighting? It is nothing! You only have home-made weapons.” Mao tells the students: “If you are capable of it, you should lead the war on a large scale,” but it is clear that they are only mimicking a revolutionary military heroism that is completely imaginary and that they are being allowed to do so just because the military apparatus has decided, so far, not to intervene. “This little civil war is not a serious thing,” concludes Mao, and even more so it must be stopped soon.

Lin Biao argues in a classical dialectic Chinese style, to confirm the non-negotiable demand to stop the armed struggle: “In all the great events in the world, it should be unity after long disunity and disunity after long unity. All your defenses aimed at armed struggle must be dismantled. All hot weapons, cold weapons, knives and rifles should be put in storage.”¹⁷

The discussion involved several details about the situation that would require elaborate annotations. I therefore limit myself to the two main concerns that animated the meeting: the urgency to stop the fighting between the factions and, parallel to that, the even more uncertain problem of the destinies, both political and intellectual, of the university.

“We Do Not Want Civil War”

“These are our reasons: first, we want cultural struggle, we do not want armed struggle”; “the masses do not want civil war at all.” These are the two main arguments that Mao and the other members of the Central Group address to the students. Mao admits that there are different points of view between the factions and that, in the final analysis, he agrees more with one faction than with another; however, he notes that none of this justifies the absurd war fought by the students in the campuses.

He quotes, for example, the “theory of the ‘certain victory,’” formulated by the “April 14th” faction hostile to Kuai Dafu, according to which the faction was sure to achieve victory in the struggle for “power” on the basis

of the principle that “those who conquer the power are not capable to govern.” In other terms, Kuai, who had overthrown the former authorities and “conquered power” at Qinghua, could do nothing but hand over power to April 14th, because the latter had been formed later. As for the value of the arguments supporting the “historical law” expressed by April 14th,¹⁸ it was apparently a rather instrumental “theory,” aiming only to justify the April 14th’s opposition to Kuai. Mao declares, in fact, that he does not feel any special sympathy for that doctrine of the “certain victory” while stressing nonetheless that it should be free to exist exactly because it intends to be a “political theory”: “‘April 14th’ has a theorist called Zhou Quanying. Why should we arrest a theorist? He is a theorist of a school of thought. He writes articles. Why should you arrest him? Release him. He has his opinions. Let him write again! Otherwise, they will say that there is no freedom.”¹⁹

It should be recalled that freedom of political thought, here openly defended by Mao even in the case of a rather poor “theory,” was the key issue in constituting the Red Guards since the second half of 1966. These arose as a multiplicity of organizations that self-authorized their own existence while supporting their own capacity to formulate political declarations in places external to the party-state, and at the same time prescribing the latter to admit and to promote their existence. The decline and militaristic degeneration of these organizations were marked by very different intentions. In the expanding phase of the pluralization process (roughly from the first *dazibao* at Beida to Shanghai January Storm), the main issue at stake was how far the multiplicity of self-authorized and independent political places could be extended. In the declining phase, the so-called factionalism was increasingly marked by mutual harassment by organizations involved in the struggle to cut each other short. These eventually considered the annihilation of their opponents as the prime condition for their own existence, each of them regarding itself as the “nucleus” of the regeneration of the party-state. This was the main motive that led to the present sticking point.

I say—Mao continued in his colorful polemic register, while addressing Nie Yuanzi—that you, Old Buddha, should be a little more generous. There are several thousand people in Beida’s Jinggangshan [the faction adverse to her]. If they are released like a torrential flood, they will wash

out the Dragon King's Temple [Nie's headquarters]. How will you stand that? Otherwise, Old Buddha, we will impose military control. The third method is to act according to dialectics: you do not live in the same city, one divides into two, either you or Jinggangshan moves to the South. If one is in the South and the other in the North, you will not see each other and you will not be able to fight. Each one puts its own affairs in order and then the entire world will be united [*yi tong tianxia*]. Otherwise, you also will be afraid. If they launch an attack on the nest of the Old Buddha [another sarcastic name for Nie Yuanzi's headquarters] you will not be able to sleep. You are afraid, and they are afraid too. It is necessary to hold back a little. Why should you be so tense?²⁰

Mao and the others of the Central Group repeatedly expressed their great indignation for the gratuitous cruelties the factions inflicted on each other and for the complacent slogans that threatened “to slaughter” and “to cook” the adversaries. Furthermore, the arguments that each faction used to accuse their opponents of being counterrevolutionary and to treat them as war enemies were ludicrous. When Mao asked Nie Yuanzi why she regarded the adverse faction as counterrevolutionary, she answered: “They organized a reactionary block that viciously attacked Chairman Mao and Vice-Chairman Lin.” Mao sharply replied: “What is the matter if they slander us a bit?” The evidences Nie produced about the “political crimes” of her adversaries were null: “Let them criticize us,” Mao said several times, “how would it be possible not to have opponents?”

On the tortures inflicted on their opponents by the “little generals” who claimed to emulate the glories of the “people's war,” Mao reminded them how far more civilized was the style of the People's Liberation Army, despite the fact that it was composed of soldiers and even generals with very poor formal education. “Two rough fellows” (*tupaozi*), Mao said, jokingly referring to the chairman and the vice-chairman of the general staff present at the meeting, who had attended only a couple years of primary school, compared with the long curricula of the Red Guard leaders, who could definitely be considered “intellectuals” (*zhishifenzi*). Whereas in the army, Mao said, deserters were not put under arrest anymore and isolation was no longer used as a punishment, in the student factions arrest was frequently

used and the opponents treated as “prisoners of war to be subjected to coercion and forced to confess”; those who refused to confess were beaten to death. “I think the intellectuals are the most uncivilized—commented Mao sourly—do you say that they are the most civilized. I do not think so. The less educated are the most civilized.”

Among the members of the Central Group, Jiang Qing was the one who was the most distressed about the treatment of the opponents. At the Normal University, where Tan Houlan was in command, many students of the opposite faction had been put under arrest and imprisoned for several days in the dark with neither food nor drink:

Jiang Qing (*addressing Tan Houlan*): . . . How could you have done this? As soon as they told me, I could not help crying. These hundreds, or tens of persons, after all they are the masses . . .

I have no friendly feelings toward your opponents. It is said that [they] are against us. We are not speaking in their name, but release them! Proletarians should stress proletarian humanitarianism. These dozens of counterrevolutionaries are, after all, youths.

They want to strangle me to death. I am not afraid of being fried in oil. I have heard that Beida Jingtangshan wants to fry Jiang Qing.

Yao Wenyan: Frying is just so to speak.

Chairman: They even say to strangle Kuai Dafu to death.

. . .

Jiang Qing: Nie Yuanzi, have I still some right to speak? I am deeply grieved for all of you. Now you are all masses struggling against other masses, and the bad people are hiding. . . . “April 14th” says they are definitely going to win. “April 14th” is especially against the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution [that is, against the leaders present at the meeting]. They are also against the Premier [Zhou Enlai] and Kang Sheng [of the Central Group]. Nevertheless, they are a mass organization.

You know where I live. If you want to strangle me, go ahead. If you want to fry me, go ahead. We were in troubles and adversities together. If you cannot tolerate others, how can you rule the country and bring peace in the world [*zhi guo ping tianxia*; the same *tianxia* as above, but not sarcastic]? I think you are not studying the Chairman’s works, and you

are not learning his working style. The Chairman always makes unity with those who oppose him.

Chairman . . . (*addressing Nie Yuanzi*): What you cited [as the crimes of your opponents] are nothing but [their] attacks on Jiang Qing and Lin Biao. We can write them off at one stroke. They only talked among themselves privately, they did not go out to post *dazibao*.

Jiang Qing: Even if they post *dazibao*, I am not afraid . . .

Chairman (*addressing Nie*): . . . You cannot get rid of thousands of members of the Beida Jinggangshan . . .

Nie Yuanzi: More than one thousand left the Jinggangshan. They are holding study classes [she means that they are under the control of her faction].

Chairman: You cannot rely on those who leave Jinggangshan. Most of them are physically with Cao Cao, but, with the heart, they are with the Han.²¹ Physically they are with the Old Buddha, but their mind is with Jinggangshan. Do not do anything to Niu Huilin [leader of the opposite faction], let him go with Jinggangshan, let him free. We should not compel or insult others, especially not beat people and not extort confessions. In the past, we committed many mistakes. You are making this mistake for the first time; we cannot blame you.²²

Since the hostilities among the Red Guard factions were deeply entangled with the relationships that the student leaders held with individual members of the Central Group,²³ Mao and the other central leaders repeatedly emphasized that to be for or against some of them did not constitute any possible reason to continue the struggle.²⁴ The Central Group was united and resolute in its request for an immediate cessation of the fighting.

The intransigence of the Central Group on this point was augmented by the trend, worsening in the recent months, of an interlacing between student factionalism on one side and, on the other, a series of divergences among military commands that, if fully developed, could have turned the fighting among small student factions into conflicts among real warlords.²⁵ The student leaders, for their part, seemed not to be worried about that possibility. Some of them, during the meeting, indirectly advanced the request of the army's support to their factions for overwhelming their adversaries.

Nie Yuanzi went further in asking the support of a particular army unit that she considered close to her faction. “You want that all be made according to your preference,” Mao replied with anger.

The interference of student factionalism with the military was one of the meeting’s hottest issues, and it emerged very excitedly when a worried Zhou Enlai intervened about a meeting of the Scientific Committee of National Defense that some student organizations had called at the Beijing Institute of Aeronautics. It is clear that the Scientific Committee was an organism situated at the institutional joint between military and academic-scientific apparatuses and that the Institute of Aeronautics was closely connected with the programs of national defense. “How did you dare to call that meeting?” Zhou Enlai thundered to Han Aijing. “You know that it deals with secrets of national defense.” Han’s long answer reveals the mix of complacency, adventurism, and tactical opportunism that led the “little generals” to an impasse disproportionate to their capacities.

Han Aijing: We did not call that meeting. You may investigate. Wu Zhuanbin of Guangdong called the meeting. I was ill, and before going to the hospital, I lived at the School of Physical Education. A telephone call came from the school asking me to receive two standing members of the provincial revolutionary committee. People say: “Up there is Heaven; down there is Beijing Aeronautical Institute.” I did not enthusiastically welcome the leaders of the May 4th Students’ Congress and the various leaders of the rebel factions from other provinces, so we were criticized for being conceited and arrogant; they even said that we were rich peasants and not revolutionary anymore. Thus I accepted to receive them. As they were leaving, they wanted to call a meeting to discuss the national situation. I told them that if they call such a meeting in Beijing it would be a black [that is, an illegal] meeting. In Beijing, the situation is very complicated—there is a Sky faction and an Earth faction. I agreed to have a chat with some reliable leaders of rebel factions and the responsible persons of revolutionary committees, just for talking about the situation, without discussing any specific measures. Both Kuai [Dafu] and I went to those talks; then I entered the hospital. As soon as the meeting started, everybody felt that things were going wrong. Those from the Geology Institute

after having attended the preparatory meeting did not attend the other ones. Kuai Dafu, after listening for a few minutes, ran away scared from the meeting, and the representatives of Jingganshan did the same. One after another, schoolmates informed me; I said we should hasten to write reports; who would have thought that we were already criticized.²⁶

Another essential reason to ask the Beijing students' leaders for the end of the struggles between the factions was due to the national echo that the events unavoidably assumed. The fighting in Beijing was actually only a few thousand students in five or six campuses, but in the last months in some provinces, especially in Guangxi province, there had been much more serious fighting. In the face of the situation in Guangxi, the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution had issued an announcement on July 1, asking for the immediate cessation of the armed struggle.²⁷ The continuation of fighting in some Beijing campuses (the organization of Kuai Dafu stated that the announcement was applicable only in Guangxi, but not in Beijing) influenced the situation in the whole country, because of the prestige enjoyed by Beijing's Red Guard leaders. About the cessation of the armed struggle, Mao was intransigent. Whoever kept on fighting would be dealt with as a criminal.

Chairman: Somebody says that notices issued on Guangxi are applicable only in Guangxi and those on Shenxi are applicable only in Shenxi. Now, I issue another nationwide notice. If anyone goes on running counter and fighting the People's Liberation Army, destroying means of transportation, killing people, or setting fires, he is committing crimes. Those few who turn a deaf ear to persuasion and persist in not changing their behavior are bandits, Guomindang elements subject to capture. If they continue to stubbornly resist, they will be annihilated.

Lin Biao: At present, some of them are true rebel groups; others are bandits and Guomindang elements that are using our flag for rebellion. In Guangxi, one thousand houses have been burned down.

Chairman: In the notice it should be written clearly and explained clearly to the students that if they persist and do not change, they will be arrested. This for the light cases; in the serious cases, they will be surrounded and suppressed.

Lin Biao: In Guangxi one thousand houses have been burned down and they were not allowed to put out the fire.

Chairman: Was not the Guomindang just like this? This is like the desperate agony of class enemies. Burning houses is a grave error.

Lin Biao: During the Long March I entered the Guangxi, where I defeated Bai Chongxi. He too used this method: he burned houses and tried to make believe that they were the Communists who did it. It is the same old tactic used again.

Han Aijing: Kuai Dafu is riding a tiger from which he cannot get down.

Kang Sheng: It is not the kind of situation as you say.

Chairman: If he cannot get off the back of the tiger, then let us kill the tiger.²⁸

“To kill the tiger” meant to declare the end of the Red Guards as politically independent organizations, which was in fact the main result of the meeting. The arrival of Kuai Dafu confirmed the subjective breakdown that the meeting was trying to deal with. Kuai broke into the hall two-thirds through the meeting, sobbing theatrically, just as his friend Han Aijing indirectly had anticipated at the beginning. The tragicomic effect, as the transcript scrupulously recorded, clearly showed on Jiang Qing’s face:

Huang Zuozhen reports that Kuai Dafu has arrived. Kuai enters crying out bitterly. The Chairman stands up, goes toward him and shakes his hand. Comrade Jiang Qing is laughing. Kuai, still crying, introduces his case [*gaozhuang*, “introduces his complaints to superiors”]; he says that Qinghua is in extreme danger, that the workers, manipulated by the Black Hand, entered Qinghua to suppress the students, and that there is a big plot behind it all.²⁹

To understand how different the situation was, one should consider that in June 1966 Kuai emerged as a brave leader of the student rebellion at Qinghua, writing an “open letter” to the “hesitant,” whose general intonation was the following: “I sincerely hope that in this difficult and crucial moment you remain firm. The train of the revolution, which is running at very high speed, is entering a sharp bend. Keep yourself firm if you do not want to fall down and shatter.”³⁰

Two years later, Mao met a whimpering Kuai Dafu, to whom he could not but repeat what he had already said to the others, adding serious criticism for the bloody attacks led by Kuai's faction against the workers at Qinghua the day before. The opposite faction, the April 14th, had in fact welcomed the workers, while the Jinggangshan of Kuai Dafu, with which Mao said he was more sympathetic, had launched a deadly attack against them:

Chairman: You want to arrest the Black Hand; I am the Black Hand. There was no other possible way to deal with you. We are more sympathetic with your faction, I cannot accept "April 14th's" idea of the sure victory, but we must win over their masses, including some of their leaders. The main idea of Zhou Quanying is that those who conquer power cannot rule, thus Kuai Dafu cannot but transfer the power to the April 14th.

We asked the workers to do some propaganda work, but you refused. You knew well how many people were coming for making propaganda—Huang Zuozhen and Xie Fuzhi had talked to you, there was nothing else to do. The workers were bare-handed, but you rejected, you have attacked, killing and wounding them. In the case of Beida also, we are more sympathetic to Nie Yuanzi. We are more inclined toward you, five great leaders, but did you not know what those tens of thousands of workers were coming to do at Qinghua University? If there was not a decision of the Central Committee, how could they have dared to come? You have been very passive. On the contrary, April 14th has welcomed the workers, you of the Jinggangshan, instead, did not welcome them, and you were wrong.³¹

Unable to reply, Kuai was so confused that Mao, after criticizing his "passive" (in the sense of politically inert) behavior, did not insist too much, and eventually he just suggested Kuai find a place to rest. Zhou Enlai, for his part, recommended Han Aijing take care of his ally and help him find a way out. The attitude of the Central Group for the Cultural Revolution with Kuai and the other student leaders was very patient, notwithstanding the gravity of the situation.

Mao had also expressed a precise evaluation of the paroxysm of student rebellion during the previous months:

There is quite a bit of anarchism. In this world, anarchism [*wu-zhengfu*, “no government”] is correlative with government. As long as there is government in the world, anarchism cannot be eliminated. [Attitudes of] servility and “docile tool” that in the past have been told [to youth] now turn in their contrary. This is the punishment of the right opportunism, the punishment for the right opportunism of the Central Committee.³²

It could be said that, after all, any “censorship” has always a corresponding “return of the repressed.” However, against the backdrop typical of Mao of a general philosophical fatalism about the unavoidable countereffects of the very existence of “government,” what he was proposing was a properly political judgment on the situation. Did not the party-state disseminate and impose, especially among the youths, acquiescence and even servility as qualities of a “good Communist”?³³ The present “anarchism” was the opposite result, commented Mao. It was a sort of Dantesque *contrappasso*, or the “retaliation” that the “right opportunism of the Central Committee” had fully deserved.

The meticulous methods, in no way inferior to those of the Jesuit colleges in the European Renaissance, for disciplining schools and university students in the early sixties would deserve specific research.³⁴ Many actions of brutality and even cruelty of the Red Guards—this was the sense of Mao’s bitter remark—were the tragic result of a basic failure of the “pedagogy” of the party-state and of the program of moral “perfecting” of the youth in which the Chinese educational apparatuses were engaged during the previous two decades.

“Should We Still Be Running Universities?”

Besides the fighting in Beijing universities, the other important topic discussed that day unavoidably regarded the institutional and intellectual destinies of the university. The issue, about which the uncertainty was probably greater than that about how to stop the armed struggle, was crucial for several reasons: the central place occupied by the university system in the Chinese state apparatus in the 1950s and 1960s; the obvious failure of any attempt to reform university education through the Red Guards’ activism

(the “struggle-critic-transformation” degenerated into brutal brawls); and, not the least, the 1968 worldwide university crisis that the Chinese university system largely anticipated and finally concentrated in itself, through a prolonged institutional paralysis. It was July 1968, the moment of maximum uncertainty for the modern university education, when Mao asked:

Should we still be running universities? Should universities enroll new students? Not to enroll students will not do. I left some leeway in my remarks. We should still run universities: I have mentioned science and engineering colleges, but I did not say that humanities colleges should not be run. If these latter are unable to make any achievement, then forget about it. As far as I can see, colleges offer more or less the same basic courses as those offered in junior and senior middle schools and in the last years of primary school. One should go to school only for six years, at most ten years. In senior middle school, the courses repeat those in junior middle school, university courses repeat those in senior middle school. As for the basic courses, they are all repetitious. As for the specialized courses, even teachers do not understand.

Philosophers are unable to talk about philosophy. What is studying for? Nie Yuanzi, are you not a philosopher?

Nie Yuanzi: No, I am not a philosopher.

Jiang Qing: She is an Old Buddha.

Chairman: For what is the study of philosophy worth? Is the philosophy something that one can learn in the college? If one has never been a worker or a peasant and goes to study philosophy, what kind of philosophy is that?³⁵

Questions like these could horrify some philosophy teachers bound too much to school programs, but not necessarily all philosophers. Is it possible to learn how to philosophize inside the university only? Lin Biao, who during the meeting showed from time to time a certain humor, answered with a fierce joke: it was not *zhexue*, “philosophy,” but *zhaixue*, “shrinking study”: “The more one studies the more [the mind] shrinks.”

Mao posed the same question for literature: is it possible to learn how to write literature in the university? This time it was Zhou Enlai who bitterly commented: “When they go to university their brain petrifies,” citing the

case of a self-taught writer of peasant origin, Gao Yubao, who had been rewarded and sent to university. His case was the object of a large propaganda effort as the result of the democratization of the Chinese school, but as soon as Gao entered university, he stopped writing altogether.³⁶

The skepticism about the results of previous educational policies was almost total. “Look at some of our boys who attended school for more than ten years—said a disheartened Mao—they are so physically destroyed as to be unable to sleep. A boy studies history, but he does not understand the class struggle.” In other terms: is to philosophize, to write novels, to make politics in a thoughtful way, intellectually homogenous to the system of university knowledge and its transmission? In the summer of 1968, these were key intellectual questions worldwide. According to Mao:

When studying literature, one should not study the history of literature, but should rather learn to write novels. Write me a novel per week. If one is unable to do it, go to a factory to work as apprentice. During his apprenticeship, he should write about his experience as an apprentice. Nowadays those who study literature are unable to write novels.³⁷

Besides showing an intense aversion, not groundless indeed, to the “history of literature,” Mao here talked about going to factories and to the countryside to become an apprentice or a peasant in order to be able to write novels: certainly a thorny problem, open to various misunderstandings. However, which writer has really learned more for his art from university education than from living the reality of the relationships among people? “Factories and countryside” designated here that principle of reality that is the existential horizon of 90 percent of people in China at that moment. On the other hand, looking at the Chinese literary blossoming of the 1980s and 1990s, it is significant that great poets like Bei Dao, Mang Ke, and Yang Lian, or narrators like Han Shaogong,³⁸ began to write at the end of the 1960s, when they had been sent as “young educated people in the countryside” and that nobody among them ever attended the university. Can we assert that the interruption of the university teaching of literature during those years has been so harmful to contemporary Chinese literature?

What was at stake, after all, was the role of the modern university in the relationship between the intellectuality—of art, politics, or philosophy—

and its didactic transmissibility. University apparatuses of the socialist state, which in those years in China were modeled on the Soviet system, had pretended to embody the perfect balance between thought and knowledge, but this was exactly what the current crisis was radically refuting, impelling China to find new paths. For this reason Mao, who was far from being persuaded of the superiority of the socialist university, emphasized that Marxism—that was the core of the Chinese university knowledge of that time, and in particular of the philosophical ones—had not been formed in the university. No one among the great Marxists had graduated, except Marx, who to be sure did not follow an academic career. As for the school records of the others, as Mao recalled, Engels began to make inquiries on workers while he was a bookkeeper in his father's factory and studied by himself at the British Library. Lenin attended university for two years; Stalin only some years at a secondary school ("run by the church," Mao specified, maybe not without irony). Gorky went only two years to a primary school, less than Jiang Qing, who attended some years more, and less than Lin Biao, who, having attended some years of middle school, could be defined an "intellectual," as Mao jokingly commented.

Mao said he had not been a good student ("I have only tried not to be thrown out of school"), but this should not be taken too literally. As a student and later as a teacher of the Normal School of Changsha, he was for several years a young militant educationalist who took part in important initiatives in the most advanced currents of educational reform of the "May Fourth" movement. Traces of those experiences emerge in this meeting, as for example the Hunan self-study university (*zixiu daxue*) that Mao founded in 1921 and that then produced a significant echo at the national level (Mao will in fact repropose a self-study system).³⁹ Peculiar to those experiences, as well as to the school policies of Yan'an in the 1930s and 1940s, was to consider school and university policies as a crucial terrain of political and intellectual experimentation, and not only as elements of the modern state system to be taken for granted. They in fact created remarkably inventive forms of school.⁴⁰

Other leaders present at the meeting had been protagonists of those experiences, like Zhou Enlai, who in his youth was active in the vanguard intellectual and educational reform currents of the May Fourth, and Lin

Biao, who at Yan'an directed the University of the Anti-Japanese Resistance (*Kangda*). Although they avoided boasting of any special expertise in the educational field and proudly declared themselves to be self-taught, a number of the leaders present at the meeting had in fact a deep knowledge of the problem. Nevertheless, with the irreversible crisis that the school and university policies of the socialist state revealed in that moment, the issue of which new criteria should inspire an educational reform was then the most uncertain for all the participants. The evaluation of the last two decades was for them largely negative, and the experiences of the last two years did not show any new path.

“No steps forward have been made in the educational reform,” someone said during the meeting. “If no steps forward will be made in the educational revolution—Mao replied to the students—we too will not make any step forward, let alone you. The old educational system damaged you.” Moreover, if the situation would be blocked in the fighting between student factions, it was impossible to find out something new:

Chairman: . . . As I see it, if all is reduced to these few matters [of the student factions], what revolution in education can we do? If we fail, let us disperse [*san*]. This is what the students say, not information that I get from the disengaged [*xiayoapai*]! . . .

Yao Wenyuan: I am inclined to accept that in some schools there should be struggle-criticize-dispersion [*dou-pi-san*], or struggle-criticize-quit [*dou-pi-zou*].

Chairman: . . . With the two factions going on like this, I think that even if they do not want to quit they should quit [the campuses]. . . . When they leave the territory empty, let in their place go people for self-study of [*zixiu*] how to write a novel. If you study literature, you should write poems and drama. Those who study philosophy should write family history, history of the revolutionary processes. Those who study political economy should not learn from the professors of Peking University. Are there any famous professors at Peking University? These topics do not need professors who teach. Professors who teach, this is a harmful method. Organize a small group and study by yourself, [run] a self-study university [*zixiu daxue*]. Come and go, half a year, one year, two years, or

three years. No examinations: examinations are not a good method. Suppose ten questions are asked about a book, which contains one hundred viewpoints: do they not only cover one-tenth? Even if you answer correctly, what about the other 90 percent?

Who examined Marx? Who examined Engels? Who examined Lenin? Who examined Comrade Lin Biao? Who examined Comrade Huang Zuozen? The needs of the masses and Jiang Jieshi have been our teachers.⁴¹ This was the case for all of us. Teachers are needed in middle schools but everything should be simplified and the superfluous eliminated [*shan rong jiu jian*].

Yao Wenyuan: Open a few good libraries.

Chairman: Give workers, peasants, and soldiers time to use them. To study in a library is a good method. I studied at a library in Hunan for half a year, and in the library of Peking University for another half a year. I choose books by myself. Who taught me? . . .

Universities are run in such a lifeless way. There should be some more freedom.⁴²

As I have noted, these were crucial topics worldwide. Was not the intellectual value of the modern university, and then, in the long term, its institutional existence too, at stake, in China as in France or elsewhere? It is usually said that China had been isolated from the rest of the world for ten years. But any university student or teacher, in July 1968, who was not asking himself somewhat radical questions—about the usefulness or the damage of academic lessons, or the intolerable bureaucratism of exams, or the need for freedom of choice in study—lost a great chance to reflect on some essential circumstances of his own intellectual existence.

The End of the Sequence Declared

After the end of the meeting, the five “little generals” were kept a little while at Zhongnanhai. “What about today? Do you think that we are going to arrest you and to put you in isolation?” Mao had said sarcastically, blaming them for the cruelties against their opponents and for the deadly attack against the workers at Qinghua. The student leaders were in fact treated

rather magnanimously. They were only asked to sign a brief summary of the discussion and then disperse it on their campuses: two pages in all, containing the main arguments with which Mao and the others of the Central Group had harshly criticized the student leaders for their behavior and asked for the immediate end of the fighting.⁴³

The meeting confirmed that the situation had reached a self-destructive gridlock because by that time Red Guard organizations were lacking any political content. Two years before, the Red Guards had been welcomed by the *Decision in Sixteen Points* of August 1966 as “an excellent bridge that allows our party a closer tie with the masses.” They should be considered, continued the document, “not as temporary but as permanent organizations,” destined “to operate for a long time” and not only in the schools and universities; their expansion to “factories, mines, neighborhoods, towns, and countryside” should be welcomed also. In July 1968, with the dispatching of the workers at Qinghua and with this meeting, Mao and the Central Group declared in fact that the subjective existence of that kind of organization should be considered as concluded. As for the political sequence started in June 1966, those places in which the “masses liberate only by themselves, and no one must in any way act in their place,” as told by another famous passage of the *Decision in Sixteen Points*, had come to an end.

With the decomposition of the “rebel organizations,” the most difficult problem for Mao and the Central Group was not how to halt armed struggle on the campuses but how to intervene in the student factions—disarming them and in fact envisaging their dissolution—without destroying the subjective energy that allowed their existence. It is remarkable that the main initiatives taken by the Central Group at the end of July 1968 crossed the theme of the university with that of the factories and the workers. The choice to involve the workers and the factories with the educational issues can be considered, using a classical Maoist category, a “strategic retreat.” The retreat would be made only after having identified a terrain to orient themselves, to keep the chances to experience new forms of self-emancipatory politics alive, on the basis of the political energy of the last two years.

Sending the workers to the Qinghua campus was above all a way to deal with that situation as a political matter, rather than simply as an unavoidable police operation. The workers entered Qinghua to disarm the students,

screaming slogans like “use reason not violence, lay down the arms, form a big alliance,” and thanks to this rationalist discipline, absolutely rare in this kind of event, they accomplished the task of stopping the fighting.⁴⁴ Mao mobilized the workers as possible protagonists of political inventions and not as substitutes of the state’s repressive apparatus. The demonstration of the workers at Qinghua, to be sure, also carried out a highly symbolic role, thanks to the prestige of the category of “working class” in the ideology of the socialist state. However, Mao was not leaning on a fixed and stable point. Although that decision seemed to arise from the canonical options of Marxist-Leninist culture, and to bring the issue back to the relationships between the socialist state and its “worker base,” it must be remembered that those relationships during the Cultural Revolution endured a political cataclysm.

In Shanghai’s January Storm of 1967, the clash between millions of “red” workers and millions of “scarlet” workers led to a subjective breakdown within the very category of “working class” and therefore within the entire conceptual chain “worker-factory-class-party-state” that constituted the ideological and organizational pillar of the socialist state. The first result was in fact the collapse of the entire institutional machine of Shanghai’s party-state. It is impossible here to investigate more precisely this crucial point, but it should at least be recalled that in the Chinese state asset of the 1950s and 1960s, and in its original Soviet model, the relationship of worker-factory was at the junction of a deadly ambiguity. The promise, essential to the existence of the socialist state, of a full political recognition of workers was reduced to forms of productive and social control, disguised with loyalty to a historical-political ideal.

This ambiguity underwent the subjective scrutiny of the January Storm, and, significantly, Shanghai was then the city least involved in the factional fighting and the most open to political and institutional innovation. Thanks to a newly enlightened leading group that was able to turn the consequences of that cataclysm into a stimulus for political experimentation, in Shanghai until the mid-1970s there were important attempts at thinking political content in the worker-factory relationship.

Mao tried to rely on those possibilities, although gropingly, when he appealed to the mobilization of workers for solving the fighting at Qinghua. Just a week before the meeting with the Red Guards, Mao had published

a text accompanying a report from a Shanghai machinery factory, which announced the opening of a “worker university.” Mao’s remark, emphasized by the national press, enthusiastically supported the initiative, praising it as “the path to follow” in the transformation of the technical-scientific universities. Those strange “worker universities”—which in the following years were one of the strongest issues of the Maoist group—audaciously linked the university’s destiny to the experimentation of new political possibilities in the worker-factory relationship.⁴⁵ The issue deserves specific research to clarify both the political content of some important experiments of the following years up to the Chinese “Thermidor” of 1976 and their relationship with the core sequence of the Cultural Revolution, whose end was declared by the meeting with the five leaders of the Beijing students.

The three main initiatives taken by the Maoist group at the end of July 1968—the publication of Mao’s remark on the “worker university” of Shanghai, the sending of the workers to Qinghua, and the meeting analyzed above—formed a coherent, although precarious and risky, set of political decisions. The large distribution of the record of the meeting, both in the form of a synthetic summary and in its full text, played a crucial role in the attempts to find a political way out of the impasse created by the factional exhaustion, in fact by the depoliticization, of the Red Guard organizations.

P.S. One Step, an Encounter

One could ask why such an exceptional document, published in the well-known 1969 edition of the collection *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long Live Mao Zedong Thought*, in the mid-1970s a “must” for contemporary China scholarship) and supposedly familiar to many specialists, has been rarely quoted and never directly analyzed. The omission might have been accidental, but more likely it is symptomatic of scholarship’s attitude toward the Cultural Revolution and of the decline, both political and epistemic, of a research field nowadays almost lifeless.

As for the scholarly predicament of historiography and sociology in facing the Chinese events of the mid-sixties to mid-seventies, I have argued elsewhere that the major theoretical difficulty is that the Cultural Revolution undid the previously established conceptual bridges between history

and politics—bridges that were crucial in the network of modern political episteme and that all the social sciences had crossed when investigating political events.⁴⁶ I am at present more inclined to stress the role of political bewilderment, in fact, a vast reactionary drift that has dominated the field since the 1980s, as the main cause of its desertification.⁴⁷ I do not intend to further discuss the question here and limit myself to summarizing some circumstances of my work on this text and the arguments for considering it as an important step into the analysis of the events.

For quite some time, I had looked at the record of this meeting as a key document, but only a few years ago did I start to study it in detail. At one level, for me its importance is that it marks a crucial caesura: in the early hours of July 28, 1968, the core sequence of the Cultural Revolution definitely resolves. That sequence had been determined by the existence of independent political organizations, or the “Red Guards,” that through this meeting were put under tutelage and shortly after dissolved. This document was therefore one of the main vouchers for the chronology of events that I have proposed in a previous article, where I have also sketched some preliminary arguments for reorganizing a perspective for research and a possible way out of the deplorable scholarly impasse in the study of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁸

After some hesitations and false starts, I finally realized that starting from an examination of this formidable transcript was the right step for going beyond the preliminaries. As I had always been struck by the potential theatrical value of the text, I translated it entirely into Italian, both to scrutinize its details and with the intention, or better with the vague hope, of submitting the “script” to a professional artist from whom I hoped to receive a well-grounded answer to the question: could a brave director give this text a theatrical enactment?

I met with particularly lucky circumstances. Shortly after completing the translation and writing a commentary that constitutes the basis of the present article, I was visited by the artistic supervisor of Bologna’s Teatro dei Dispersi, Gianfranco Rimondi, an extremely talented director and dramaturge. Rimondi asked for some advice in the staging of *Bus Stop* by Gao Xingjian, whose Italian version I had helped edit some years earlier. As the consulting involved sideline activities that the director had conceived as

introductory to the Chinese social and political context, how could I have hesitated to show him the “script” that I had just translated? After a few days, an enthusiastic response came: the company was strongly interested in staging “the conclusive scene.”

An exciting experience then started: after having slightly reduced the text together with the director, deleting only some details, the rehearsals were a unique occasion of a specialist seminar held literally on the stage. The questions posed by the director and the actors were precise, and the subsequent discussions pertinent indeed: how to render the right intonation of one or another of the participants of the meeting? Was the Chairman’s attitude more severe or rather indulgent in that remark? How relevant was a certain literary or historical citation? Was not Lin Biao somewhat ironic in that passage? How to realistically perform Jiang Qing’s affliction, or Xie Fuzhi’s sarcasm, or the “little generals’” mix of real bewilderment and unshakable attachment to their imaginary role?

Most remarkable was that the questions concerned primarily the subjective nature of the situation, or what was happening just on the stage, and were largely indifferent to the “backstage”—not only in the sense of the vulgar version of the Cultural Revolution as an effect of plots and intrigues but also in the perspective of the more classical historical-social scholarly wisdom engaged in interpreting subjective attitudes as intrinsically linked to objective conditions and in the last analysis grounded on them. One could say that the actors and the director were doing their own jobs, and as they were neither historians nor sociologists they could refrain from those sorts of questions. However, it was exactly their lack of attention to the relationships between “subjective and objective” that allowed them to look at the text as merely subjective, that is, as intrinsically political. To perform the text with the realism indispensable on the stage, the actors focused on the declarations in subjectivity, and in doing so they spontaneously adopted the only perspective through which political situations can be thought.

The performance was very successful.⁴⁹ The actors in black scenic suits, standing in front of music rests in a choruslike order, offered a masterly “reading” of the document. The political and even the emotional relationships among the “characters” were fully rendered in a thoughtful atmosphere, broken by a single coup de théâtre: the rushing into the scene of the

sobbing Kuai Dafu coming out from the parquet circle. The music of Béla Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*, well chosen for opening the performance and marking the pauses, enriched the horizon.

Marc Bloch once described the historian as rewinding the tape in a film viewer.⁵⁰ To be sure, the idea that history is a movie that can be investigated through a Movicola was just a metaphor for expressing the question of temporality. However, after that theatrical experience, I would argue, and not only metaphorically, that at least in the case of politics, the stage rather than the film viewer is a much more suitable analytic support, because the theater, more than cinematography, can claim a peculiar homogeneity with political situations. Since ancient times, the *mise-en-scène* of political dilemmas has been a crucial element of the theater, because the declaration, or the subjective precision of the statement, is as essential on the stage as it is in politics meant as a subjective activity. Something similar can be told about love, whose subjective choices are equally essential for the theater. Is there not a declaratory essence of politics (and of love as well) that the theater can grasp and illuminate more than any other artistic mode? That performance, far from being a "dramatization," showed the intimate proximity of a document that records an unrepeatable moment of political subjectivity, with the singularity of theater that exposes itself, each night unrepeatable, to its visitors in subjectivity.⁵¹

Notes

- 1 A preliminary project to examine this document was developed as a part of the 1999 graduate interdisciplinary seminar *Cultural Revolution vs. Revolutionary Culture*, held at the University of Washington, Seattle, in the Program in Critical Asian Studies, under the kind invitation of Tani Barlow. Suggestions and encouragement came from Alain Badiou, Edoarda Masi, and Claudia Pozzana, who read an earlier draft of this article. Thanks to Giacomo Ferrarello, Robert Fulton, and Alex Passi for editorial assistance and linguistic advice.
- 2 According to William Hinton, author of a book of inquiry written a few years after the events, thirty thousand workers took part in the demonstration in an organized way, and at least as many joined spontaneously. See *Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

- 3 The transcript was published with the title *Zhaojian shoudu hong dai hui fuzeren de tanhua* (*Talk with the Responsible Persons of the Conference of the Red Guards of the Capital*), hereafter cited as *Tanhua*, in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long Live the Thought of Mao Zedong*) (n.p., 1969), 687–716, a nonofficial publication attributed to an unidentified organization of Red Guards, which contains most of Mao’s texts from the years of the Cultural Revolution. The volume has been well known to scholars since the 1970s thanks to reprints from Taiwan and Japan. A partial translation of the volume, though not always accurate enough, may be found in *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought (1949–1968)*, Joint Publication Research Service, 61269, pts. 1 and 2 (for the record of this meeting see pages 469–97).
- 4 It is almost superfluous to recall that the relationships between Mao and the Red Guards are unanimously considered by historians to possess an exclusive imaginary nature: “A curious alliance between an old leader and fanatic teenagers that adored him like a God” (Marie-Claire Bergère, *La république populaire de Chine de 1949 à nos jours* [*The People’s Republic of China from 1949 to the Present*] [Paris: Colin, 1989]).
- 5 *Tanhua*, 687. In the present article, all the quotations are taken from the above-quoted volume *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*; all translations in this article are mine. The text is reproduced, unfortunately somewhat imprecisely, in the *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*, ed. Song Yongyi (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002), with the title, added by the editor, *Zhaojian hongdaihui “wu da lingxiu” shi de tanhua* (*Talk at the Meeting with the “Five Great Leaders” of the Red Guard Congress*).
- 6 The faction of Nie Yuanzi majority at Beida (abbreviation for *Beijing Daxue* [University of Beijing]), called “New Beida (Commune),” was affiliated with the Sky faction. Therefore, it was in principle allied with Kuai Dafu and Han Aijing’s group; whereas the Beida’s faction opposed to Nie (stemming from a division of the same “New Beida” faction) called “New Beida (Jinggangshan),” or only “Jinggangshan,” was affiliated with the Earth faction. However, Jinggangshan was also the name of the majority faction at Qinghua led by Kuai Dafu, who was in principle an ally of Nie and therefore an enemy of the Jinggangshan faction of Beida. In fact, Nie pretended to be in a superior position (an “Old Buddha”) in regard to the network of alliances. Moreover, the faction opposed to Kuai at Qinghua was called “Jinggangshan (April 14th),” or simply “April 14th”; it resulted from the 1967 split of the original “Jinggangshan” of Kuai Dafu, now called “Jinggangshan (Headquarters).” There were obviously various contradictions within each of the two main factions as well. With the name “Jinggangshan” (the mountains of the first “red bases” created by Mao in 1929) caught in a tug-of-war between “Sky” and “Earth,” one of the great revolutionary modern Chinese names became politically exhausted.
- 7 Hinton, *La Guerra dei cento giorni: Rivoluzione culturale e studenti in Cina*, trans. Silvia Calamandrei (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 182.
- 8 *Tanhua*, 697–98.

- 9 He also said: "You must put politics in command, go among the masses and together with them carry on the Cultural Revolution in a better way." See *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (*Mao Zedong's Manuscripts after Liberation*), vol. 12 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1998), 158. The demonstrations of 1966 deserve to be investigated beyond the "charismatic" image that they obviously bear.
- 10 As told above (see note 6), both the Beida factions had the same name, "New Beida," but were distinguished by the label in parentheses: "New Beida (Commune)" and "New Beida (Jinggangshan)." Mao remarked sarcastically that, merely at the level of the signifier, they were imitating the specification "Bolshevik" in parentheses in the title of the Russian Communist Party, to distinguish it from the "Menshevik" Communist Party.
- 11 *Tanhua*, 688.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 688–89.
- 13 See *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, 648.
- 14 The quoted volume of Marie-Claire Bergère summarizes the current opinion in the specialized historiography. This is also a recurrent judgment in memoirs of the Red Guards, especially among the most radical ones. See, for instance, Hua Linshan, *Les années rouges* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).
- 15 *Tanhua*, 689.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 707–9.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 689.
- 18 A reconstruction of the factional contradictions at Qinghua, based on interviews with the participants, may be found in Joel Andreas, "Political and Cultural Capital as Axes of Contention in Student Factional Conflict during the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Theory and Society* 31 (2002): 463–519.
- 19 *Tanhua*, 690.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 This is another historical reference, which here seems to have only a proverbial meaning, to the military revolts that marked the fall of the Han dynasty between the 2nd and the 3rd centuries BC.
- 22 *Tanhua*, 700–702.
- 23 Tan Houlan seemed not to have any special reason to oppose Jiang Qing, who during the meeting recalls an episode in which she had helped her. However, because of Tan's association with the Earth faction, she was allied with the Beida Jinggangshan (those who wanted "to fry" Jiang Qing) that was hostile to the Central Group (as was also the case of Qinghua April 14th). According to Jiang Qing's words, the opponents to Tan at the Normal University (those whom Tan had imprisoned in the dark without food and drink) seem to have also been hostile to the Central Group. The confused tangle of unprincipled alliances and enmities among factions was proportional to their political exhaustion.

- 24 The insistence with which the Central Group kept a distance from involvement in fights between Red Guard organizations can be explained as a reaction to tendencies manifested in the previous months inside the same organization. In September 1967, three of its members, Qi Benyu, Guang Feng, and Wang Li, had been removed, accused of stirring up the hostilities between the factions to strengthen their own position inside the Central Group. The episode marked a critical passage, but during this meeting, it was only marginally recalled.
- 25 As is well known, during the summer of 1967, the “Wuhan incident” showed the possibility of serious clashes between local military commands and the central military machine.
- 26 *Tanhua*, 699–700.
- 27 In fact, Guanxi’s factional armed struggle—one of the most self-destructive episodes of the Cultural Revolution—was dealt with in a very different way than that on Beijing’s campuses. The clashes were closed off not by disarmed workers, like those who entered in Qinghua, but by the People’s Liberation Army and the armed militia, which treated students much more brutally. In the above-quoted memoir, *Les années rouges*, Hua Linshan, who was a member of a Red Guard organization in Guangxi, gives a different version than that offered here by Mao and Lin Biao, and insists on the purely military form of suppression. He confirms, however, and not without nostalgia, the heroic-militaristic imaginary vision of politics that dominated among the Guangxi student factions in 1968.
- 28 *Tanhua*, 699.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 704.
- 30 Hinton, *La Guerra dei cento giorni*.
- 31 *Tanhua*, 711. According to Hinton, the attitude of April 14th was due to serious “military” difficulties in that moment and to the fact that they were on the point of being overwhelmed by the Jingtangshan. In a sense, they welcomed the workers as their rescuers. Those of the Jingtangshan who believed themselves to have almost reached a complete control of the situation were particularly fierce against the workers, whom they saw as stealing away their victory. This detail further confirms the total political groundlessness of the armed clashes at Qinghua.
- 32 *Tanhua*, 700–701.
- 33 The criticism of the theory of a “docile tool” was in those months one of the main polemical arguments against Liu Shaoqi’s most famous work, *Lun gonchandagyuang xiuyang* (*On the Cultivation of a Member of the Communist Party*), translated into English with the title *How to Be a Good Communist*, which in the past decades, and especially in the early 1960s, had constituted a fundamental ideological-moral breviary in the political pedagogy of the CCP.
- 34 A vivid narration of the disciplinary atmosphere in the Chinese schools in the early 1960s, especially the most prestigious ones, may be found in Rae Yang’s memoir *Spider Eaters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

- 35 *Tanhua*, 693.
- 36 Gao Yubao has been the author of a book of memories translated into several languages by the Foreign Languages Press.
- 37 *Tanhua*, 693.
- 38 Together with Claudia Pozzana, I have translated into Italian and commented on the works of these authors in two anthologies: *Nuovi poeti cinesi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995) and *Un'altra Cina: Poeti e narratori degli anni Novanta*, special issue of *In forma di Parole* 19, no. 1 (1999).
- 39 I have edited with Fabio Lanza and introduced a collection of texts of the young Mao on education in the May Fourth years, among which those on the Hunan self-study university are the most remarkable. See Mao Zedong, *Inventare una scuola: Scritti giovanili sull'educazione* (*Inventing a School: Early Writings on Education*) (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1996). Chinese texts are collected in *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao* (Changsha: Hunan Chubanshe, 1990). For an English version, see *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949*, ed. Stuart R. Schram, vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1992).
- 40 I have analyzed the inventiveness of educational policies from the May Fourth to the Yan'an period in chapters 5–8 of my book *Le rovine del mandato: La modernizzazione politica dell'educazione e della cultura cinesi* (*The Ruins of the Mandate: The Political Modernization of Education and Culture in China*) (Milan: Angeli, 1985).
- 41 Jiang was cited here in the sarcastic sense of *fanmian jiaoyuan*, or “teacher in negative,” which was one of the favorite expressions of the Maoists in those years.
- 42 *Tanhua*, 705–6.
- 43 “Mao zhuxi guanyu zhizhi wudou wenti de zhishi jingshen yaodian” (“Basic Points of the Directives of Chairman Mao on the Cessation of the Armed Struggle”), reproduced in “*Wenhua da geming*” *yanjiu ziliao* (*Material for the Study of the “Great Cultural Revolution”*), vol. 2 (Beijing: Guofang Daxue, 1988), 153–54. The document that resumes the main passages of the above-cited interventions of Mao and Lin Biao was written under the supervision of a member of the Central Group, Xie Fuzhi, and was signed by all five leaders of the Red Guards. On this episode, see Wang Nianyi, *Da dongluan de nian dai* (*The Years of the Great Disorder*) (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), 302–3.
- 44 Some interviews done by William Hinton with the workers who attended the demonstration are remarkable.
- 45 We can appraise that farsightedness today, when the depreciation of the worker job, in China as elsewhere, is the base of the depreciation of the intellectual job. It should be recalled that during the 1980s a basic and even explicit topic of the Chinese social consensus was that the intellectual job would have regained prestige again only through the devaluation of worker's job, not to mention that of the peasants.
- 46 Alessandro Russo, “The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution,” in *New Asian Marxisms*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 311–32, originally published in *positions* 6 (1998): 179–202.

- 47 I have discussed the question of the “radical negation” in my paper “How to Translate Cultural Revolution?” (presented at the conference “Translating Universals: Theory Moves Across Asia,” University of California, Los Angeles, January 21–22, 2005), forthcoming in a volume edited by Michael Bourdagh and John Duncan.
- 48 Russo, “Probable Defeat.”
- 49 The performance was held on March 10, 2002. The actors were Marina Pitta (Jiang Qing), Roberto Mantovani (Chairman), Alessandro Tampieri (Han Aijing), Luisa Vitali (Nie Yuanzi), Franco Laffi (Lin Biao), and the students of the theatrical school run by the Teatro dei Dispersi. During three short interruptions, roughly corresponding to the subdivision of the present article, the director and I sat in a corner of the stage and discussed some introductory questions.
- 50 Marc Bloch, *Apologia della storia*, trans. C. Pisciogedda (Torino: Einaudi, 1969), 56; originally published as *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien (A Defense of the Historian Craft)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954).
- 51 A final remark or, better, a note for further research. The record of the “conclusive scene” is not an archival exception. Other records of talks, meetings, and face-to-face encounters between groups of Red Guards and party leaders are disseminated in the immense and still largely unexplored mass of publications of the Red Guards. Moreover, the transcripts of political dialogues are not limited to the Cultural Revolution period, and they probably should be seen as a peculiar tradition in modern Chinese politics that traces back at least to the May Fourth and may have much older roots. The best known, for obvious reasons, are the records of talks and meetings involving Mao Zedong: as for instance the meetings of the *Xin min xuehui* (Society of the New People) in the May Fourth period, compiled by Mao himself, reproduced in *Xin min xuehui ziliao (Materials on the Society of the New People)* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1980); the transcripts by Li Rui of the face-to-face disputes between Mao and Peng Dehuai at the Lushan conference of 1959 (*Lushan huiyi shilu [The True Records of the Lushan Conference]* [Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1999]); and various of Mao’s talks with other central leaders in the 1950s and 1960s collected in the above-quoted *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* and in other Red Guard publications. Two editions of Mao’s texts in English are based on these sources: *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed: Talks and Letters, 1956–71*, ed. Stuart Schram (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1974); Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). In the introduction to the latter, Benjamin I. Schwartz observed that the style of Mao’s transcribed conversations is reminiscent of that of university departmental meetings. This should be considered, however, as an excessive attachment, on the part of Schwartz, to his academic workplace. In fact, few people would have felt the need to give large distribution to the accurate transcript of such bureaucratic exchanges; and as far as department meetings are concerned, most participants would rather forget what has been

said. On the contrary, these reports of political discussions are a transcript of subjective enunciations. The recurrence of this kind of text in modern China, to the point that they almost constitute a minor literary genre, shows the importance attributed to the declarations in political situations. In fact, the model of this genre can be traced back to the famous classical *Yan tie lun* (*Dispute on the Salt and the Iron*), recording a dispute in 81 BC between Confucian scholars and Legalist ministers around the basic policies of the Han state.