

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF BLOOD LINEAGE THEORY

BY YONGYI SONG

One of the most destructive debates of the Cultural Revolution period was over whether China should be run by those who had demonstrated their abilities, or by those who had the appropriate revolutionary pedigree. This debate, which originated among China's students, transformed a generation, and its influence can still be seen in the structure of China's power elite today.

During the Cultural Revolution, a critical and long-lasting debate arose between the blood lineage theory (*xuetong lun*), promoted by a number of children of high-ranking officials, and the egalitarian principles espoused in Yu Luoke's essay, "On Family Background" (*chushen lun*), and supported by ordinary students. Originating on high school and university campuses, the debate quickly spread and ignited Chinese society at large. Supported by Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), blood lineage theory spurred the rise of the Red Guard movement and the nationwide red terror that characterized the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. The subsequent appearance of "On Family Background" evidenced people's growing resistance and, ultimately, their demands for equality and human rights.

Although this debate has received considerable coverage in publications on the history of the Cultural Revolution by Chinese researchers and scholars,¹ it has received only very limited attention in works by Western scholars.² This contrast may derive from the fact that Yu Luoke's central point, "Every youth [regardless of background] is equal"³ has long been taken for granted in the West. It may also have resulted from the limited extent to which the relevant original texts have been translated into English.⁴ However, even with the passage of nearly forty years, and the wide acceptance, at least in theory, of Yu Luoke's central tenet in China, the debate reveals a fundamental conflict between the masses and the privileged class, and between citizens' rights and dictatorship, that continues in China today. For that reason, the blood lineage debate and its lasting reverberations deserve serious attention as an integral part of China's political heritage.

Blood lineage theory and the class line couplet

Blood lineage theory was actually a radicalized version of the Party's "class line" (*jieji luxian*) that came into being at the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and that had subsequently gained wide acceptance in Chinese society. The emergence of blood lineage theory coincided with the rise of the Red Guard movement and its attendant violence during the summer of 1966, and can be traced back to two primary documents. One was the "class line couplet" that first appeared as a big-character poster produced by the Red Guards of the Attached High School of Beijing Aeronautic College on July 29, 1966: "If the father is a hero, the son is a good fellow; if the father is a reactionary, the son is a good-for-nothing—it is basically like this" (*laozi yinxiong er houhan, laozi fandong er hundan, jiben yuci*).⁵

The second was the essay "The Born-Reds Have Stood Up!" (*zilai hongmen zanqilai!*), which circulated widely on the campuses of Beijing middle schools in early July 1966 as the organizational principle of the Red Guards. Created by members of the Red Flag Battle Group of the Attached High School of Peking University, one of the founders of the Red Guard movement, the term "Born-Reds" (*zilai hong*) provided justification for the special political privileges enjoyed by some students. So-called "Born-Reds," broadly defined as "born under the red flag and raised in the red military family environment," considered themselves as having been "fully nurtured by red revolutionary education since our childhood."⁶ The obvious question that comes to mind is, why were these children of high-ranking officials demanding political privileges at the onset of the Cultural Revolution? Had they not already enjoyed many political, social and educational privileges before the Cultural Revolution?

The answer is a resounding "Yes." Since 1949, the leaders of the CCP, like the feudal rulers they routinely decried, had done their utmost to prepare their offspring as heirs to their rule and successors to their power. Creation of the so-called "proletarian class line" helped them legitimize the classification of their own offspring as first-class citizens while discriminating against young people with so-called bad family backgrounds.⁷ Another important essay of blood lineage theory, "Long Live the Proletarian Class Line,"⁸ by another founding organization of the Red Guard movement, at the Attached High School of Tsinghua University (Qi Xiangdong), states that "class line did not fall from the sky; it was earned by the

hard struggles and sacrifices of our fathers and elder brothers who shed their blood and laid down their lives. . . . The class line stems from the blood and sweat of the previous generations. We must carry it on and never lose it.”⁹

Proletarian class line legitimized the classification of officials’ offspring as first-class citizens while discriminating against young people with so-called bad family backgrounds

However, since CCP ideology had always claimed that its ultimate goals were to “work wholeheartedly for the benefit of the majority of the people in China and the whole world” and to “liberate all humanity,”¹⁰ its leaders could not publicly advocate and build a feudal hereditary system for their children. They tried to resolve this dilemma by disguising the discriminatory class line as “laying stress on one’s behavior” (*chong zai biao xian*). In 1965, the Chinese Communist Youth League, which often served as a vehicle through which the CCP leadership conveyed their orders and political messages, tactfully summed up class line in the following way: “First, we think class status [family background] matters; second, we do not base everything on class status; and third, we lay stress on one’s behavior.”¹¹ Not only did this definition deliberately confuse people’s class status with their family backgrounds, but the CCP had never fully implemented “laying stress on one’s behavior.” In short, it was only a subtle version of class line created to gloss over the discriminatory nature of an important Party policy that directly affected the fate of tens of millions of Chinese youth.

In any case, this tactfully-crafted definition of class line was neither understood nor embraced by some radical children of high-ranking officials who were actually seeking Born-Red status, i.e., an inherent right to power and privilege. The traditional education system, where meritocracy played a role, was not yet totally destroyed before 1966, and children of officials often found themselves competing with, and all too often outperformed by, children of other family backgrounds, particularly in the national college entrance examination. This not only offended their sense of superiority, but also adversely affected their prospects for a privileged life. China’s higher education system had developed very slowly between 1949 and the eve of the Cultural Revolution; according to official statistics, only 9.7 (1964) and 9.3 (1965) out of every 10,000 Chinese had the opportunity for higher education, and the average rate of high school graduates entering colleges was only around 0.3 percent.¹² The severe shortfall in opportunities for higher education exacerbated the concerns of some radical children of high-ranking officials regarding their chances of entering college.

These students retaliated by creating a political myth that portrayed them as victims of the pre-Cultural Revolution educational system. They complained, “We Born-Reds gasped for breath under the suppression of the cow ghosts and snake demons [teachers and school administrators], and bourgeois bastards [children with bad family backgrounds] in schools.”¹³

In his essay “What Does the Disturbance of the ‘United Action Committee’ Reveal?” (*liandong di saolun suomingle shenmo?*), Yu Luoke aptly pointed out that these bogus victims had actually received favorable treatment from the school authorities and the old education system because of their politically and materially privileged status. As a former student at the Attached High School of Tsinghua University recalled, “The Party leaders in Beijing’s elite high schools all feared being viewed as not heavily favoring the children of high-ranking officials, since it would be a serious reflection of their class stand in the political culture of the early 1960s.” Some school administrators even “became accustomed to taking their cues from the children of high-ranking officials before they did anything on campus.”¹⁴

But it was Mao Zedong who provided the ideological support and justification for the removal of academic roadblocks for the children of high-ranking officials and further encouraged their radicalism. A few years before the social upheavals erupted in 1966, Mao reintroduced and intensified his class struggle theory, and placed high hopes on the children of high-ranking officials for implementation of his so-called “educational reforms.” From 1964 to 1965, Mao had seven conversations with his nephew Mao Yuanxin and niece Wang Hairong, both college students at that time, in which he affirmed the role of class line in college admissions and encouraged children of high-ranking officials to oppose the traditional education system. In one of his conversations with Wang Hairong, Mao commended a son of a high-ranking official from Wang’s college who refused to apply himself to rigorous academic work and willfully rebelled against the existing education system.¹⁵ Mao openly rallied students to his political campaigns with the incendiary statement, “Class struggle is the major course for all of you.”¹⁶

Mao’s remarks swiftly circulated among the children of Beijing’s Party elites. A former student recently recalled another “secret directive” in which Mao made the following remark: “The political performance of the children of revolutionary cadres in schools can only be rated as second-class, but students with bad family backgrounds have performed very well. However, no matter how well they have performed, revolutionary tasks cannot be put on their shoulders.”¹⁷ This directive not only bolstered the claims of inherent privilege on the part of children of revolutionary cadres, but also deepened their prejudice against schoolmates from other family backgrounds.

Encouraged and emboldened by Mao’s call, a number of secret and radical student groups comprised of children of high-ranking officials sprang up and spread throughout elite high schools and universities in Beijing shortly before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. An example was the “educational reform group” of the Attached High School of Tsinghua University,¹⁸ which became the predecessor of the Red Guards. In 1964, a similar student group at Beijing No. 4 Middle School launched a students’ strike for “educational reform” in which they did away with examinations and “strictly implemented the class line in schools.”¹⁹ As the Cultural Revolution erupted, it was this same group of students who wrote a letter to the CCP Central Committee calling for the abolition of the national college entrance examination so as to “strictly imple-

ment class line,”²⁰ thereby dismantling the last remnants of the meritocracy system.

On July 24, 1966, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued an official document abolishing the national college entrance examination. This document called for implementation of “the Party’s class line” in the admission process, e.g., “giving admission priority to children of workers, poor and lower-middle class peasants, revolutionary cadres, revolutionary military personnel, revolutionary martyrs and other working class people.” At the same time, the document stressed that “children from exploiting families should undergo strict political screening; admissions given to them should be limited.”²¹

The essay “The Born-Reds have Stood Up” subtly voiced the desire for a hereditary system through the establishment of the Red Guards: “Sons will justifiably succeed to the power seized by their fathers’ generation. This is called passing it on from generation to generation.” However, implementation of this permanent system of discrimination developed into a campaign of red terror; temples and museums were desecrated, books and paintings burned, homes of the so-called “Black-Seven-Categories” invaded and ransacked, and students and teachers with bad family backgrounds became “the secondary target of the proletarian dictatorship.”²²

It is important to note that blood lineage theory was soon supported and exploited as a political weapon by all factions in the CCP, whether it was Mao and his ultra-left colleagues, or the so-called “bourgeoisie reactionary line” (*zican jieji fandong luxian*) ostensibly headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. No sooner had the Cultural Revolution broken out in the summer of 1966 than Liu and Deng unleashed hordes of work groups to various campuses to keep the movement under control. At the same time, on June 22, 1966, Deng told his son, Deng Pufang, a leader of a secret radical student group at Peking University, “It is the right direction for children of revolutionary cadres, workers and peasants to hold power.”²³ Blood lineage theory provided a new enemy for the Mao and Liu-Deng factions to attack jointly instead of fighting each other.

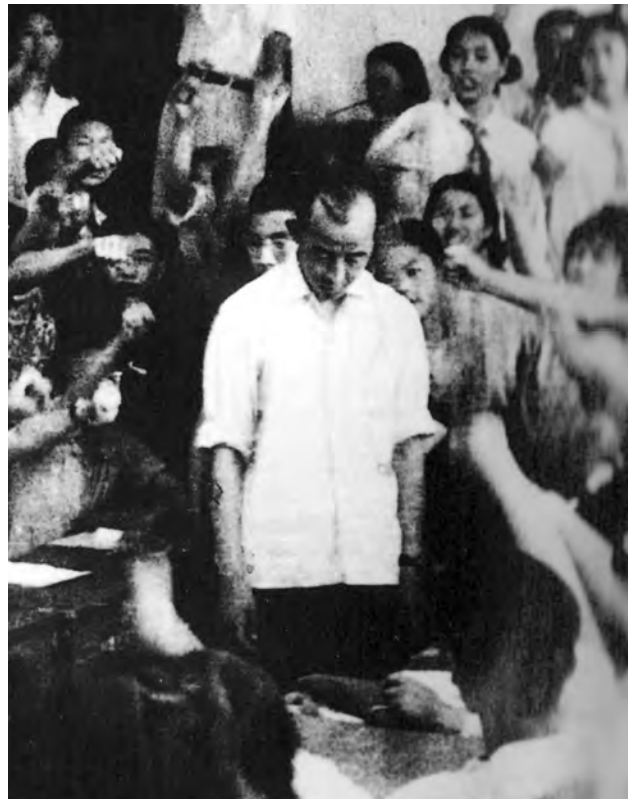
One of the main strategies employed by the work groups stationed at various schools was to incite one group of students against the other, i.e., to direct the Born-Reds to assault the “Born-Blacks” (*zilai hei*), students and teachers with bad family backgrounds. This strategy was spearheaded by Tan Lifu that same year in his “Speech at the August 20 Debate.” As the son of a high-ranking official and a blood lineage theorist from Beijing Industrial University, Tan defended the work group for class line and called for a new war on students and teachers with bad family backgrounds: “First we will struggle against you; we will struggle against you east and west, north and south until you betray your families and remold your ideology.”

With support from the work group, Tan and Liu Jing, the son of another high-ranking official, put out a big-character poster entitled, “A Discussion Stimulated by the Couplet,”²⁴ in which they suggested that the class line couplet could be “refined into policies and become the content of future Party and state documents.” Millions of copies of Tan’s speech, printed by work groups and local Party officials, soon found their way to campuses all over China, and its enthusiastic embrace at all levels of

government helped Party officials survive the political storm at the expense of countless innocent people who became victims of violence inspired and endorsed by the message in Tan’s speech. The speech catapulted Tan into instant political stardom, but subsequently his association with the couplet and blood lineage theory became such a liability that he changed his name immediately after the Cultural Revolution.²⁵

Mao and the members of his inner circle all either explicitly supported blood lineage theory or acquiesced to the red terror it incited. Even when allowing that the theory was “untactful,” they would always emphasize that it basically matched the Party’s class line. On August 1, 1966, during a meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG), core member Guan Feng said of the class line couplet, “I think its fundamental goal is good for implementing the Party’s class line and for demanding that work groups rely on children of workers, peasants and revolutionary cadres.”²⁶ On August 6, when Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng attended a mass debate on the couplet in Beijing’s Tianqiao Theater, a student asked them about their position on the couplet. Jiang replied that she agreed with the theory in principle, but that the couplet stemmed from a feudal figure, Dou Erdun, and “needed some revision.” Kang Sheng simply lauded the advocates of this theory as “fighting for Mao Zedong’s class line,” and added, “I admire you very much.”²⁷

Closer scrutiny of the antagonistic factions in the CCP leadership vis-à-vis their attitudes towards blood lineage theory presents an interesting phenomenon. On the one hand, the factions were engaged in a life-and-death struggle against each



Red Guards criticize principal of Tsinghua University Attached High School. Photo courtesy of Yang Kelin, Museum of the Cultural Revolution.

other, while on the other hand, they shared an almost identical view on blood lineage theory. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that both factions were comprised largely of pseudo-communists and opportunists whose primary concern was serving or protecting their own interest instead of that of the “majority of the people in China and the whole world.” In any case, Mao’s promotion and intensification of his class struggle theory in the early and middle 1960s, as well as the strong desire of radical students to establish their institutionalized Born-Red successor status, were instrumental in the violent implementation of blood lineage theory during the early stage of the Cultural Revolution.

Resistance to blood lineage theory

Although blood lineage theory was never accepted by the vast majority of students on the Beijing campuses where it emerged, resistance to it was initially very weak, and only built up to a strong and concerted nationwide effort a year later. Broadly speaking, the blood lineage debate underwent three major stages of development.

The first stage of debate occurred from June to August 1966, which saw the rise of the Red Guards and the red terror in Beijing. This first round of debate was provoked by some Born-Reds with a view to overwhelming the opposition and using their political advantages to force their inherent privileged status on the Born-Blacks. Mou Zhijing, at that time a student at Beijing No. 4 Middle School who opposed the theory, gives the following description of public debates on blood lineage theory

in some middle schools: “As soon as the couplet was put out, it would ignite a major debate. One day I went to the Central Music Conservatory to attend a debate where speakers argued passionately. However, most of them were advocates of the couplet.” In describing another debate that took place in his classroom, Mou writes: “The Red Guards held a class meeting and shouted: ‘Anyone with a bad family background who dares to say he is not a cur, stand up!’ In fact, no classmates with bad family backgrounds dared to stand up at that time.”²⁸

In analyzing more extensive debates such as the one held at Beijing Tianqiao Theater on August 5, some Chinese scholars note: “Since the Red Guards who enthusiastically supported the couplet had full control of the stage for the debate, they made good use of the occasion to propagate the blood lineage theory. The unfortunate consequence was that soon after this debate, supporters of blood lineage theory stormed into Chinese society and threw it into greater turmoil.”²⁹ This consequence was also evident in the August 20 debate at Beijing Industrial University, where Tan Lifu’s speech encountered no significant challenge from his opposition, and became an instrument for Party leaders to spread the theory across the country. Worse still, Zheng Yi, one of the countless victims of this theory, relates how the red terror also caused “widespread degeneration of morals on the part of the victims.” He notes that during the terror-filled days of Red August, some students with bad family backgrounds not only belittled themselves as “curs” (*gouzaizi*) but also actively participated in beating other “curs,” sometimes even their own parents.³⁰



A husband and wife involved in cultural work subjected to criticism in Inner Mongolia. Photo: Guo Benchu

It was not difficult to explain why blood lineage theory achieved great success during the first stage of the debate. First, its opponents had no alternative theory with which to counter it. By the time the Cultural Revolution broke out, most people had already been subjected to the CCP's political indoctrination and class line discrimination for so long that they had largely internalized their "inferior" political status. The only theoretical basis to which people with bad family backgrounds could cling was "laying stress on one's behavior," which the CCP had shown no real evidence of practicing in good faith.

Second, June to October 1966 was a honeymoon period for the old Red Guards³¹ and the Party Central. Antagonistic factions within the Party supported or acquiesced to the blood lineage theory in order to exploit radical youth for their political ends. Mao's review of the Old Red Guard parade in Tiananmen Square on August 18 sent an especially strong and clear signal that the Old Red Guards had Mao's blessings as representatives of the "new revolution." Since "revolution" was virtually the only cause held sacred by that generation, who would dare challenge the justification of the new revolution and those who represented it?

Last but not least, the extreme violence and ruthless massacres committed in the name of blood lineage effectively silenced any would-be opposition and resistance. During the terrifying Red August, many fervent Red Guards, with the authorization, assistance or acquiescence of the police, beat 1,772 innocent civilians to death in Beijing alone, and expelled members of nearly 9,000 Beijing households to the remote countryside. The vast majority of the victims were members of the so-called "Black-Seven-Categories" (*hei qi lei*) and their children.³² In the face of such brutal atrocities, any challenge to the unbridled, government-sanctioned power of the Old Red Guards would have served as an invitation to torture or even death.

A case in point was the tragic death of a high-school student, Wang Guanghua, as described in "What Does the Disturbance of the 'United Action Committee' Reveal?" A Beijing student with a bad family background, Wang was tortured to death for taking part in the then very popular Great Networking (*da chuanlian*)³³ in violation of a ban on participation by Born-Blacks set by the Capital Red Guards West City District Pickets.

Under such a deterrent force of terror, it is not hard to understand why most youths with bad family backgrounds became discouraged and subdued during the first stage of the debate and even demeaned themselves. Unfortunately, their passivity only served to incite the Born-Reds to even more violent acts in the name of implementing the blood lineage theory.

During the second stage of the debate, from September to December 1966, history took an unexpected turn. As mentioned before, Mao and his ultra-left cohorts viewed the violent acts of the Old Red Guards against their school principals and teachers as a legitimate means of transforming an education system that Mao deemed to be run by his rivals. However, the real targets of Mao's Cultural Revolution went far beyond intellectuals and bureaucrats at the grassroots level. As the power struggle within the CCP intensified and continued into September and October, it became evident that Mao's purge

had shifted primarily to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, along with ninety-five percent of the Party's top officials, many of whom were the parents of the Old Red Guards and the unmistakable source of their special privileges. Nearly all of the Born-Reds found themselves transformed to Born-Blacks virtually overnight as their parents were suddenly labeled members of the "Black Gang" (*hei bang*) or "Capitalist-roaders within the Party" (*dangnei zhouzipai*).

Some students with bad family backgrounds actively participated in beating other "curs," sometimes even their own parents.

In order to protect their vested interests and help their parents survive Mao's purge, these radical youths quickly turned into conservatives siding with the Liu and Deng camp, ultimately leading to a clash between this group and Mao and his inner circle. The Old Red Guards soon found themselves the target of the revolution they had so fervently supported just a few months before, while the Rebel Red Guards, students from "red" and "not-so-red" backgrounds such as the Third Headquarters of Capital Red Guards, soon became the new favorites and henchmen of Mao and the CCRG.

The blood lineage theory came under direct criticism by the Party Central for the first time on October 16 at the Party Central working meeting, when Chen Boda, the head of the CCRG, remarked, "A theory of 'Born-Red' became very popular recently. Those who advanced this fallacy were actually the ones who had attacked and edged out the children of workers and peasants before. By exploiting the class feelings of youth with worker and peasant family backgrounds and the naivety of other students, they confused the students and encouraged them to present the couplet, 'If the father is a hero, the son is a good fellow.' In fact, this is the reactionary blood lineage theory of the exploiting class. The feudal landlord class used to advocate such a blood lineage theory as 'Dragons beget dragons, phoenixes beget phoenixes, and burglars' children learn how to break into houses.' This is completely against Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought. It is utter historical idealism. It is absolutely against Marxist class analysis."³⁴ But Chen's condemnation of blood lineage theory came too late to undo the red terror of the previous months during which tens of thousands of innocent lives had been lost. It is important to note that this same Chen Boda had only two months before agreed with the couplet, saying, "It is true that 'it is basically like that,'" although he suggested "it needed some subtle revisions."³⁵

Not only did Chen's condemnation come too late, but it came more as an effort to attack Mao's rivals within the Party than as a sincere attempt to rid society of the injustice and discrimination arising from blood lineage theory. While Chen denounced "those who advanced this fallacy," he implied that Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and senior officials associated with them were to blame for the support the radical youths

received. For the same reason, Chen also accused Tan Lifu, the student theorist of the blood lineage theory, of opposing the Cultural Revolution. However, Chen conveniently forgot two important historical facts: 1) It was Mao who gave vital support to those radical young militants during the earlier months of the Cultural Revolution; and 2) It was the Party's longstanding class line that gave rise to the Old Red Guards. On Mao's instructions, Chen's speech was distributed to every campus, giving opponents of the blood lineage theory a great opportunity to strike back at the Born-Reds.

Mass criticism of Tan Lifu on campuses across China was one of the main characteristics of the second stage of the debate on blood lineage theory. Thousands of big-character posters denounced Tan, but the main focus of the criticism was on his "reactionary political behavior," such as defending work groups and the Liu-Deng faction. Articles attacking Tan's promotion of blood lineage theory were strikingly similar in their logic and approach to the campaign they purported to oppose. For instance, some tried to prove that Tan's family background was not "Red" but "Black," which caused him to oppose the Cultural Revolution.³⁶ Ironically, the theoretical basis for most of these writings was the Party's class line, which was in itself a more subtle version of the blood lineage theory.

During this stage, the criticism was limited to school campuses and led not by the victims of the theory but mainly by the Rebel Red Guards, a great many of whom had supported the blood lineage theory to varying degrees. This significantly limited the scope and extent of their criticism of Tan.

Reeling from their abandonment by Mao and the CCRG, the children of former senior CCP officials began to respond and act. On December 15, they organized their own resistance organization, known as the United Action Committee (*lianhe xingdong weiyuanhui*), to openly defend blood lineage theory in defiance of Mao and CCRG. It was the United Action Committee's unflinching position that led to the next round of debate.

Calls for equality and human rights

It was Yu Luoke's essay "On Family Background" that characterized and dominated the final stage of the debate from January to May 1967 with its demands for equality and human rights. This monumental essay inspired a new and larger response from both sides of the debate, enjoyed the widest circulation, and gained an enduring influence. In the course of the debate, Yu wrote about ten essays building up systematic theories on this significant subject.

Yu was a young apprentice at the People's Machine Factory of Beijing when the Cultural Revolution erupted. Yu's father, who had trained as an engineer in Japan and returned to China in the 1930s, was branded a "Rightist" in 1957. Because of his family background, Yu was denied college education despite his outstanding academic performance.

During the Red Terror in August 1966, Yu witnessed members of the Old Red Guards justifying their torture and murder of innocent people on the basis of blood lineage theory. In the absence of any serious challenge to the theory, Yu employed his profound knowledge of Western philosophy and Chinese history to write "On Family Background" as a means of clarifying

The Scars of Youth

BY SONG XIAOYING

A woman who grew up during the Cultural Revolution recalls how the events of that period shaped the person she became.

The social and historical environment of a person's early years can leave an indelible impression that lasts a lifetime.

I was born in the 1960s, so from my earliest childhood my spiritual growth was influenced by the Land Reform Movement, the Cultural Revolution and other political movements of that time.

At that time, my mother, who had been working in a match factory in the city, was sent down to my father's village to work the fields. The village was engaged in a heated struggle against landlords. My grandfather was subjected to all-day struggle sessions at the village elementary school because his family once owned a few mu of land, and also because while he was a teacher he had supposedly signed some document related to the Young Men's Three Principles Association.¹ For the same reason, an uncle who was working in Beijing at the time was also sent down to work in the village.

The revolutionary groups liked to stir up conflicts between family members, and even some descendants of landlords became caught up in the notion that "profit is criminal, revolt is reasonable." At the end of one struggle session, my uncle climbed onto the stage and hit his father, leading to my grandfather's tragic suicide. I remember that my dad came back from the city, but it turned out that people classified as both landlords and counterrevolutionaries were not allowed a proper burial ceremony. I remember that the shroud my grandfather was wrapped in was a bit short, exposing his thin, white toes. This was how he was buried, and those of us in his family couldn't cry, because he had been charged with a new crime of "alienating himself from the people, deserving of 10,000 deaths."

At that time, I was in the village elementary school, and every day I would pass by a forest of big-character posters, some of which were about members of my own family. Everyone in my family had hated my grandfather, and no one would bring him food. Because my mother was a city dweller, she didn't understand the countryside, and she had twice let my younger brother bring my grandfather food, for which she was labeled a "counterrevolutionary element sympathizer." I also saw a cadre hang another big-character poster stating something to the effect that "counterrevolutionary family member XXX (my mother's name) always sings coun-

theoretical truth.³⁷ Yu and his brother, Yu Luowen, mimeographed a hundred copies of the essay and posted them on electric-wire poles in Beijing around the end of 1966, which attracted Mou Zhijing and other high school students who had opposed the blood lineage theory from the outset. Together, they revised this essay and finally published it on January 18, 1967 in the *Journal of Middle School Cultural Revolution* (*zhongxue wenge bao*), a widely circulated newspaper run by Yu and his supporters.

“On Family Background” immediately shook Chinese society to its core, touching the hearts and souls of millions of youths across the country. About 60,000 copies were sold within a week in Beijing alone and more than a million copies were reprinted nationwide. Support letters poured in from every corner of the country.³⁸ In Beijing alone, at least twenty Red Guard newspapers were involved in the debate, either supporting or opposing the essay.³⁹ Yu and his supporters took the initiative to organize or attend numerous public debates, some of them involving thousands of people. In spite of vehement attacks from all sides, their arguments always prevailed, and during the first six months of 1967, the bestselling newspapers for grassroots organizations were all embroiled in this debate.⁴⁰

“On Family Background” immediately shook Chinese society to its core.

Yu incisively and profoundly challenged his opponents on the following issues: First, under the CCP’s 17-year rule,⁴¹ who were the discriminators and who were discriminated against in the Chinese society, and why? Second, could class line and the dire consequences of blood lineage theory be justified? Third, were all people entitled to equal political and educational rights, regardless of family background?

Unlike the Old Red Guards and Rebel Red Guards, Yu, as a grassroots theorist, was not interested in the internal strife among the Party’s top echelon. While criticizing the blood lineage theory, he looked far beyond the school campuses and concentrated instead on its horrendous impact on the whole of Chinese society. The opening argument of “On Family Background” states: “The issue of family background has been a longstanding serious social problem” because people belonging to the Non-Red Five Categories “represent the absolute majority” of Chinese society.⁴²

In exploring theoretical truth, Yu first uncovered historical truth. While the proponents of the blood lineage theory repeated the myth of “the persecution of the children of revolutionary cadres, workers and peasants” during the 17-year rule, Yu provided a large quantity of information that showed that during this period the Born-Reds were actually discriminators against people with bad family backgrounds. He further noted that under this government-sanctioned system of discrimination, “A new privileged class has formed, followed by a new class that is discriminated against”; and, “Those from backgrounds of the so-called Black Seven Categories, namely ‘curs,’ have already become the secondary target of the proletarian dictatorship.”⁴³

Yu further observed that the creation of this myth was an attempt to “create a new privileged class in disguise under the

socialist system. It even attempts to create a reactionary caste system and a new oppression among the people themselves.” Moreover, Yu brought the Party to account: “Who are the victims in this unfair system? If things continue on like this, what would be the difference between those with bad family backgrounds and those living in caste systems such as the blacks in America, Sudras in India and Burakumin in Japan?”⁴⁴ Although Yu tactfully held the “revisionists” responsible for the blatant discriminations and the creation of the myth, the real target of his criticism was unmistakably the CCP and its class line. Not surprisingly, his essay was widely viewed as a serious indictment of the CCP-led government and as “the bravest writing since the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign.”⁴⁵ Just as his opponents in the debate such as the United Action Committee and the Old Red Guards had discovered, the purpose of “On Family Background” was actually to “revolt and overturn heaven.”⁴⁶

Denounced by millions of ordinary people, the young radicals did not dare to openly defend blood lineage theory in this round of debate. Instead, they retreated to the tactful version of blood lineage theory, the Party’s class line, and emphasized that the “family influence” of Born-Reds was superior to that of youths with bad family backgrounds. Yu refuted that view by demonstrating how “social influence exceeds family influence and can overcome family influence” through the brilliant and detailed exposition in his essay “A New Counteroffensive of the Reactionary Blood Lineage Theory—Refuting ‘The Big Poisonous Weed ‘On Family Backgrounds’ Must Be Torn Up by the Roots.’”⁴⁷ After laying bare the follies of his opponents’ arguments, Yu made the most important observation in this debate concerning the connection, or lack thereof, between one’s family background and his behavior: “Since family background is only related to family influence, and family influence occupies a place of little importance in one’s behavior, it is not difficult to reach the conclusion that there is minimal correlation between family background and behavior.”⁴⁸ It is especially worth noting that Yu also convincingly demonstrated the distinction between “class status” and “family background” on the basis of Marxism and Mao’s own theories, which further exposed the contradictory nature of the CCP’s class line. This tactic proved to be not only necessary but also highly effective.

While Yu was filled with righteous indignation when he examined and related the unspeakable tortures and murders committed in the name of the blood lineage theory, he did not allow himself to be bogged down at that emotional and personal level. Instead, he made a point of focusing on how and why blood lineage theory turned young radicals into cold-blooded perpetrators of inhumane acts. Throughout the debate, Yu and his friends were often insulted and even beaten by members of the Old Red Guards and the United Action Committee. However, Yu refused to lower himself to their level and firmly declined a friend’s plan to use personal attacks to rebuff the arguments of the Red Guards of the Attached High School of Tsinghua University. Instead, he concluded his essay with this entreaty: “We earnestly and sincerely urge those youngsters who are deceived by the theory of basing everything on family background not to feel insulted after reading our article. In fact, we have more compassion for you than we resent and detest

you. We had compassion for you when the bourgeois reactionary force gained the upper hand in some departments. What an impractical education you received in school! What a comfortable lifestyle you lived at home! What rubbish literary and artistic works you read! What hopelessly foolish thoughts and ridiculous ideas you have formed! What stupid mistakes you have made that you will regret all your lives!”⁴⁹

Among the millions of big-character posters and mass criticisms produced during the Cultural Revolution, Yu’s essays were probably the only ones that underscored human rights and equality in defiance of the strict prohibition against these words by Mao and the Party. Anyone who read “On Family Background” would have found its essence to be just one word: equality, in the sense of “Every youth is equal” and “We don’t recognize any right that is not achieved through one’s personal efforts.” Yu also laid a scathing indictment at the door of the Chinese government when he wrote, “All sorts of violations of human rights appeared, such as the cruel ‘taking out the roots,’ so-called ‘debates’ that are totally humiliating, body searches, degradation, detention and beating. Such violations became the means to disrupt the normal order of the lives of these youth and deprived them of their political rights, but they were all done in the name of ‘Super Mao Zedong Thought.’” In the end, the author passionately appealed to the public: “All oppressed revolutionary youth, rise up and fight brave battles!”⁵⁰

Apart from criticizing the blood lineage theory, Yu also offered remedies to the problems it caused. In his “On Chasm” (*tan hongyou*), Yu suggested “filling up the chasm” between

youth with different family backgrounds by emphasizing that “all youth, regardless of their family backgrounds, are entitled to equal political treatment. The equality among revolutionary comrades that we have talked about is not based on a tactical consideration. It should be a matter of course. Nobody can expect you to grant equality to others by making sacrifices and compromises while believing that you stand a head taller than others.”⁵¹

During this four-month debate, Yu displayed fiercely independent thought. He refused to use popular titles such as “combat team” for his independent study group, simply calling it “Family Background Study Group.” Aside from criticizing the blood lineage theory, he and his comrades were never involved in factional infighting. His opponents in the debate were formidable; they included not only the Old Red Guards but also Mao’s favorite new force, the Rebel Red Guards. Kuai Dafu, a well-known leader of the Beijing Rebel Red Guards, was so concerned about Yu’s writings and viewpoints that he used his power to restrict paper supply for the *Journal of Middle School Cultural Revolution*. He also dismissed the viewpoints of “On Family Background” as “not even worth refuting.”⁵² The significant impact of Yu’s essay also prompted a “public announcement” to be published in *Battlefield Dispatch* (*bingtuan zhanbao*), a mouthpiece of the Beijing Middle School Rebel Red Guards, which suggested outlawing the *Journal of Middle School Cultural Revolution* and denounced the Family Background Study Group as a “reactionary organization.”⁵³

On April 13, Qi Benyu, a core member of the CCRG, reviled



“What stupid mistakes you have made that you will regret all your lives!” Photo courtesy of Long Bow Group, Inc. www.morningsun.org.

“On Family Background” as “big poisonous weeds that misrepresented the Party’s class line and instigated youth with bad family backgrounds to attack the Party.”⁵⁴ The *Journal of Middle School Cultural Revolution* was banned in May 1967. On January 5, 1968, Yu himself was arrested by the Beijing Public Security Bureau, and his Family Background Study Group was declared a “Counterrevolutionary Clique” by the government. Yu was executed on March 5, 1970, at the age of 27. According to “internal information,” the decision to sentence him to death was made as a result of Mao’s instructions implemented by Zhou Enlai.⁵⁵ Nearly 300 of Yu’s supporters nationwide were also detained or persecuted to death. This significant debate about family background was silenced by shackles and bullets just as it reached its theoretical peak: a plea for equality and human rights.

The debate continues

In 1968, Mao exiled millions of young students to the countryside, including Red Guards of all factions who had outlived their usefulness for Mao and CCRG. Before they parted for their respective destinations, a leader of the Old Red Guards gave this unsolicited advice to a student leader with a bad family background who was a supporter of “On Family Background”: “You represent landlords, rich peasants, bad elements, counterrevolutionaries and capitalists; but we represent workers, peasants and revolutionary cadres. See you in twenty years!”⁵⁶ In his mind, the debate had not ended, and the Born-Reds were ultimately bound to rule China just as blood lineage theory predicted. A comment by another former member of the Old Red Guards was more straightforward: “We have a natural relationship with authority and power-holders in China. China’s future will certainly be like this: We will be the power-holders and you [youth with other family backgrounds] will do the basic work for us. . . . Don’t refuse to accept this fate. If you don’t believe it, we will see what happens in twenty years!”⁵⁷

Many Born-Reds have prospered under red-bureaucratic capitalism through involvement in corruption, abuse of power and looting of state-owned property.

What has happened in China since the Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976? Unfortunately, the advice and predictions quoted above have largely come true in today’s China. It is an open secret that in the 1980s and 1990s a sizable number of former Born-Reds became a significant part of the so-called “third echelon” and “fourth echelon” by virtue of their connections with the Party establishment. Under China’s ongoing economic reforms, many of them have also prospered under red-bureaucratic capitalism through involvement in corruption, abuse of power and de facto looting of state-owned property. Since the 1980s, such individuals have acquired notoriety in popular parlance as the “Princelings” (*taizidang*). From this perspective, the former Born-Reds have won the debate, as they have fulfilled the prophecy that they would eventually return as power holders because of their blood lineage.

However, history has demonstrated its impartiality to all

players. As these radical children of high-ranking officials have morphed into powerful modern-day high-ranking officials, ruthless capitalists or mercenary princelings, the Chinese people’s impression of them has also grown increasingly negative. The existence of this privileged class and the power it wields has once again debunked the CCP’s claim that its ultimate goals were to “work wholeheartedly for the benefit of the majority of the people in China and the whole world.” In addition, the rapid changes in China’s social, economic and political scenes have made it difficult or even counterproductive for the CCP to insist on class line in Chinese society. In 1979, the CCP issued a central document to officially abandon the practice of associating “bad family backgrounds” with the children of landlords and rich peasants.⁵⁸ Now, many of those who would have qualified as members of exploiting classes in the past are joining the CCP in droves to become members of the new exploiting class of bureaucrat entrepreneurs. On November 21, 1979, the Beijing Intermediate People’s Court ruled that Yu Luoke’s death was a “misjudged case” during the Cultural Revolution. Chinese are no longer labeled on the basis of “family background,” and the principles Yu espoused and promoted are now widely accepted throughout Chinese society. From this perspective, Yu and the supporters of “On Family Background” have won the debate.

Looking back on the history of the rise and fall of blood lineage theory, and the fall and rise of “On Family Background,” one might reach the conclusion that this heated debate manifested a fundamental conflict between the masses of ordinary people and a privileged class, and between citizens’ rights and dictatorship. As long as a privileged class and dictatorial government continue to rule China, similar debates and clashes are bound to continue, and Yu Luoke’s ardent desire for a fair, equal and just society will remain unfulfilled.

1. For instance, both Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao’s *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996) and Liu Guokai’s *A Brief Analysis of the Cultural Revolution*. Ed. Anita Chan. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1987) have devoted almost an entire chapter to this topic.
2. Some Western scholars have studied this theme in their works. See, for example, Gordon White, *The Politics of Class Origin: The Case of the Cultural Revolution* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1976); Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); Stanley Rosen’s *Red Guard Factionalism and the Cultural Revolution in Guangzhou (Canton)* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982) and Joel Andreas’ “Battling over political and cultural power during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (University of California, Los Angeles),” *Theory and Society* 31, 2002.
3. See Yu Luoke, “On Family Background,” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, (Summer 2001): 25.
4. Translation of some original texts on this subject began to emerge in 2001 with the publication of both Part I and Part II of *Heterodox Thoughts During the Cultural Revolution*, *Contemporary Chinese Thought* (Summer & Fall 2001) (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe).
5. The Mao Zedong Thought Study Group of Colleges and Middle Schools in the Capital (ed.), *Tian fan di fu kai er kang: Wu chan jie ji wen hua da ge ming da shi ji 1962.9–1967.10* (In Heroic Triumph Heaven and Earth Have Been Overturned: Chronicle of the Events in the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1962.9–1967.10), (Beijing, 1967), 43.
6. Song Yongyi and Sun Dajin. *Wen hua da ge ming he ta de yi duan si chao* (Heterodox Thoughts during the Cultural Revolution) (Hong Kong: Tian yuan shu wu, 1997), 83–5.

7. The term “bad family background” is a common expression in English writing on China. It means “bad according to the distorted standards of the time,” and should not be mistaken for a genuine moral judgment. It is a direct translation of a political term with a meaning very different from the original sense of the phrase.
8. Wuchan jieji jieji luxian wansui, July 1966.
9. Xu Xiao et al. ed. Yu Luoke: yi zuo yu hui yi (Yu Luoke: writings and memoirs) (Beijing: Zhongguo wen lian chu ban gong si, 1999), 135–40.
10. Mao Zedong, *Jian guo yi lai Mao Zedong wen gao* (Mao Zedong’s Writings since the Establishment of the People’s Republic of China), (Beijing: Zhong yang wen xian chu ban she, 1996), vol. 11, 85.
11. See *Zhongguo qing nian bao* (Journal of Chinese Youth) September 9, 1965.
12. See The State Bureau of Statistics. *Xin Zhongguo wu shi nian* (Fifty Years of New China) (Beijing: Guo jia tong ji chu ban she, 1999), 583.
13. Song and Sun, *Wen hua da ge ming he ta de yi duan si*, 83–5.
14. See Zhong Weiguang “Qing hua fu zhong hong wei bing xiao zu dan sheng ji shi” (The birth of the Red Guard group at the Attached High School of Tsinghua University) *Beijing Spring*, 9 (1996): 7–9.
15. See “A few conversations with Wang Hairong” (1964–1965), “A Conversation with Mao Yuanxin” (1964.2), and “A Conversation with Mao Yuanxin (II)” (1964.7) in Song, Yongyi, et al., ed. *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*. CD-ROM. (Hong Kong: Universities Service Centre for China Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002).
16. See Mao Zedong, *Jian guo yi lai Mao Zedong wen gao* (Mao Zedong’s Writings since the Establishment of the People’s Republic of China) (Beijing: Zhong yang wen xian chu ban she, 1996), vol. 11, 96.
17. Zhu Laozhong “Dui lian shi mo” (The whole story of the couplet), September 1, 2003. <[http:// people.freenet.de/chinatown/index.htm](http://people.freenet.de/chinatown/index.htm) >
18. See the interview with Luo Xiaohai in the film *The Morning Sun* directed by Carma Hilton (Boston: Longbow Inc. 2003).
19. See Lei Yu and Shi Yun “Kuang re, Huan mie , Pi pan” (Fanaticism, Disillusionment, and Criticism) *Youth Studies* (Beijing), 2 (1991): 30–31.
20. *People’s Daily*, June 18, 1966.
21. See “Circular of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council on reforming college admission,” *zhongfa* [66] 379 (June 24, 1966).
22. See “On Family Background,” 19.
23. See He Wei “Lao hong wei bing xu ping” (On Old Red Guards) *Chinese Intellectuals*, (Spring, 1986): 35.
24. *Cong duilun tanqi*, August 12 1966.
25. After the Cultural Revolution, Tan Lifu changed his original name to Tan Bin and served as the Deputy Director of the Palace Museum in Beijing.
26. Guan Feng, “Broadcast addresses to students by Guan Feng and others, delivered at the CCRG reception room” (1966.08.01) in Song, Yongyi, et al., ed. *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*. CD-ROM. (Hong Kong: Universities Service Centre for China Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002).
27. See “The Remarks of Jiang Qing, Wang Renzhong and Kang Sheng to Beijing Middle School students” (1966.8.6) in Song, Yongyi, et al., ed. *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*. CD-ROM.
28. Ya Yi, “Cong zhi shi zhe de liang xin chu fa: fang Mou Zhijing bo shi” (From An Intellectual’s Consciousness: Interview with Dr. Mou Zhijing), *Beijing Spring*, 6 (1996): 70.
29. Shi Huilai and Liu Xiao “Xue tong lun zai wen ge zhong de xin shui” (The rise and fall of the blood lineage theory during the Cultural Revolution) *Long Jiang Dang shi* (The Party History of Heilongjiang Province) 3 (1994): 16.
30. Zheng Yi “Qinghua fu zhong, hong wei bing yu wo” (The Red Guards of the Attached High School of Tsinghua University and I), *Beijing Spring*, 11 (1996): 31.
31. There existed two types of Red Guards during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. The first type was referred to as “Old Red Guards.” This type was comprised of high school students essentially from the families of high-ranking officials. Their main targets were the Four Olds and the Black-Seven-Categories and their violence and destruction were endorsed by Mao and CCRG in the summer of 1966. The second type of Red Guards was called “Rebel Red Guards.” This type was mostly comprised of students from both “red” and not-so-red family backgrounds. Their primary targets were the so-called capitalist-roaders within the Party and they were often used by Mao and CCRG to attack the Liu-Deng line during the campaign to criticize the bourgeois reactionary line in late 1966 and early 1967.
32. Wang Youqin “Terrorizing Classmates: Facts and Analyses,” *China Studies* (Hong Kong), 2 (1996): 104–5.
33. During the Great Networking in the summer and fall of 1966, Red Guards could ride on trains free of charge all over the country to practice “great revolutionary networking” or to pay homage to Mao in Beijing.
34. Chen Boda “Speech on the CCP’s Working Meeting” (1966.10.16) in Song, Yongyi, et al., ed. *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*. CD-ROM.
35. Chen Boda “Talk with Beijing Middle School Students” (1966.8.3), See Shi Huilai and Liu Xiao “Xue tong lun zai wen ge zhong de xin shui,” 16.
36. See *Dong fang hong* (you guan pi pan Tan lifu jiang hua cai liao zhuan ji) (The East is Red (Special issue to criticize Tan Lifu’s speech): Beijing gong ye da xue “Dong Fang Hong Gong She” bian yin, 1966.10.17: 26.
37. Yu was very familiar with Western philosophers from Plato to Rousseau. Among them, Rousseau’s Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men directly influenced Yu’s writing. See Yu Luowen. *Wo Jia* (My family) (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 2000), 51–99.
38. *Ibid.*, 83, 100.
39. Data have been chiefly drawn from *The New Edition of Red Guard Publications, Part I* (20 vols.) and *The New Edition of Red Guard Publications, Part II* (40 Vols.), (Oakton: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1999–2001).
40. Yu Luowen, *Wo Jia*, 93, 97.
41. The 17-year rule was a common expression referring to the period from 1949 when CCP took power to the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. In the view of Mao and his ultra-left colleagues, the “revisionists” were in charge of China during those 17 years, which constituted part of the reason for Mao launching the Cultural Revolution.
42. Yu Luoke “On Family Background,” 19.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, 17, 32.
45. Yu Luowen. *Wo Jia*, 85.
46. See Xu, Yu Luoke: yi zuo yu hui yi, 125–34.
47. “Fandong xuetonglun di xin fanpu—bo ‘da ducao’ (chushenlun) biesui lingen chanchu,” March 6, 1967.
48. Song and Sun. *Wen hua da ge ming he ta de yi duan si chao*, 189–206.
49. *Ibid.*, 158–9.
50. Yu, “On Family Background,” 24–5.
51. Song and Sun. *Wen hua da ge ming he ta de yi duan si chao*, 174–188.
52. Xu, Yu Luoke yi zuo yu hui yi, 242.
53. *Battlefield Dispatches* (Bing tuan zhan bao), March 20, 1967.
54. Mou Zhijing, “‘Chu shen lun’ he ‘Zhong xue wen ge bao’,” (“On Family Background” and the *Journal of Middle School Cultural Revolution*) in Yang Jianli ed. *Red Revolution and Black Rebellion*, (Boston: Foundation for China in the 21st Century, 1997), 174, and Xu, Yu Luoke yi zuo yu hui yi, 243.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
56. Zheng Yi “Qinghua fu zhong, hong wei bing yu wo,” 34.
57. *Ibid.*
58. See “Resolution of the CCP Central Committee concerning the removal of class-status labels for landlords and rich peasants and the determination of class status for children of landlords and rich peasants; *zhongfa* [79] 5 (January 11, 1979).”