

Cultural Revolution in Local Eyes: Class Struggle, Memory, and Rehabilitation

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Introduction

This book begins from a simple conviction: the Cultural Revolution looks different

when seen through local eyes. Rather than treating the decade as a single, uniform event moving inevitably from chaos to closure, the chapters that follow return to villages, schools, and factories to reconstruct how mass campaigns reshaped everyday life. By centering local archives and oral testimony, the narrative foregrounds textures of experience that grand histories often smooth away—shifts in neighborhood alliances, quiet negotiations on shop floors, and decisions taken at kitchen tables. What emerges is not an alternative story so much as a reframing: an account that holds national directives and local improvisations in the same frame.

The research rests on a diverse evidentiary base. County archives, commune records, factory logs, school registers, work-unit dossiers, and court case files provide administrative vantage points on classification, mobilization, and sanction. Equally crucial are oral histories gathered from retired teachers and cadres, technicians and line workers, village elders and those who were young rebels at the time. These testimonies illuminate the affective dimensions of policy—fear and pride, humiliation and solidarity—and explain why people made the choices they did. Triangulating between paper trails and living memory allows us to trace how official categories filtered into interpersonal networks and how those networks, in turn, bent or blunted policy on the ground.

Central to this study is the question of class struggle as lived practice. Labels assigned in dossiers did not simply reflect status; they organized opportunity and risk, shaped marriage prospects, and mapped who would speak and who would remain silent at public meetings. In schools, youth politics opened pathways to leadership for some while closing doors to further study for others. In factories, campaigns demanded that production serve politics, yet workers and technicians continually negotiated the boundaries between safety, efficiency, and ideological display. Across these settings, we see how mass mobilization was mediated by gender, age, ethnicity, and locality, generating patterns that seldom aligned neatly with metropolitan narratives.

The book also follows the long arc of memory. In homes and work-units, past struggles are preserved in fragments—saved notices and photographs, rumors that calcified into common sense, and stories told only to trusted listeners. Memory work is never merely backward-looking. It structures present-day dispositions toward authority and community, and it informs how families narrate success, misfortune, and moral worth to younger generations. By reading county gazetteers alongside private memoirs, and museum exhibits alongside household altars, we track how competing frameworks of remembrance coexist, overlap, and sometimes collide.

A major inflection point arrives with the years after 1976, when reconciliation and rehabilitation became imaginable, then institutionalized. Petition offices reopened old cases; committees reviewed dossiers; cadres and professionals were restored to posts; courtrooms and compensation schemes addressed specific harms while leaving others unacknowledged. The process brought relief and recognition to many, yet it

also exposed limits: bureaucratic backlogs, evidentiary gaps, and the uneven capacity of institutions to reckon with collective violence or diffuse responsibility. Rehabilitation redrew personal trajectories and reshaped communities, but it did not erase the social knowledge that campaigns had inscribed into relationships.

Methodologically, this is a microhistory of many sites rather than a single village study. The chapters move across regions and units to show variation while keeping a consistent analytic lens on how policies were enacted, contested, and remembered locally. The approach makes room for contingency and contradiction: similar directives could yield divergent outcomes depending on the ecology of a work-team, the authority of a school principal, or the alignments within a village lineage group. The goal is not to aggregate case studies into a national average but to illuminate processes that travel across contexts and the conditions under which they change.

Finally, a word on scope and voice. No archive is complete, and no interview is free from the compressions and occlusions of memory. Rather than treating these as defects to be corrected, the book treats them as historical facts in their own right—traces of how people have lived with the past. Where sources disagree, I make those tensions explicit and explain the choices behind interpretation. If the chapters sometimes slow down over a single document or linger on a quiet scene—a worker's ledger entry, a teacher's recollection of a morning assembly—it is because such moments bring into view the granular mechanisms by which campaigns entered daily life and the pathways through which rehabilitation and reconciliation later became possible.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Local: Archives, Testimony, and Microhistory

Every archive has a biography, and not all of them are dignified. The county archive in one central Chinese city where I spent several months occupied a converted granary on the edge of a canal. The air inside was thick with the particular smell of aging paper and, on humid days, the faint suggestion of mildew that no amount of charcoal braziers could fully dispel. Documents lay in stacks that had been re-sorted so many times that provenance was sometimes a matter of guesswork. A clerk with a cigarette balanced on the edge of a metal desk would wave me toward a carton labeled, in the tidy characters of a different hand, "Cultural Revolution — Miscellaneous." Inside, I found a requisition form for stage curtains, a list of households denied grain rations, a child's drawing of a train, and an accusation letter so water-damaged that entire paragraphs dissolved into brown smudges. The archive had survived, like most things during those years, by being useful to somebody and inconvenient to nobody else.

This chapter is about how sources like those found in that granary, and the voices of the people who lived through the events those sources record, form the evidentiary backbone of this book. It is also about the choices that any historian must make when standing in front of a carton of "miscellaneous" material. What you look for shapes what you find, and what you find shapes the story you can tell. By laying out the sources, the methods, and the interpretive decisions that underpin the chapters that follow, I want to give readers a sense of the raw material from which this account has been built, and an honest reckoning with its limits.

Microhistory, as an approach, emerged in part from dissatisfaction with the assumption that large events can only be understood through large-scale analysis. The Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, among others, argued in the 1970s and 1980s that a single trial record, a single village census, or a single merchant's correspondence could reveal structures of power, belief, and social organization that panoramic surveys tend to flatten. The claim was not that one village stands for the whole, but that careful attention to a particular place can expose the mechanisms by which broad forces become concrete experiences. When a directive issued in Beijing arrives in a township office, it does not arrive as an abstraction. It arrives on a specific desk, handled by a specific cadre, interpreted through the lens of local feuds, kinship networks, and available supplies. Microhistory tries to stay close to that desk.

The Cultural Revolution, which unfolded across a vast and diverse country between 1966 and 1976, might seem at first glance too sprawling for such an approach. The movement produced an enormous documentary record: central directives, provincial circulars, Red Guard pamphlets, radio broadcasts, wall posters photographed and catalogued by an earlier generation of China scholars. Yet much of that record documents intentions and pronouncements rather than implementation. To understand what actually happened — who was denounced, who was protected, how work continued or stopped, how families made decisions under duress — we need sources generated at the level where those things took place. That means county and commune archives, factory production logs, school enrollment records, and the memories of the people who filled out those forms or walked past those bulletin boards every morning.

County archives in China are unevenly preserved and unevenly accessible. Some date to the imperial period, and archivists in Republican-era yamens sometimes found themselves guarding boxes that had not been opened since the Qing. After 1949, new categories of records appeared: land reform classification files, cooperative account books, and later the dossiers compiled during political campaigns. The Cultural Revolution added its own layer — struggle session transcripts, work-team investigation reports, applications for revolutionary committees, and the endless self-criticisms that individuals were required to draft and rewrite until they met political standards. In many counties, these documents were transferred to local archives in the early 1980s

during a brief window of liberalization, sometimes catalogued hastily by staff who themselves bore memories of the events. In other counties, sensitive files remained under lock at party committee offices, accessible only with introductions and patience.

What survives is never complete. Archives are shaped by the priorities of the bureaucracies that produce them. A factory log will record output figures and political study hours but rarely the conversation between two workers at the tool bench that explains why output dropped. A commune archive might preserve a model cadre's work summary but not the anonymous letter complaining about that same cadre's favoritism. The gaps are themselves historically significant. When a county archive contains no records of a particular campaign for a particular year, the question becomes whether the campaign was not carried out, whether the records were destroyed, or whether they were never created in the first place. Each possibility points to a different local dynamic, and none of them can be resolved by reading the central directives alone.

Oral history entered my research not as a supplement to documents but as a parallel stream with its own logic. Between 2008 and 2019, I conducted interviews with former teachers, factory technicians, village leaders, sent-down youth, retired cadres, and the children of people who had been classified as politically problematic. Some of these interviews lasted an afternoon; others were sustained over several visits spanning years. All of them required negotiation — not deception, but a careful calibration of trust. Many of my informants had never spoken at length about the Cultural Revolution before. Some had been instructed, formally or informally, not to. A retired school headmaster in Hunan poured tea and talked for three hours, then stopped and said, "I've told you things I haven't told my own daughter. Please don't make me regret it." I told him I would not use his name without permission, and I kept notebooks and recording devices visible throughout so he could see exactly what I was taking away.

The frankness that emerges when people feel safe is remarkable. An elderly woman in Sichuan described how, as a teenager, she stole chalk from her school so her family could write slogans on their courtyard wall — an act of mimicry that shielded her father from suspicion. A former factory apprentice in Liaoning recalled the precise sound a certain machine made when it was about to jam, a sound he learned to recognize during night shifts that were quietly replacing daytime political study sessions. These details do not appear in any archive I have found. They surface only in conversation, triggered by a question, a photograph, or sometimes simply the presence of a listener willing to sit still.

Memory, however, is not a camera. It compresses, rearranges, and sometimes substitutes. A retired cadre in Jiangsu gave a vivid account of a struggle session he organized in 1967, complete with dialogue he attributed to specific individuals. When I checked the county archive, the event was recorded in a single paragraph of a work summary, with no dialogue and a different date. This does not mean the cadre was

lying. It means he had lived with the story for decades, shaped it in retellings to family and neighbors, and layered it with reflections drawn from later experience. The task is not to discard such accounts but to understand them as retrospective constructions — historically real in their own right, and revealing of how people make sense of events long after those events have passed.

Oral histories are most powerful when they can be set alongside documentary evidence. When a former teacher describes the atmosphere of a school meeting in which a colleague was publicly criticized, and a school archive from the same week contains a terse entry recording the colleague's abrupt transfer, the two sources illuminate each other. The document tells us what happened in bureaucratic terms — a personnel reassignment. The testimony tells us what it felt like, what was said, who looked away, and who protested quietly afterward. Neither source is sufficient alone. Together they sketch a scene that neither could produce by itself.

This triangulation is the methodological heart of the book. It is also, I should be honest, messy. Archives contradict each other. Two witnesses to the same event recall different sequences. A document that appears neutral on its face — a production report, a class roster — turns out to encode political judgments in its choice of words or its selection of what to count. Working through these contradictions is not a flaw in the method; it is the method. The goal is not to arrive at a single definitive account of any given event but to map the range of what was possible, plausible, and actual in a particular setting.

The geographic and institutional range of my sources reflects the book's ambition to capture variation rather than produce a single representative case. County-level archives were consulted in provinces spanning the north China plain, the Yangtze delta, the southwestern highlands, and the northeastern industrial belt. Village-level materials, where available, supplement county records with the granular detail of household registration, land allocation, and local grievance. School archives — where preserved — provide windows into youth politics and the everyday texture of "revolutionary education." Factory records, many of them uncatalogued bundles stored in disused workshops, document production quotas alongside political study schedules, offering a view of work-unit life that official histories of either the economy or the movement rarely capture on their own.

Each site selected for sustained treatment was chosen not because it is typical — the very concept of "typical" in a country as large and varied as China is deceptive — but because its records are rich enough and its community accessible enough to allow both documentary and oral reconstruction. Some sites yielded extraordinary detail; others proved thin, and I have not forced them into prominence they cannot support. The reader will notice that certain places appear in multiple chapters. This is deliberate. Returning to the same locality across different thematic chapters allows us to see how the same community experienced class classification, youth mobilization,

religious change, economic scarcity, and eventual rehabilitation from several angles, rather than treating each of those topics in isolation.

One practical question deserves mention: the language of sources. Official documents are in Chinese, of course, and most of my interviews were conducted in Mandarin. In a few cases, particularly in minority regions covered in later chapters, local languages or dialects mediated the conversation through bilingual assistants. Archival handwriting posed its own challenges, especially with documents drafted by semi-literate cadres or hastily scribbled by clerks during meetings. Deciphering these texts sometimes required cross-referencing with typed versions circulated later, or with the memories of the individuals who produced them. Errors in transcription, where identifiable, are noted.

Let me say something about the concept of class struggle as it appears in the sources, because the phrase will recur throughout the book and carries connotations that deserve unpacking at the outset. In central rhetoric, class struggle was the engine of history, the lens through which all social relations were to be understood and periodically purified. On the ground, it was also a language — a set of available scripts, accusations, and defenses that people deployed strategically in pursuit of concrete aims: a promotion, the protection of a relative, the removal of a rival, the allocation of housing or a school place. To say that class struggle was performed, as much as believed, is not to dismiss its reality as a force that destroyed lives and restructured communities. It is to insist that the force operated through human choices, and that those choices were shaped by local histories, personal relationships, and the ever-present calculation of risk.

Archives encode these calculations in coded language and procedural formality. A "voluntary" self-criticism submitted under duress appears in the record as a voluntary act. A summary that describes a meeting as "lively" or "fruitful" or "successful" tells us less about what happened than about what the person writing the summary believed their audience wanted to read. One of the recurring tasks of this book is to read official documents against the grain — to notice what is emphasized, what is omitted, and what is described in language so formulaic that it has ceased to mean anything specific. Where oral testimony contradicts or complicates the official record, I try to present both and let the reader see the gap.

I also want to acknowledge, frankly, the role of luck in research. Archives that were scheduled to open remained closed because of a leadership change. An interview arranged through a local contact was canceled when the prospective interviewee was hospitalized the night before. A box of documents I had been told did not exist turned up in a back room after a junior archivist, perhaps out of boredom, decided to look. Historians who work with Chinese local sources learn to build redundancy into their plans and to treat dead ends as a normal part of the process rather than a personal rebuke. They also learn, or at least I did, that hospitality and patience on the part of

strangers — people who had every reason to distrust a foreigner asking about painful memories — far outweighed suspicion.

The methodological choices made in this chapter have consequences for what follows. By foregrounding local variation, the book inevitably complicates any narrative that treats the Cultural Revolution as a single, coherent episode with a beginning, a middle, and an end imposed from above. Some villages experienced the movement as a brief disruption; others were transformed over the full decade. Some factories shut down for months of factional conflict; others maintained production throughout, albeit at the cost of exhaustion and cynicism. Schools became laboratories of political education in some places, and refuges from politics, however precarious, in others. None of these experiences is more "authentic" than the others. The book's architecture — thematic chapters that revisit particular sites from different angles rather than a single chronological narrative — is designed to hold this diversity without collapsing it into a false consensus.

Finally, a word on what this book is not. It is not a comprehensive political history of the Cultural Revolution at the national level. It does not attempt to adjudicate the debates among top leaders or to assign responsibility within central politics. Those questions have been addressed, and continue to be debated, by scholars working with different archives and different questions. Nor is this book a memoir, though the voices of individuals are central to it. The people interviewed for this project are not subjects to be pitied or celebrated but witnesses whose accounts, checked against other evidence, provide indispensable texture to the historical record. When their memories diverge from documents, the divergence itself becomes a source of insight. When their memories converge with documents, we gain something close to the texture of lived experience that neither source could provide alone.

With these foundations laid, the chapters that follow move into concrete terrain — the assignment of class labels and the lives reshaped by those designations, the choreography of struggle sessions in villages and schools, the politics of youth rebellion, the rhythms of factory life under political pressure, and the long, uneven process of reckoning with what happened after the movement ended. Each chapter builds on the evidentiary and interpretive framework outlined here, returning repeatedly to the question of how national upheaval filtered into the particular textures of local life, and how the traces of that filtering survive in archives, in memory, and in the present-day communities that carry the past with them whether they wish to or not.

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