# 1969

*In April 1969, Mao Zedong convened the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which was intended to put an end to the mass upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. At that moment, hundreds of thousands of workers joined a series of rallies in the central city of Wuhan under the banner 'Oppose restoring the old!'. The rallies were organised by the city's rebel factions, which—with Mao's support—had overthrown the local Party authorities, prevailed over the conservative workers' faction organised to support these authorities and taken control of the city's factories and newly organised municipal Workers' Congress. They had also engaged in violent factional conflicts among themselves, but they now united to challenge the direction of the Ninth Party Congress and oppose the marginalisation of their representatives in the new revolutionary committees created to govern Wuhan's factories and city administration. This essay examines this movement, which revealed in sharp relief the aspirations and tensions that animated the Cultural Revolution. The main analytical concern is the extent to which rebel workers' organisations during the Cultural Revolution acted autonomously.*

# ‘Oppose Restoring the Old!’: The Culmination of the Rebel Workers’ Movement in Wuhan during the Cultural Revolution

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Modern Chinese history is replete with highly contentious workers’ movements, but none as massive or widespread as that during the Cultural Revolution. Between autumn 1966 and the spring of 1969, workers organised huge rallies, marches, factory occupations, sieges and street battles involving tens of millions of people. Never before—or since—have Chinese workers mobilised in such large numbers or for such an extended period. The movement spanned cities and towns throughout the country, encompassed every sector of industry (and beyond) and the participants were highly politicised and class conscious. Workers across the country divided into rebel and conservative factions: the rebels were inspired by Mao Zedong’s call to challenge local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities, while the conservatives defended these authorities.

Some observers write off this historical chapter, reasoning that workers were not acting on their own, but rather were mobilised as part of a conflict between Mao and other CCP leaders. It is true, of course, that Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution and the mass factional conflicts of this period were shaped by contention among CCP leaders and local officials.[1] The questions I will address in this essay involve the extent of their autonomy: Were the rebel workers’ organisations that emerged during the Cultural Revolution pursuing their own interests, as they perceived them? Were they acting on their own or were they simply following directives issued from above?

The answers to these questions, I will argue, must be nuanced. On the one hand, the rebel movement was inspired by Mao, it could not have existed without his support and rebel workers generally did their best to follow his lead. On the other hand, the rebels were self-organised, they effectively challenged factory and municipal Party authorities and they forcefully raised demands for popular participation (see also Thornton’s essay in the present volume). The rebel camp was made up of small,

loosely affiliated 'fighting groups', there was no hierarchy of authority that connected them to Beijing and, although they generally followed Mao's lead, there were critical moments in which they did not.

A few scholars have looked closely at these exceptional moments. There have been a number of accounts, for instance, of workers' efforts to raise economic demands, which took place mainly in the early weeks of the workers' movement, before Mao denounced 'economism' (经济主义). Many workers attempted to win improved conditions and welfare in their own work units and temporary workers organised a remarkable national movement to demand permanent status.[2] In addition, there has been scholarship about 'ultra-left' ideas and organisations, especially theorists of the *Shengwulian* (省无联) tendency in Hunan, who advanced a critique of the 'Red capitalist class' (红色资本家阶级).[3]

This essay examines what was in some ways rebel workers' most defiant coordinated action: the Oppose Restoring the Old (反复旧, *Fan Fujiu*) movement that took place in the spring of 1969. By that time, Mao and the leadership of the CCP had been trying to rein in the mass factional contention of the Cultural Revolution for well over a year. The *Fan Fujiu* movement, which mobilised massive rallies in major cities around the country, directly challenged the CCP leadership, especially because the most audacious actions coincided with the CCP's Ninth Congress, with which Mao intended to definitively signal an end to the mass upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. The *Fan Fujiu* movement exposed in sharp relief the aspirations and tensions that animated the Cultural Revolution, and it revealed both the extent and the limits of rebel autonomy.

While the *Fan Fujiu* movement encompassed many cities, in this essay, I will examine the movement in Wuhan, a large industrial city in Hubei Province that straddles the Yangzi River. Although the first skirmishes of the Cultural Revolution were in schools, by the end of 1966, workers had come to dominate the contending factions and, by the end of 1968, students had gone to the countryside, leaving workers to stage the *Fan Fujiu* movement. I was able to interview seventeen individuals who were involved in the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution in Wuhan, including several key leaders of the *Fan Fujiu* movement, as well as other rebel and conservative activists in a number of large factories. I have also made use of valuable information provided in accounts of the *Fan Fujiu* movement in Wuhan published by Shaoguang Wang and Lao Tian, as well as reports on how the movement developed in other cities.[4] Before examining the

events of the spring of 1969, I will provide necessary context by briefly tracing the rise of the rebel workers' movement in China, and its specific trajectory in Wuhan.[5]

## Rebels Loyal to Mao

The Cultural Revolution was a highly unusual social movement in which Mao called on students, workers and villagers to attack the local officials of his own ruling party. There are many theories about why Mao chose to do this. I have argued that the Cultural Revolution can best be understood as the culmination of a series of experiments intended to find effective means of 'mass supervision' (群众监督)—the CCP's term for mobilising the population to help the Party control its own cadres.[6] Although the CCP was a highly disciplined party with effective top-down controls, it was concerned that these had to be reinforced by bottom-up supervision. Mao and other Party leaders worried that, without supervision from below as well as from above, it would be impossible to effectively enforce Party policies and curb corruption, the abuse of power and especially 'bureaucratism' (官僚主义)—that is, isolation of cadres from the masses. The trick in managing mass supervision campaigns had long been finding a way to give workers and villagers enough autonomy to effectively criticise wrongdoing by local Party leaders without endangering central control over the movements.

In previous mass supervision campaigns, such as the Three Antis and Five Antis movements in the early 1950s and the Four Cleans campaign in the early 1960s, the CCP typically dispatched outside work teams of Party cadres to mobilise workers to criticise factory leaders. While these movements were effective in curbing corruption and other vices, by the mid-1960s, Mao was convinced they reinforced bureaucratic behaviour by only allowing the masses to raise their voices under work team tutelage. When he launched the Cultural Revolution in the summer of 1966, therefore, although he initially permitted Party officials to again send work teams to schools and factories, he then condemned the work teams for suppressing the masses and encouraged students and eventually workers to throw them out and form their own 'rebel groups'. Moreover, he gave these groups licence to attack factory Party leaders, all of whom were open to the charge that they were 'following the capitalist road'.

By the autumn of 1966, workers in Chinese factories had split into two camps: rebels, who attacked the enterprises' Party leadership, and conservatives, who defended it. The rebel camp was made up of many small, self-organised groups led largely by workers; some were disaffected rank-and-file Party members, but most had never joined the Party. The conservative camp—usually larger and better organised—was typically led by base-level cadres. Nevertheless, by the end of the year, the rebels—with Mao's support—had effectively paralysed factory Party organisations, leaving the conservative camp discouraged and in retreat. Then, in January 1967, Mao astonishingly called on the rebels to 'seize power' (夺权).

Mao, however, never intended the rebels to unilaterally take control of China's factories. Rather, he called on the military to dispatch small teams of officers to factories to oversee the formation of 'revolutionary committees' (革命委员会) comprising these officers, veteran Party cadres and 'mass representatives' (群众代表)—that is, leaders of the rebel groups. As might be expected, the formation of these committees was a highly contentious process and the military officers, contrary to Mao's instructions, were generally not inclined to support the rebels.

In Wuhan, as elsewhere, disparate rebel groups quickly coalesced into moderate and radical camps. The moderate alliance, which called itself the New Faction (新派), was more inclined to cooperate with the military, while the radical alliance, known as the Steel Faction (钢派), insisted that rebels take full control of factories. In February and March, the military detained leaders of the Steel Faction and drove the organisation underground. After Mao denounced the suppression of the rebels in April, however, the moderate and radical rebel factions joined forces and went back on the offensive. In response, conservative workers and cadres, with military support, also regrouped, forming a powerful confederation called the Million Heroes (百万雄师). Violent confrontations ensued as rebels and conservatives battled for control of factories, with rebels suffering the most casualties. In July, conservative militants kidnapped and beat up high-level envoys dispatched by Mao to mediate the conflict. Mao harshly condemned the 'Wuhan Incident' and removed the military units that had supported the Million Heroes from the city. The conservative confederation collapsed and rebels triumphantly took control of Wuhan's factories, violently settling scores with their adversaries.

Seeking to consolidate their newfound authority, rebel factions restored industrial production, while continuing to promote their own political agendas—efforts that were often at odds. 'The rebels took power in the work units and used work unit money to publish newspapers,' a rebel leader told me. 'If different rebel groups in a work unit had different thinking then they would publish different newspapers.'[7]

That autumn, workers in every work unit were instructed to elect delegates to municipal and provincial workers' congresses, who in turn—together with delegates elected to new peasants' and students' congresses—were to elect the members of the provincial revolutionary committee. A new cohort of military officers was dispatched to preside over the process. With the conservative faction sidelined, the Steel and New factions each vied to promote their own leaders and 'pull' old cadres to join their lists. After the two rebel coalitions failed to agree on a single list, the military leaders finally decided the composition of the provincial revolutionary committee in February 1968. Nearly one-quarter of the committee members, including the chair and vice-chair, were military officers, with the remaining seats divided evenly between the rebel leaders and old cadres nominated by each of the two rebel factions.[8]

The election of the provincial committee was followed by elections of municipal and enterprise committees, as well as workshop committees within factories. A rebel leader described the process to me this way: 'Each organisation held their own meeting to choose their own representatives. Then it was decided in a big meeting how many representatives each organisation would get. Everyone had to agree. They negotiated and compromised. It was relatively democratic.'[9] Nevertheless, competition for control over revolutionary committees led to a new round of violent confrontations, this time among the rebel groups. Finally, in the autumn of 1968, Mao insisted that rebel factions around the country disband, cease publishing their own newspapers and turn in their weapons.

Until that time, workers recalled, revolutionary committees had met regularly and rebels held sway in many of Wuhan's factories. Now military officers began to assert their authority more aggressively. They began reorganising Party committees, which excluded rebel leaders who were not Party members, and made decisions without consulting the broader revolutionary committees. They not only marginalised rebel leaders, but also began punishing the most recalcitrant as part of the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign.[10] 'That was the big question', a rebel leader told me,

explaining why the rebels took to the streets again in early 1969. 'The mass representatives on the revolutionary committees could not play the role they were supposed to play. That's why they called it "restoring the old".'[11]

## Opposing the Restoration of the Old

The *Fan Fujiu* movement was launched in Shandong Province in November 1968 and soon spread to Anhui, Fujian, Guangxi, Guizhou, Gansu, Henan, Hubei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Shanxi, Sichuan and other provinces.[12] The geographic extent of the movement was all the more remarkable because rebels had been barred from organising across provincial boundaries.

In January 1969, rebels in Wuhan joined the movement and began to openly defy the city's military leaders. As rebel organisations had been folded into workers' congresses, these organisations became key organising vehicles. 'Although our organisations have been disbanded, there is still the Workers' Congress,' a rebel publication declared. 'The Workers' Congress is the core of leadership for us. We do not acknowledge the authority of the military representatives. We do not acknowledge the authority of the puppet revolutionary committee.'[13]

The Steel Faction and the New Faction were still in a competitive mode, with the latter continuing to enjoy relatively favourable treatment by the military, but by mid-March leaders of the two factions decided to band together to resist efforts to sideline and suppress them. They understood it was a risky move. A radio factory worker who had become a leader of the New Faction and was instrumental in initiating the *Fan Fujiu* movement, told me: 'We decided we're all rebels. We'll go forward together, we'll live together or we'll die together.'[14]

On 16 March, leaders of the two factions penned a big character poster, titled—in dramatic Cultural Revolution style—'I shed my blood for the people and the liberation of mankind', calling on workers to once again take to the streets. Overnight, rebels plastered copies of the poster across the city, launching a movement sharply at odds with the message of 'unity' that was the watchword of the upcoming Ninth Party Congress.

Although the rebel organisations had been compelled to close their own newspapers, they controlled the official Workers' Congress newspaper, *Wuhan Workers* (武汉工人). Until then it had largely echoed the line emanating from Beijing; now they converted it into a vehicle to denounce the local military authorities. They began publishing the newspaper more

frequently and used it to condemn increasing military control over the revolutionary committees, the sidelining of worker representatives, the suspension of revolutionary committees in factories in which the rebels held sway and the persecution of rebel activists.

The rebels hoped to consolidate their power in workers' congresses at the factory level and turn them into more autonomous organisations. Accordingly, they demanded that factory workers' congresses not be subordinated unilaterally to factory revolutionary committees, but instead also be accountable to the citywide workers' congress. In factories, they worked to enhance the power of workers' congresses they controlled, take over others they did not, and revive congresses that had become inactive. A wave of wildcat strikes swept Wuhan, encouraged by the municipal workers' congress.[15] While the central demands were about shifting the relative power of workers' congresses, revolutionary committees, Party committees and the military representatives, the movement was also inspired by debates and disputes about factory rules and practices, which had become grist for rebel accusations about the restoration of old power structures and old ways of management.

Starting in mid-March, rebel leaders employed the municipal and factory-level workers' congresses to mobilise a series of massive rallies, which grew in size as the Ninth Party Congress met in Beijing from 1 April to 24 April. On 27 April, they convened a mass rally reportedly attended by 500,000 people.[16] During the first weeks of May, they continued to hold huge rallies and rebel leaders became bolder in their denunciations of Hubei's military leaders, demanding they make self-criticisms before the masses. Rebel groups reorganised in hundreds of factories across the city and reportedly took power from the existing revolutionary committee leadership in 180 work units. On 11 May, 100 trucks carrying rebel activists surrounded the headquarters of the provincial and municipal revolutionary committees.[17]

In early May, more than twenty rebel leaders and military representatives were summoned from Wuhan to Beijing. The rebels travelled to the capital hoping to make their case to top Party leaders, as they had been able to do in previous meetings in Beijing. Over the course of nearly two weeks, they met numerous times with Zhou Enlai, Chen Boda, Kang Sheng and other top leaders. In the meetings, they were admonished for pursuing factionalism, but they defended their actions. 'We didn't give up,' the New Faction leader told me, recalling that they argued that

their protests were justified because they were being marginalised and suppressed.[18] Ultimately, however, Mao approved a document, known as the '27 May Directive', that criticised the rebels for attacking the military and 'placing the workers' congress above the revolutionary committee'.[19]

The directive opened the way for military leaders in Wuhan to carry out a wave of repression against the rebels, who were no longer in a position to resist. 'Because the centre and Mao had criticised us,' the New Faction leader explained, 'what could we say?'[20] In November, more than 1,000 rebel leaders were sent to Beijing for 'study'—a euphemism for intensive interrogation and political pressure sessions, which lasted for six months. Thousands more endured such sessions in their own factories. This repression was folded into the nationwide 'One Strike and Three Antis' campaign and the drive to ferret out '16 May elements', during which thousands of rebels in Wuhan were locked up, some for several years.[21]

The rebels were able to regroup after Mao and the CCP leadership criticised the military representatives and removed them from factory and government administration in 1972. Over the next four years, with Mao's renewed support, rebels mounted a series of new offensives. During the Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius campaign in 1973–74, they revived factory workers' congresses and once again used them as vehicles for mass mobilisation. They abducted military officers, compelling them to face the wrath of workers in the factories they had managed, and thousands of workers surrounded the Party headquarters in Wuhan demanding—and winning—freedom for rebel leaders who remained in prison. Then, in 1975 and 1976, along with former rebel leaders around the country, they mobilised workers to support a new campaign that promoted radical policies and toppled Deng Xiaoping. Their movement, however, was decisively crushed after Mao's death in September 1976.

## Discussion

Can we call a workers' movement that was completely dependent on Mao autonomous? Clearly, the rebels' autonomy was profoundly limited, as they had little choice but to follow Mao's agenda. That meant that, while they were free to attack cadres' privileges, corruption and authoritarian behaviour, they could not raise economic demands and, while they could overthrow local Party officials, they could not fundamentally challenge the Party's authority. Moreover, their complete dependence on Mao was

revealed when he withdrew his support. Without it, they were unable to defend themselves against repression and retribution by the Party establishment. After Mao used the rebels to attack local Party officials, he abandoned them to their fate.

Rebels followed Mao's agenda, however, not simply because of practical power constraints; their worldview was fundamentally shaped—and limited—by the Maoist vision. All social movements, of course, wear ideological lenses and blinders fashioned within the societies they inhabit. The lenses and blinders worn by rebel workers during the Cultural Revolution gave them a particularly righteous and fervent class consciousness, which included the idea that workers should run the factories in which they work. The CCP, of course, had long promoted the slogan that workers were the 'masters of the factory'. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao gave this idea a subversive twist, telling workers they were being denied their rightful role by bureaucratic Party officials.

Regardless of the limits of their autonomy in terms of practical power and vision, the rebels were self-organised and not subordinate to any organisational hierarchy. Not only were they autonomous from the local Party organisation, but their overriding purpose was to challenge its authority and, although they sought to follow Mao, they had to interpret his unpredictable and sometimes ambiguous messages themselves. They, therefore, had no choice but to think for themselves and, at critical moments, their thinking—and actions—deviated from Mao's agenda. This essay has recounted one such moment, when rebels in Wuhan and other cities disagreed with the direction in which Mao was leading them and went their own way, hoping he would follow.