

The tumultuous history of “big democracy” in China’s factories

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Abstract

This paper compares two fateful experiments conducted in China during the Mao era that encouraged freewheeling criticism of Communist cadres: the 1957 Party Rectification campaign and the early upheavals of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1968). Through a content analysis of articles published in the Chinese Communist Party’s flagship newspaper, *People’s Daily*, we first show that the two movements shared characteristics that made them very similar to each other and remarkably different from all other mass campaigns carried out during the Mao era. We then examine the differences between the two movements by investigating how they unfolded in factories, based on interviews with workers and party cadres. Key elements of the strategies Mao pursued during the Cultural Revolution, we argue, can be interpreted as responses to the unmitigated failure of the 1957 campaign. In comparing the two movements, we highlight the evolution of the term “big democracy,” which was uniquely associated with these two episodes, but was deployed very differently in the Cultural Revolution than it was in 1957.

Introduction

In early 1968, when Franz Schurmann was trying to make sense of the Cultural Revolution in order to write a supplement to his classic work, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, he repeatedly returned to an earlier episode, comparing the upheaval to the 1957 Party Rectification campaign that served as the culmination of the Hundred Flowers movement.¹ Since then, although there has been no attempt to systematically compare the Cultural Revolution and the 1957 Party Rectification campaign, a number of other scholars have also noted similarities in the two movements, both of which featured efforts to encourage criticism of Communist Party officials from below.² For other observers, however, the two periods could not have been more different. In their accounts, the Hundred Flowers was a brief opening in which intellectuals were allowed to more freely express their views, while the Cultural Revolution was a period of dogmatic conformity, when intellectuals and contrary views were harshly repressed. From this perspective, the Cultural Revolution was the descendant not of the Hundred Flowers movement, but rather of the subsequent Anti-Rightist campaign, in which those who had dared to speak out were denounced and punished.³

In this paper, we will first analyze the fundamental characteristics shared by the 1957 Party Rectification and the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-68). Both, we will argue, were part of a series of Mao-era campaigns intended to spur criticism of party officials from below. These campaigns also included, most prominently, the Three Antis campaign (1952-1953) and

¹ Schurmann 1968, pp. 582-592.

² See, for instance, Dittmer 1987, pp. 65 and 73-74, Meisner 1986, p. 444, and Wu 2014, pp. 31-34.

³ Cite scholarship xxx.

the Four Cleans movement (1962-1966). While these other campaigns were carefully orchestrated by the party organization, however, in 1957 and 1966 Mao encouraged more freewheeling criticism, signaled by the slogan *daming dafang*, which is typically translated as “free airing of views,” although it literally means “big speaking out and big opening up.”⁴ Introduced shortly before the 1957 Party Rectification campaign, this slogan disappeared soon after the campaign ended, only to be resurrected nearly a decade later during the Cultural Revolution, after which it again disappeared. Thus, the slogan is particularly tied to these two episodes, making them not only similar, but also unique.

On the other hand, what transpired during these two episodes was quite different. The 1957 campaign provoked a powerful backlash from party officials and was shut down only weeks after it began; as an effort to facilitate criticism of party officials from below it was ultimately a complete failure. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution unleashed a far more sustained and powerful wave of criticism of party officials from below. This was only possible, we will argue, because of the ways the Cultural Revolution differed from the 1957 campaign. Key elements of the strategies Mao pursued in the Cultural Revolution, we argue, can be interpreted as responses to the unmitigated failure of the 1957 campaign. We highlight both the similarities and the differences between the two movements by analyzing the evolution of the term “big democracy” (*da minzhu*), which was uniquely associated with these two periods, but was deployed in very different ways in each. Ultimately, we will argue, the differences between the Cultural Revolution and the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign can only be properly understood by first recognizing the fundamental features that the two movements shared.

In the following sections, we will first use quantitative content analysis to reveal common patterns that make the 1957 campaign and the early years of the Cultural Revolution stand out from other periods. This analysis involved reading and coding hundreds of articles published in the Chinese Communist Party’s flagship newspaper, *People’s Daily* (Renmin ribao).⁵ Because the data are drawn from an official newspaper, it is only possible to draw conclusions about how the party *presented* events, and in this section we will restrict ourselves to that purpose.

The subsequent sections will delve into each of the two movements in more detail, this time focusing on the differences between them. To get a sense of what happened on the ground level, we have investigated how the two movements unfolded in factories and other industrial enterprises. Factories are particularly instructive locations for this investigation for three reasons. First, as the CCP took control of urban institutions in the 1950s, it turned factories and other workplaces, known as work units (*danwei*), into its most important sites of governance. While cities were divided into geographic districts for administrative purposes, the most important interface between the party and the urban populace was not through these districts, but rather through work units. Second, the CCP focused particular attention on factories because of the importance it attached to industrialization and because for ideological and

⁴ Because of the awkwardness of the English translations, in this paper we use the Chinese term *daming dafang*.

⁵ We used a database compiled by People’s Data (人民数据) that includes digitized copies of all *People’s Daily* articles published from 1946 to the present.

political reasons it cultivated industrial workers as a strategic base of support. Third, the hierarchical relations of authority in factories became archetypal objects for Mao's efforts to reform cadre behavior and solve chronic problems in "cadres-masses relations" (*ganqun guanxi*), which, as we shall see, were a central focus of the 1957 Party Rectification and the Cultural Revolution, as well as other mass campaigns. Significantly for the purposes of our analysis, despite press reports promoting involvement of workers in the 1957 Party Rectification, the campaign in factories was mainly limited to office staff, while workers on the shop floor remained largely on the sidelines. In contrast, factory workers played a central role in the Cultural Revolution.

Our research has relied on contemporary publications and other documentary sources as well as interviews with participants. Documentary sources included official publications (including *People's Daily*), as well as unofficial publications of Cultural Revolution-era mass organizations, and collections of Mao Zedong's writings and talks. Altogether we interviewed 58 workers and cadres who were employed in 28 industrial enterprises at some point between 1956 and 1969.⁶ These two types of sources were complementary. From official publications we were able to look back at how events and policies were presented by the CCP at the time. These sources, of course, offer a biased perspective, but they suit our purposes well, as we have been able to use them to analyze the discourse the CCP employed to mobilize the populace during both periods. The accounts presented by the workers and cadres we interviewed are also, of course, the particular perspectives of the individuals, but they offer diverse versions of how events actually unfolded on the ground.

Common characteristics of the 1957 Party Rectification campaign and the Cultural Revolution

We started our content analysis by searching the *People's Daily* database for articles that contained the term "mass supervision" (*qunzhong jiandu*). The CCP has long used this term to mobilize criticism of targeted groups. It has most often been used to encourage criticism of Communist cadres by their subordinates, but other groups—including old elites—also been targeted. Our broad goal was to analyze how use of the term has changed over the entire period of Communist power, from the middle of the 20th century to the present.⁷ In the analysis presented in this paper, we focus on the first two decades, from 1949, when the CCP came to power, to 1968, the culmination of the initial years of upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Mass supervision was a regular theme in the pages of *People's Daily* during this period, but there were marked ebbs and flows. Figure 1 tracks the distribution of articles about mass supervision, revealing distinct high points in 1957 and then again during the Cultural Revolution.

[Figure 1 about here]

⁶ The content analysis of *People's Daily* articles was conducted largely by Yige Dong, while the interviews were conducted by Joel Andreas. For convenience, in this paper we use the pronoun *we* to discuss all aspects of the research.

⁷ See Andreas and Dong 2016 (forthcoming).

We were particularly interested in finding out which groups and behaviors were targeted for mass supervision during different periods. In all, there were 957 articles published between 1949 and 1968 that discussed mass supervision.⁸ We read each of these articles to determine which groups and behaviors were the main targets. Through an inductive process, we developed lists of the types of groups and the types of behaviors to which articles referred. We then used these lists to code each article, after determining which group and which behavior was targeted most prominently.

Targeted groups

We divided the groups targeted for mass supervision into three broad categories: “cadres,” “old elites” and “others.” The “cadres” category includes Communist political leaders, administrators, and managers, as well as village leaders, and rank-and-file party members (the latter two groups did not have formal cadre status, but were closely affiliated with the regime). The “old elites” category includes capitalists, landlords, and rich peasants, old regime officials, incumbent managers, and intellectuals (including teachers and technical and professional staff), who were generally distrusted by the new regime because of their old elite origins. It also includes those judged to be “bad elements” (criminals) or politically hostile (“counterrevolutionaries,” “Rightists,” etc.). The “others” category includes individuals of more ordinary stature, such as workers, peasants, soldiers, and small entrepreneurs, as well as members of Cultural Revolution-era mass organizations. Overall, the great majority of the articles—73%—targeted groups in the cadres category, while 18% focused on old elites, and 7% were directed against members of other groups (see Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

The groups targeted in the articles, however, shifted considerably over time, as is evident in Figure 3. The proportion of articles that targeted old elites increased significantly during three periods—in the mid-1950s, when the CCP was moving to nationalize private enterprises (and many articles reported on workers denouncing malfeasance by capitalists and incumbent managers), in 1958, as the Anti-Rightist campaign was mobilizing attacks on intellectuals. In contrast, the proportion of articles that targeted cadres reached highpoints in 1957 and during the Cultural Revolution. In 1957 this proportion was 85%, a figure that was only surpassed during the Cultural Revolution years—86% in 1966, 90% in 1967, and 88% in 1968.

[Figure 3 about here]

⁸ In our search of *People’s Daily* data base, we did not include synonymous terms such as *renmin jiandu* (people’s supervision) and *minzhu jiandu* (democratic supervision), which would have yielded a significantly larger number of articles. We eliminated 21 articles in which the term mass supervision was used only in passing (or only in reference to the Soviet Union or other countries).

Targeted behaviors

Articles about mass supervision encouraged criticism of a wide range of behaviors including corruption, waste and inefficiency, producing unsafe products, fostering unsafe working conditions, privilege-seeking, selfishness, favoritism, profiteering and tax evasion (by private entrepreneurs), as well as political transgressions, ranging in gravity from counterrevolutionary activities and Rightism to carrying out policies that placed more emphasis on expertise than on politics. As is evident in Figure 4, however, the behaviors most often targeted for criticism were those associated with bureaucratism (*guanliao zhuyi*). In the CCP's lexicon, the most important meaning of bureaucratism is separation of cadres from the masses. The party demanded that its cadres "live, eat, and work" (*tongzhu tongchi tonglaodong*) with the workers and peasants; they were required to lead them, but also to listen to their criticisms and suggestions, attend to their concerns, and involve them in local governance. "Isolation from the masses" (*tuoli qunzhong*), "commandism" (*mingling zhuyi*), stifling of criticism from below, arrogance, and failing to adhere to a "democratic work style" (*minzhu zuofeng*) were denounced as bureaucratic behavior, which party leaders feared would alienate the masses and threaten the party's ability to govern.

[Figure 4 about here]

Throughout the first two decades of Communist power, the problem of bureaucratism among party cadres was a recurring theme in the pages of the *People's Daily*. The main targets of the 1957 Party Rectification campaign were "bureaucratism, sectarianism, and subjectivism," but the focus on bureaucratism was carried over from a series of previous campaigns: a 1950 Rectification campaign was directed against "bureaucratism and commandism," the Three Antis movement in 1951-1952 targeted "corruption, waste, and bureaucratism," and the New Three Antis campaign in 1953 sought to curb "bureaucratism, commandism, and violations of discipline and law."

During the entire period from 1949 through 1968, among the *People's Daily* articles about mass supervision that targeted a specific behavior, 38% focused on those associated with bureaucratism, making it by far the most prevalent target. Figure 5, however, shows that the frequency of articles varied greatly over time, once again reaching highpoints in 1957 and again during the Cultural Revolution.

[Figure 5 about here]

Communist leaders considered mass supervision to be the essential antidote for bureaucratism. The CCP was a highly disciplined party with strict top-down controls, but party leaders recognized that if these controls were not combined with monitoring from below they would

be ineffective in curbing behaviors associated with bureaucratism.⁹ In fact, top-down controls could even be counterproductive because they exacerbated cadres' proclivity to turn their gaze up, rather than down. For this reason, in order to prevent cadres from becoming aloof from the masses, CCP leaders considered "supervision" from below to be indispensable. Thus, it is not surprising that the number of articles mentioning mass supervision and the proportion of these articles that focused on bureaucratic behaviors both spiked during the same years.

Daming dafang and big democracy

These two periods—the 1957 Party Rectification Campaign and the early years of the Cultural Revolution—stood out even more dramatically when we searched for terms associated with freewheeling criticism of Communist cadres: *daming dafang* and big democracy. The periods when these slogans were used were much more circumscribed, arising with the commencement of each of these two campaigns, and largely disappearing afterwards.

Figure 6 tracks the distribution of *Peoples Daily* articles mentioning variations of the *daming dafang* slogan that were published during the entire Mao era (1949-1976). The slogan, which was first introduced in early 1957, continued to frequently show up in the pages of the *People's Daily* even after the Party Rectification campaign had morphed into the Anti-Rightist movement in June of that year, although the context and usage changed dramatically (as will be discussed below). Then, with the demise of the Great Leap Forward, the slogan almost completely disappeared for several years before being resurrected during the Cultural Revolution. At that point it was amended to include two other expressions that had gained currency in 1957—*da bianlun* (大辩论, "big debates") and *dazibao* (大字报, "big character posters")—and the combined refrain was abbreviated as the 四大 ("four bigs," often translated as "four big rights").¹⁰ A fifth "big"—particular to the Cultural Revolution—was subsequently added to the list during this period: *da chuanlian* (大串连, "big linking up"), referring to the right of activists to travel and develop ties with groups in other areas.¹¹

[Figure 6 about here]

The use of the term big democracy followed a similar trajectory. Figure 7 tracks the number of *People's Daily* articles published between 1949 and 1976 that contained the slogan, once again

⁹ On the CCP's top-down means of controlling cadre behavior, see Edin, "State capacity," Gong, "The party discipline inspection," Guo, "Controlling Corruption in the Party," Huang "Administrative monitoring," Lü, *Cadres and Corruption*, Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, 309-364, Sullivan, "Role of the control organs," Wedeman, "Intensification of corruption," Young, "Control and style." [Check to see if these include the Mao era.]

¹⁰ The "four big rights" were formally affirmed in the 1975 Constitution, but they were eliminated from the Constitution in 1980 (Leng and Chiu 1985, pp. 19 and 43).

¹¹ Figure 3 records the number of articles in which one of the following terms appeared: "daming dafang," "dabianlun," and "dachuanlian," all of which were used almost exclusively to mean facilitating criticism from below (we eliminated a few false positives). We did not track "dazibao" because the term was often used to refer to official notices and so it was too difficult to eliminate false positives.

revealing high points in 1957 and the early Cultural Revolution years. As will be discussed below, however, the way big democracy was used changed dramatically between the two periods: in the late 1950s it served as a latent threat, while during the Cultural Revolution it became a rallying cry. During the later period, the meaning of big democracy became virtually synonymous with *daming dafang*, but with a more antagonistic edge, and it largely supplanted the latter in *People's Daily* articles. Both slogans almost entirely disappeared from the pages of the newspaper after the suppression of freewheeling contention in 1968, only to make a brief reappearance in 1976, as radical leaders attempted to mobilize their constituents in anticipation of Mao's death.¹²

There were, as we have noted, other major campaigns to mobilize mass supervision of cadres during the Mao era, including most significantly the Three Antis movement in the early 1950s and the Four Cleans campaign in the early 1960s, but these movements were tightly scripted and mass criticism was largely organized by the party organization. Notably, during these campaigns there was no mention of big democracy or *daming dafang* in the pages of the *People's Daily*.¹³

[Figure 7 about here]

To sum up, the broad trends revealed by this content analysis alert us to features that the 1957 Party Rectification campaign and the Cultural Revolution had in common. They stand out as moments of particularly intense discussion in the official press of mass supervision. During both moments, cadres were under particularly sharp scrutiny and bureaucratism was the main concern. The correlation between the moments when criticism of the bureaucratic behavior of cadres was most intense and when *daming dafang* and big democracy were promoted is particularly striking, and the reasons for this correlation will be explored below.

Despite the similarities between the two movements, they were also quite different. In order to understand the differences, we have examined more closely publications produced during both periods and investigated how both movements unfolded at the ground level in factories by interviewing participants. We will argue that the abysmal failure of the 1957 experiment in freewheeling criticism of cadres, together with Mao's continued frustration with the more conventional means of mobilizing criticism of cadres employed during the Four Cleans campaign, led him to launch a much more radical experiment in 1966. In the following accounts of these two experiments, we will note both the similarities and the differences, and compare the results.

Big democracy and the 1957 Party Rectification campaign

¹² For accounts of this period, which will not be addressed in this paper, see Andreas 2009, Forster 1990, Perry and Li 1997, and Wang 1995.

¹³ For accounts of the Three Antis campaigns in Hangzhou and Tianjin, respectively, see Gao 2004 and Lieberthal 2009. For overviews of the Four Cleans campaign that focus on implementation in rural areas, see Baum 1975, MacFarquhar 1998, pp. 334-348; and Teiwes 1979, pp. 385-466.

Mao first introduced the concept of big democracy in late 1956, speaking to a meeting of the Central Committee. Big democracy was, per Mao's definition, an antagonistic form of struggle, a means for the downtrodden to attack their oppressors, which took the form of mass political action outside of institutional channels—disturbances, rebellions, and revolutions. He cited as examples famous rebellions that punctuated Chinese history, culminating in the revolution that brought the CCP to power. But he warned his comrades, now that they were in power they should not think they were immune.

There are several hundred thousand cadres at the level of the country party committee and above who hold the destiny of the country in their hands. If they fail to do a good job, alienate themselves from the masses and do not live plainly and work hard, the workers, students, and peasants will have good reason to disapprove of them. We must watch out, we can't develop a bureaucratic style of work and grow into an aristocratic stratum divorced from the people. The masses will have good reason to throw out of office anyone who practice bureaucratism, makes no effort to solve their problems, abuses and tyrannizes the masses, and never changes. I say it's fine to remove them—they ought to be removed."¹⁴

Speaking at the moment the CCP was celebrating the completion of the socialist transformation of the economy, Mao declared that class contradictions with respect to property ownership had been resolved, but noted that "contradictions in other respects have come to the fore, and new contradictions have arisen."¹⁵ He highlighted bureaucratism as an affliction that would—if not checked—undermine relations between Communist cadres and the masses, adding ominously, "Big democracy can be used to deal with bureaucrats too."¹⁶

Mao illustrated the speech with contemporary examples of big democracy: students taking trains to Beijing to lodge petitions, peasants physically defending their land against expropriation to build an airfield, and workers going on strike. "If you alienate yourself from the masses and fail to solve their problems," he warned his comrades, "the peasants will wield their carrying poles, the workers will demonstrate in the streets, and the students will create big disturbances."¹⁷ He went on to propose that the right to strike be added to the Constitution, arguing that strikes would "help resolve the contradictions between the state and the factory director on the one hand and the masses of workers on the other."¹⁸

Mao also brought up the recent uprising against the Communist regime in Hungary, which he characterized as a reactionary example of big democracy. He was clearly apprehensive that the

¹⁴ Mao 1977, p. 325-326.

¹⁵ Mao 1977, p. 325.

¹⁶ Mao 1977, p. 324.

¹⁷ Mao 1977, p. 324.

¹⁸ Mao 1977, p. 325. The right to strike was included in the subsequent version of the Constitution, which was not adopted until the Fourth National People's Congress met in 1975. It was eliminated from the Constitution in 1982. (Chang 2003; Leng and Chiu 1985, pp. 19 and 43).

CCP might face a similar popular upheaval. The typical response of a state leader to such a threat might be to suppress popular protests and try to channel discontent into existing institutional arrangements. While Mao did not exclude such conventional responses, he emphasized another more peculiar response—to welcome outbreaks of big democracy as the most effective antidote to the regime’s defects.

If big democracy is to be practiced again, I am for it. You are afraid of the masses taking to the streets, I am not, even if hundreds of thousands should do so... There are people who seem to think that now that state power has been won they can take it easy and act like tyrants (横行霸道). The masses will oppose such people, throw stones at them and strike them with their hoes, which I will welcome because I think it will serve them right. Moreover, sometimes to fight is the only way to solve a problem. The Communist Party needs to learn a lesson. Whenever students and workers take to the streets, you comrades should see this as a good thing.¹⁹

Mao clearly celebrated big democracy as a catalyst for radical change. He had an affinity for protests, strikes, and rebellions, which he saw as effective means by which the masses were able to make their voices heard, and he was distinctly less interested in formal institutions of political participation and representation, which he included in the category of “small democracy.” His lack of interest extended to the institutions created by the CCP after it came to power in 1949; he seldom mentioned the local people’s congresses or staff and workers representative councils that the new regime had established. Mao was a man of movements, not institutions. In the division of labor established at the top echelons of the CCP, other leaders—including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping—were in charge of day-to-day governance, while Mao was in charge of making sure the party was advancing in the direction prescribed by its revolutionary vision. He was responsible for initiating mass movements for this purpose, and when they erupted, he was in charge. During normal times, when institutions functioned according to established routines, Mao’s personal power ebbed, and it was enhanced by the arrival of a new movement. Politics, as understood by Mao, followed the pattern of unity-struggle-unity, and he lived for the moments of struggle. “We Marxists,” he declared in the speech in which he introduced the concept of big democracy, “hold that disequilibrium, contradiction, struggle and development are absolute, while equilibrium and rest are relative.”²⁰

In 1956, however, Mao invoked big democracy as a threat, not a call to action. In his speech to the Central Committee, the discussion of big democracy served as a prelude to announcing plans for the Party Rectification campaign to take place the following year. After warning his comrades about the possible repercussions of failing to listen to the masses, he reassured them that the upcoming campaign would not “adopt a big democracy method of kicking up rough winds and heavy torrents; rather we must adopt the method of small democracy, of fine winds

¹⁹ Mao 1977, p. 324-325.

²⁰ Mao 1977, p. 314.

and gentle rains.”²¹ Mao’s message was not subtle: big democracy was lurking in the background, under the surface, ready to erupt if the party failed to rectify itself. While many of his comrades were afraid that opening the way for criticism from below would lead to chaos, he warned them:

There are two ways to go, two ways to lead the country: One is to *fang* (open up) and the other is to *shou* (close down). Strike—just let the workers strike and let the students shut down classes. When there’s too much bureaucratism and you don’t allow big democracy and there’s no small democracy, not even a little bit of small, small democracy, then you will drive people to revolt (*bishang Liangshan* 逼上梁山)²²

Daming dafang

The 1957 Party Rectification campaign was the culmination of the Hundred Flowers movement that Mao had launched in 1956, both its most intense and its final moment. After months of encouraging citizens to raise suggestions and criticisms to improve the new order, in April 1957 they were specifically invited to raise criticisms of party leaders in order to rectify three problems—bureaucratism, sectarianism, and subjectivism.²³ Campaigns in which the non-party masses had been invited to help to rectify the party were not new and these three problems had been recurring targets of previous rectification campaigns. In the past, however, such participation had normally taken place under conditions carefully controlled by the party organization. This time, to the consternation of other party leaders, Mao encouraged people to speak out on their own. “The meaning of the Central Committee,” Mao instructed party cadres, “is that you can’t control everything, you have to let go, just let go and let everyone express their opinions, let people speak out, criticize and debate.”²⁴ As the Party Rectification campaign was gearing up in late April, *People’s Daily* published an article by Marxist historian Jian Bozan that introduced the refrain that became the byword of the campaign: *daming dafang*.²⁵ Indeed, in popular discourse the campaign itself became known as *daming dafang*.

Most scholarship about the Party Rectification campaign has focused, with good reason, on how it unfolded in intellectual circles.²⁶ The invitation to criticize party officials was extended to intellectuals in particular, and schools and offices inhabited by intellectuals became the center of *daming dafang* activities. Students and faculty at universities responded with particular

²¹ Mao 1992, p. 190. This passage is from another version of Mao’s speech to the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, this one published unofficially during the Cultural Revolution.

²² Mao 1968, 1949-1957 volume, p. 339. This passage is from yet another version of Mao’s speech to the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, also published unofficially during the Cultural Revolution. The phrase “*bishang Liangshan*,” which literally means to be forced to go to (join the rebels in) the Liangshan mountains, is taken from the classic novel *Water Margin* (*Shui Hu* 水浒传).

²³ CCP Central Committee 1957.

²⁴ Mao cited in Liu and Fang (1998), p. 561.

²⁵ Jian 1957a.

²⁶ See Andreas 2009; Chen 1960; MacFarquhar 1960; and Mu 1963.

enthusiasm, organizing “free speech forums” (*ziyou luntan*), distributing petitions, and posting big character posters criticizing university leaders and policies, and raising broader issues.

The call to participate in the campaign was also extended to China’s factories, but in a more limited fashion. *Workers’ Daily* (Gongren ribao), the newspaper of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which was controlled by the CCP, published the central guidelines for the campaign on May 1 and in the following weeks carried numerous articles related to the campaign. Its pages were filled with commentaries criticizing the bureaucratic work styles of factory leaders as well as union leaders, who were described as isolated from the masses of workers and unwilling to seriously take up their concerns. The head of the ACFTU, Lai Ruoyu, used the campaign to push for a more autonomous role for the union and to promote the mass supervision functions of staff and workers’ representative congresses.²⁷ These congresses had been established in a growing number of factories and *Workers’ Daily* carried articles about such congress representatives gathering criticisms, grievances, and demands to be submitted to factory leaders.

In practice, however, it seems the *daming dafang* campaign was largely limited to factory offices and seldom reached the shop floor. This was evident from our interviews. We interviewed ten individuals who were employed in production jobs in factories during this period along with six individuals who were not involved directly in production—two worked in factory offices, one worked in a design office for the railroad system, one studied in a factory technical school, and two worked in a trade union office. While the latter group all reported that they had participated in the movement, all of the production workers insisted that their workshop was not involved. “[The campaign] didn’t happen in factories,” a worker in a large electronics plant told us. “There were no big character posters. The party leadership was strong in the factory—no one would dare criticize it.”²⁸ The impression left by these interviews—that the *daming dafang* campaign was largely confined to office staff and factory schools, while workers remained on the sidelines—is reinforced by the coverage of *daming dafang* activities in *Workers’ Daily*, which included many reports about meetings of engineering and technical staff and of union cadres, but hardly mentioned workers, unless they were serving as representatives in employee congresses.²⁹

The *Workers’ Daily* also carried a number of reports about small strikes, slowdowns, and protests by dissatisfied workers. These only give hints about what was actually a major strike wave. In May and June of 1957 in Shanghai alone strikes broke out in some 548 factories. [Add a few sentences about the 1956-7 strike wave.]³⁰

²⁷ See, for instance, the summary of Lai Ruoyu’s comments in the lead article of the May 11, 1957 issue of *Workers’ Daily*, in which he declared that although the union operated under party leadership, it had to be an independent organization that represented the needs and demands of the masses.

²⁸ Interviewee A1.

²⁹ Frazier’s (2002, pp. 199-201) brief account of the Party Rectification and the Anti-Rightist movement in the industrial sector also gives the impression that both campaigns were largely limited to factory offices.

³⁰ For accounts of the strike wave of 1956-57, see Chen 2014, Frazier 2002, pp. 197-99, Harper 1969, Perry 1997, and Sheehan 1998, pp. 47-84.

It is difficult to tell whether the involvement of workers in the *daming dafang* campaign was limited because Mao himself was hesitant to disrupt production, or whether efforts to extend the campaign to the shop floor were thwarted by local leaders. In either case, the campaign came to be identified, at the time and in retrospect, almost exclusively with intellectuals raising criticisms of the party and party officials.

Anti-Rightist backlash

When the *daming dafang* campaign was launched in late April, authorities suggested that it would last for six months, but in early June, after several weeks of increasingly outspoken criticism by intellectuals, CCP leaders struck back in what became the Anti-Rightist movement. Party cadres were clearly unwilling to accept the kind of freewheeling criticism from subordinates and outsiders that took place during the *daming dafang* campaign, and even Mao, who had initiated the ill-fated endeavor, was not happy with the results. The educated employees who staffed the country's schools and offices, including factory offices, had raised criticisms about the bureaucratic work styles of Communist cadres, just as Mao had encouraged them to do, but many went beyond this prescribed topic and raised issues of their own that were not to his liking. Some challenged the legitimacy of party authority, or at least the extent to which the party insisted on imposing its will on all aspects of society. In factories, as in other institutions, members of the technical staff complained that party leaders were attempting to run things they knew nothing about. Mao and other communist leaders saw these objections—and the underlying idea that “non-experts cannot lead experts” (*waihang bu neng lingdao neihang*)—as a challenge to the party's revolutionary mandate.³¹ Nor was Mao inclined to support a more autonomous union, which he thought would encourage workers to pursue individual and group interests, diverting them from collective Communist goals.³²

During the Anti-Rightist movement many of those who had raised criticisms of party leaders during the *daming dafang* campaign were severely punished for their temerity. [Add a few sentences about the national Anti-Rightist movement.]³³

In the industrial sphere, the Anti-Rightist movement was directed against those who had spoken out during the Rectification campaign in offices and schools. One interviewee, who was working in an engineering unit of the national railway system at the time, was among those who suffered as a result. During the *daming dafang* campaign, the unit party secretary had publically encouraged everyone to write big character posters, but the head of the Communist Youth League had privately warned students to be careful about what they wrote. The interviewee promptly wrote a poster denouncing the Youth League leader for suppressing

³¹ See Andreas 2009, pp. 32-41.

³² Lai Ruoyu and his predecessor at the helm of the ACFTU, Li Lisan, who had also sought more autonomy for the union, were both accused of “economism” and “trade unionism.” Although Mao did not directly criticize either man, it is clear that he supported the criticism of both. See Harper 1969 and Zhang 2003.

³³ Add references.

criticism, illustrated with a drawing of a young man with tape over his mouth. For this offense—and because he refused to admit he had done anything wrong—during the subsequent Anti-Rightist campaign he was deemed to be a “medium Rightist” and sent to work laying track in Yunnan for a year. Afterwards he returned to the engineering unit in Beijing, but this blemish in his file meant he was not able to join the party, severely limiting his career prospects.³⁴

A basic level cadre in a steel mill office told a similar story, recounting how he was denounced as a Rightist and sent to work in the countryside for a year after he had raised criticisms about factory leaders during the *daming dafang* campaign. “I shouldn’t have been a Rightist,” he explained. “My family background was peasant, very poor, and I joined the army when I was sixteen. But I believe in seeking truth from facts, if you have something to say, speak openly. ...I think a person has to have his own analysis, his own solutions. If somebody is mistaken, you should be able to tell them how to resolve it.” When he returned to the steel mill, he was demoted to a production job, as were many of the other office employees who had been punished as Rightists.

The Anti-Rightist campaign, which in industrial enterprises was carried out primarily in factory offices and schools, was accompanied by a smaller-scale wave of repression on the shop floor. Interviewees reported that workers who had raised complaints interpreted as hostile to the CCP regime were denounced as “bad elements” and severely punished. [Add a few sentences about punishment of strike leaders.³⁵]

Although union cadres largely escaped criticism during the Anti-Rightist campaign, after Lai Ruoyu died of cancer in 1958, he was posthumously criticized as an “anti-party element” and his supporters in the ACFTU were investigated, denounced, and demoted.³⁶ A union leader who was among those censured told us, “The criticism had a very negative impact. There was a big change in the union. ...No one dared to say anything anymore.”³⁷

Disastrous results

This initial effort to subject party officials to unscripted criticism from below was quite limited and ended disastrously. It was contained within narrow social boundaries and the great majority of the population—workers and peasants—were in practice not permitted to participate. Moreover, the campaign lasted only for a few weeks and then the subsequent Anti-Rightist movement harshly punished those who had spoken out, which had a chilling effect on the whole country.

³⁴ Interviewee B8.

³⁵ Cite references. xx

³⁶ See Harper 1969 and Zhang 2003.

³⁷ Interviewee B6.

During the years that followed this abortive experiment in *daming dafang*, a chastened and more acquiescent union continued to convene employee congresses in factories and the party continued to organize periodic mass supervision campaigns in which workers were urged to criticize factory party leaders in meetings, confidential letters, and big character posters. All of these activities, however, were carefully managed by the party organization. During the largest and most sustained mass supervision campaign, the Four Cleans movement (1962-1966), Mao returned to the CCP's conventional practice of dispatching party work teams to villages and factories to mobilize criticism of local leaders. In factories, these work teams tightly controlled the entire process, relying on workers and basic level cadres considered to be responsible and trustworthy.³⁸

The dramatic reversal of this initial experiment in freewheeling criticism is clearly revealed by looking at changes in the discursive use of *daming dafang* in the pages of *People's Daily*. During the heady weeks of the Party Rectification campaign in the spring of 1957, *daming dafang* was celebrated as a means of strengthening the party by subjecting it to open criticism from below. Even after the tables were turned in early June, defensive party leaders did not renounce the slogan, but only its misuse. Those who were now accused as Rightists were charged with taking advantage of the *daming dafang* movement for malevolent purposes. Jian Bozan, the historian who had been entrusted with promoting the slogan in April, was now compelled to help rein in its use (which for him was undoubtedly a much more disagreeable task), writing a new editorial condemning *luan daming* (speaking out wildly).³⁹ Jian's two articles served as bookends for the brief period of freewheeling criticism of the party.

For a period of time afterward, party authorities continued to employ the *daming dafang* slogan, repurposing it to call on loyalists to speak out against the party's critics. Employees were also mobilized to offer criticisms and suggestions, but in the wake of the Anti-Rightist movement no one dared to *luan daming*. In factories, during the early months of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 interviewees reported that they were encouraged—even required—to post big character posters, but the entire process was carefully managed by the party organization.

Even in this form, however, use of the term *daming dafang*—so foreign to the party's normal ways of operation—trailed off and soon disappeared completely from the pages of *People's Daily*. In the early 1960s, the CCP continued to organize campaigns to criticize Communist cadres, including the protracted Four Cleans movement, which was carried out in factories across the country. Interviewees recounted that during the campaign workers were strongly encouraged to report cadre malfeasance and many cadres were punished, but the movement was tightly controlled by party work teams. Not surprisingly, during these years articles in the *People's Daily* almost never mentioned *daming dafang*.

³⁸ Andreas 2015.

³⁹ Jian 1957b.

Throughout this early period, big democracy remained a discursive threat, rather than an active endeavor. During the tumultuous days of the *daming dafang* movement, *People's Daily* ran editorials penned by intellectual critics advising party officials that if they did not listen to those who were speaking out in measured tones now, they would be inviting a more calamitous reckoning in the future. For instance, Fudan University historian Wang Zaoshi warned, "If in some places they don't allow a bit of small democracy, or even small, small democracy, they'll find themselves in trouble down the road when [the masses] go in for big democracy."⁴⁰ After the Anti-Rightist counterattack began, party officials turned the term against their critics, accusing them of attempting to foment big democracy in order to overturn the new order; Wang was among those denounced as a Rightist.⁴¹ Thus, both in the hands of the party's critics and its defenders, big democracy was initially invoked exclusively as a term of menace. It then disappeared almost entirely from the pages of *People's Daily* for nearly a decade.

Big democracy during the Cultural Revolution

Big democracy made a dramatic reappearance on November 3, 1966 at the sixth of the huge rallies in Tiananmen Square at which Mao greeted hundreds of thousands of young people who had joined the Red Guard movement. Mao did not address the crowd himself, but rather allowed Vice Chairman Lin Biao to issue the refrain that would immediately be taken up as a banner of rebellion against local authorities. "Big democracy," Lin declared, "is about the party having no fear of letting the broad masses use the forms of *daming, dafang, dazibao, da bianlun, da chuanlian* to criticize and supervise leading party and state organs and leaders at all levels."⁴² In its 1966 incarnation, the meaning of big democracy became more or less synonymous with *daming dafang*, but with a more antagonistic edge.

In Mao's estimation, previous attempts to rectify the party had failed, and it was now time to try a more radical approach; big democracy had become a call to action. It would be much less civil than the "mild rain and gentle winds" of the 1957 Party Rectification and much less orchestrated by the party organization than the Four Cleans movement. Mao's earlier warnings about the bureaucratic tendencies of party officials had by this time hardened into more concrete and more incendiary rhetoric. "The class of bureaucrats," he wrote in 1965, referring to officials of his own party, "is a class sharply opposed to the working class and poor and lower-middle peasants. These leaders who take the capitalist road have become, or are becoming, the capitalists who suck the workers' blood. How can they sufficiently understand the necessity of socialist revolution? They are the targets of our struggle and the targets of the revolution."⁴³ That year, in the midst of the Four Cleans campaign, he had declared the main target of the movement to be "those in authority in the party who are taking the capitalist

⁴⁰ Wang 1957.

⁴¹ Cite source xxx.

⁴² Lin cited in "Mao zhuxi diliuci jianyue wenhua geming dajun" 毛主席第六次检阅文化革命大军 (Chairman Mao reviews for the sixth time the troops of the Cultural Revolution) *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) November 11, 1966.

⁴³ Mao wrote this note in response to a report by a leader of the Agricultural Machinery Ministry about his experience implementing the Socialist Education movement in a factory. See Mao 1996, Vol. 11, pp. 265-266.

road.” These “capitalist roaders” (*zouzipai*), as they were called in shorthand form, remained the main target of the Cultural Revolution, and with the offending party officials now defined as class enemies, big democracy became an appropriate means of rectification.⁴⁴

It is evident that Mao did not have a step-by-step strategy for carrying out the Cultural Revolution. In December 1966 he told Zhou Enlai, “You learn to swim by swimming and learn to struggle by struggling; we’ll learn how to do big democracy in the course of the Cultural Revolution.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Mao had drawn a number of lessons from the debacle of 1957 and the shortcomings of the Four Cleans campaign. Basic features of the Cultural Revolution can be interpreted as strategic attempts to rectify problems that had led to the derailing of earlier efforts.

First, the movement was much broader than in 1957, when only intellectuals actively participated. This time workers and peasants were encouraged to join as well, reinforcing the ranks of those who challenged the authority of local party officials.

Second, although party cadres remained the main target, as they had been in 1957, this time the scope of the movement was extended to include intellectuals and other members of the old elite classes.

Third, the attacks on Communist cadres came *only* from the Left, as any possibility for critiques from the Right had been closed off as a result of the Anti-Rightist movement.

Fourth, not only were people encouraged to raise criticisms on their own (without the guidance of party work teams), as they were in 1957, but students, workers, and peasants were explicitly encouraged to form their own “rebel” groups, autonomous from the party organization.

Fifth, not only were party officials instructed not to suppress criticism, as they had been in the past, but the party organization was effectively paralyzed.

The first three features created political dynamics and produced political battle lines very different from those in 1957, when party cadres could dismiss their critics as bourgeois rightists hostile to socialism and proletarian power. The Cultural Revolution shared these features with the Four Cleans campaign, which immediately preceded it. The last two features, however, made the Cultural Revolution different from any previous mass supervision movement, including both the 1957 Party Rectification and the Four Cleans campaign. These became the essential conditions for big democracy as it was practiced in 1966. All five features fostered the emergence of rebel groups, autonomous from the party organization but loyal to Mao, that were in a much better position to mobilize criticism of party officials than those who had raised their voices in 1957.

⁴⁴ CCP Central Committee 1965.

⁴⁵ Mao 1968, p. 365

In the following sections we will first examine the remarkable events that opened the way for big democracy in factories in 1966. We will then look in more detail at key aspects of the Cultural Revolution—as it unfolded in factories—that distinguish it from previous mass movements. Finally, we will briefly consider the impact of the movement and the severe repression employed to rein it in.

Opening the way for big democracy in factories

Like the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign, the Cultural Revolution started in schools, but this time factories were involved from the earliest days of the movement, in the spring of 1966. Although workers did not receive explicit official sanction to form their own rebel organizations and to link up with groups in other factories until December, by then they had long been doing both.

In factories, just as in schools, during the first months of the Cultural Revolution the movement was led by official organs—factory party committees or work teams dispatched by local authorities. In many factories, work teams that had been sent to lead the Four Cleans campaign remained in place, while in others new work teams arrived. Shortly after the new movement was launched in late May 1966, however, Mao began commissioning newspaper articles and radio broadcasts that undermined the authority of the work teams. Then on August 8, the CCP Central Committee, at Mao’s insistence, issued guidelines for the movement, known as the “Sixteen Points,” which stipulated that, “The only method is for the masses to liberate themselves, and any method of doing things in their stead must not be used.” Much of the document was dedicated to warning party leaders not to suppress critics. “Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don’t be afraid of disturbances.” Cognizant of the fact that those who had challenged local authorities were almost invariably in the minority, it specified: “Any method of forcing a minority holding different views to submit is impermissible. The minority should be protected, because sometimes the truth is with the minority. Even if the minority is wrong, they should still be allowed to argue their case and reserve their views.” In a passage that presaged the turmoil ahead, the document endorsed the formation of “Cultural Revolution groups, committees, and other organizational forms created by the masses,” referring to these ambiguously as both “organs of power” and “mass organizations,” and it called for elections to select the leaders of these organizations.⁴⁶

These pronouncements encouraged workers to resist the overweening control that party leaders were accustomed to exercising. An electronics worker described the confrontation that ensued in his factory between workers and the work team sent by municipal authorities to lead the Cultural Revolution in his factory. “The work team was too strict, it tried to restrict the masses, it wouldn’t allow this, it wouldn’t allow that, it was just too much,” Zhang recalled. “So, the masses wouldn’t listen to them and we finally ran them out.” The climactic incident came after workers posted a big character poster denouncing the arrogant and domineering (*zhuanheng bahu*) style of the factory party secretary and the leader of the work team

⁴⁶ CCP Central Committee 1966.

responded by admonishing the party secretary for “stirring up a hornets’ nest.” “The workers wouldn’t stand for that,” Zhang said. “A large crowd surrounded (the work team leader) and asked what he meant (by calling the workers ‘hornets’). ‘Whose side is your ass sitting on? You aren’t speaking for us workers; you’re speaking for the cadres, you’re speaking for the capitalist roaders.’” A few days later, municipal authorities were compelled to withdraw the work team. We asked Zhang why the workers were not scared of the work team. “Scared of what?” he replied. “The higher levels were all in trouble. It was big democracy.”

As work teams were withdrawn, factory authorities—in line with the “Sixteen Points”—set up “Cultural Revolution committees” to take over leadership of the movement and encouraged the organization of semi-official “Red Guard” groups composed of reliable workers with impeccable class backgrounds. Mao’s sharp criticism of the work teams, however, had emboldened recalcitrant workers and many were no longer willing to follow the direction of any committees created by local party authorities. Their confidence grew in October as central directives encouraged students to organize their own “fighting groups” and prohibited local authorities from doing anything to put fetters on these organizations. Then in November, the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (CCRS), the ad hoc body set up by Mao to provide guidance for the movement, declared that workers also had the right to organize their own fighting groups.⁴⁷ This initiative was sharply debated at a series of central meetings that month, with top party leaders insisting that workers should not be allowed to form rebel groups and that “students and workers must not be permitted to join forces in rebellion.” This, however, was precisely what Mao intended. He prevailed, and in early December the Political Bureau issued an authoritative decree affirming the right of workers to form their own “revolutionary organizations” and link up with groups in other factories.⁴⁸

During the final weeks of 1966, rebel workers—encouraged by ever more astounding pronouncements from Beijing—grew increasingly aggressive and factory leaders grew more hesitant to suppress their challengers. Under these conditions, the rebel movement in factories across the country took off. A textile worker who helped create a rebel group in his factory told us, “When the Cultural Revolution started, every work unit formed a Cultural Revolution committee. But once the majority of people realized that the official committee couldn’t represent their own thinking, they rejected it and organized their own. That’s when the Cultural Revolution really began.” Workers, he explained, adopted a new attitude, completely at odds with the way the CCP had run political campaigns in the past. “If they wanted to really have a Cultural Revolution, they had to have their own organization. Only by having their own organization, could they represent their own will.” By December, there were two competing Cultural Revolution committees in his textile mill, the official one, which had an office in the administration building, and an unofficial one, which operated out of the factory’s residential compound.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Central Cultural Revolution Small Group 1966.

⁴⁸ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, pp. 142-144.

⁴⁹ Interviewee H11.

Since the first days of the movement, workers had been visiting universities to read big character posters and listen to the debates, and by fall some had developed ties with student groups. By late fall, large numbers of students—including emissaries of the most influential university rebel groups—moved into factories and, according to workers we interviewed, they played a critical role in helping rebel workers groups formulate demands, articulate criticisms of factory leaders, write big character posters, and publish fliers. Factories, like schools, became sites of fervent debates, which took place among groups gathered in residential compounds, canteens, and production facilities, in public meetings called by competing factions, in fliers and big character posters, and via factory public address systems.

By the end of the year, enterprise party organizations—which had dominated all aspects of factory life in the past—had largely ceased functioning and they remained dormant for at least two years.⁵⁰ Employees in factories across China had generally split into two broad camps—rebels, who attacked the factory party leadership, and conservatives, who supported them.

Autonomous organization

The Cultural Revolution was a sudden, dramatic break from the normal routines of factory political life, which until that point had all been highly organized and firmly led by the party organization. These routines included daily small group meetings to discuss workshop and factory affairs, as well as the periodic meetings of the factory-level staff and workers representative congresses. Even when normal routines were disrupted by periodic mass supervision campaigns, the party organization remained in charge. During the Four Cleans campaign, for instance, although the factory party leadership was typically set aside, a party work team arrived to take charge of the movement and mobilize workers to criticize local leaders.

During the Cultural Revolution, in contrast, rebel groups were self-organized; their leaders nominated themselves and recruited their own followings. Workers organized myriad small fighting groups, usually composed of a few people from the same workshop, which coalesced into department-wide and factory-wide coalitions. These coalitions linked up with like-minded groups in other factories and schools, forming municipal and eventually provincial alliances (they were prohibited from creating national organizations). These were, however, unstable combinations with fluid memberships and little in the way of a chain of command. Even within each factory, the rebel camp was a loose coalition of fighting groups, which each published their own fliers and called their own meetings, often with contrary opinions and agendas.

Although rebel groups were autonomous from the party organization, they were loyal to Mao. They arose in response to Mao's call, embraced his goals, and sought to follow his leadership.

⁵⁰ Li and Perry (1997, p. 158) recounted experimental efforts to rebuild party organizations in several Shanghai factories as early as November 1968. Workers and cadres I interviewed reported that party reconstruction began much later in their factories.

Moreover, they also could scarcely afford to stray from his auspices, as their existence depended on his support. They made up for their disorganization with enthusiasm, and they eagerly took up Mao's call to "bombard the headquarters."⁵¹

The rebels recognized that their movement could only have come into existence because the pervasive control of the party organization had been undermined. "If we had listened to the party committee, how would we ever have rebelled?" an aluminum mill worker who became a rebel leader asked rhetorically.

That's the problem—if you want to have a real mass movement, if you want the masses to really participate, you have to make the party committee stop its activities. If it doesn't, how can you do anything if they are exercising control at every level? You have to let the masses liberate themselves and educate themselves, you have to let them compete among themselves to find problems and discover the truth, let them make mistakes and debate right and wrong.

"Only the Cultural Revolution," he continued, "was from the bottom up, rather than from the top down, and that's why it exposed so many of the party's problems." In his mill a turning point in the movement came in late 1966 when rebel workers physically took over the podium during a mass rally organized by the factory party committee.

Big democracy broke down the relationship between leaders and led, between the leaders and the masses. You didn't have to be scared that the leaders would retaliate, so you dared to speak out, you dared to stir things up, to really speak your mind. So at that time you could report real problems in the basic level work units...and all the accumulated grievances came out. ...Before the Cultural Revolution there were always movements, but many of the problems had not been resolved. ...the Four Cleans movement hadn't resolved the problems. Now there was big democracy, everyone could speak. Big democracy—that's how the problems came up.⁵²

Workers who joined the conservative camp, in contrast, were averse to the disruption caused by the rebels. A conservative activist in a steel mill explained, "During the Cultural Revolution the top levels were in chaos, no one was in charge. The workers in the factory divided into two factions—one defended the factory leaders and the other opposed them." He joined the latter camp, he said, because "I was against overthrowing everything and smashing everything. If there's a problem, you should discuss it, right?"⁵³ Another conservative activist, a mid-level cadre in a vacuum tube factory, contrasted the chaos of the Cultural Revolution with the orderliness of the preceding Four Cleans campaign. "[Before] everything was based on documents handed down, level by level, from the center. ...It wasn't spontaneous—it was carried out the way movements were supposed to be conducted, following the regular

⁵¹ Mao 1966.

⁵² Interviewee A3.

⁵³ Interviewee W8.

conventions. ...I think the Four Cleans movement was the healthiest movement; during the Cultural Revolution things got crazy (*luanle*)”⁵⁴

Broad participation

In factories, participation in the Cultural Revolution was broader, deeper, and more fervent than in previous mass supervision movements. Unlike the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign, this time the movement was not confined to factory offices, but extended down to the shop floor. The masses of workers had, of course, been mobilized to participate in previous mass supervision movements that were led by the party organization, including the Four Cleans campaign, but these operations had relied largely on a minority of the workforce. This minority included party members, who in the best-organized factories encompassed perhaps 20% of the employees, and a select group of non-party “activists” (*jiji fenzi*) and “backbone” (*gugan*) workers. The majority of workers were required to attend meetings, but their participation was largely formalistic.

The Cultural Revolution’s style of big democracy generated a very different kind of politics. Mao’s call for rebellion electrified the country and inspired political participation that was broader and more disorderly. The extraordinary events of the early months of the Cultural Revolution galvanized workers who had never been very involved in party-organized activities in the factory. The leaders of factory-based rebel groups were typically workers, not cadres. Many were disaffected rank-and-file party members, but others were independent-minded individuals who were never able to join the party or were never inclined to do so. The rank-and-file members of rebel organizations were mainly workers who had not been closely associated with the party organization. They did so for a variety of reasons—they were attracted to Mao’s radical ideas, they were dissatisfied with the status quo, they didn’t like the party’s tight system of control, they had grievances against factory leaders, they figured rebel activism might bring future opportunities for political advancement, or they followed trusted friends, family members, and fellow workers.⁵⁵

The most reliable employees—basic-level cadres, shop floor supervisors, “backbone” workers, rank-and-file party members, young activists, and so on—were more likely to support the conservatives. From the perspective of conservative activists, their own camp was filled with “higher quality” workers who played an active role in the factory, while the rebel movement was filled with “lower quality” workers who normally took little responsibility for factory affairs. A shop floor supervisor in a textile mill described the employees in the conservative camp as “essential, dependable people, the ones who upheld order, who had strong abilities, did good work, and were steadfast and hardworking.” They were, he added, the type of people who had strong moral characters, who had joined the youth league and the party and served as basic

⁵⁴ Interviewee A2.

⁵⁵ These impressions of the characteristics of the rebel camp are similar to those presented in Perry and Li’s (1997) study of Cultural Revolution factions in Shanghai factories.

level leaders. The rebels, he said, were the “unruly troublemakers, who did poor work, and goofed off.”⁵⁶

Rebels, of course, disputed this characterization. “Those who participated in the rebel faction had a rebellious spirit,” a rebel activist in a wood products factory contended. “Some were uncouth, but only a few. Most were decent people (*laoshi*). They were dissenters, but most of them still wanted to make the factory better.”⁵⁷ Some rebels, however, acknowledged that—if one used the party’s conventional standards—those in their camp did not stack up well against those in the conservative camp. “In terms of people’s political level, political consciousness, and theoretical level, the loyalists (*baohuang pai*) were stronger than the rebels; in terms of their positions at work, their education, they were better,” a rebel leader admitted, adding, “The people who were with me, they were the ‘rabble’ (*wuhe zhizhong*).” Because he had been regarded as an excellent employee, he told us, people were surprised when he joined the rebel camp. The reason he did, he explained, was because he had an independent spirit and thought the rebels were right for “standing up and criticizing the leaders.”⁵⁸

The rebels took pride in their “rebel spirit” and “independent thinking,” creating a model of activism very different from that which the CCP had promoted in the past. The Cultural Revolution drew attention to a contradiction in Communist discourse that reflected a tension at the heart of the party’s political project. On the one hand, the CCP celebrated the broad masses as the true makers of history, and the party’s rhetoric about democracy always stressed the active participation of the masses of workers in the political affairs of their factories. On the other hand, much of the actual political work of the party involved cultivating a select group of workers who had characteristics the party identified as “advanced,” including actively participating in the affairs of the factory and the country and placing the public interest above individual interests. This recruitment system also selected for conformism, fostered dependent relations between members and leaders, and instilled in those selected an elite sensibility. In the terminology of the party, the “masses” (*qunzhong*) referred to those who were not among this “advanced” segment of the workforce. In other words, “masses” also meant “backwards.”

The problem was that the “advanced” workers were too integrated into the system to serve as effective agents of mass supervision. Because they were close to the factory establishment and accustomed to working within the system and conforming to its rules, they were not inclined to challenge party leaders. Big democracy required insurgents, and Mao found them among the disaffected, non-conformist, discontented, alienated and unfettered. Big democracy upended normal politics and political categories, with Mao supporting a rebel movement that activated workers who had been considered “backward” according the CCP’s conventional standards.

Attacking bureaucratism from the Left

⁵⁶ Interviewee H25.

⁵⁷ Interviewee G3.

⁵⁸ Interviewee A1.

The Cultural Revolution has been identified with an array of radical industrial management policies including employing moral incentives in place of material incentives, developing factory-based education and technical training, promoting technical and administrative cadres from among the ranks of the workers (rather than from among graduates of conventional colleges), creating three-in-one technology innovation teams composed of workers along with technical and administrative cadres, reforming unreasonable rules and regulations, devolving managerial responsibilities to the small group level, requiring regular participation by cadres in physical labor, and so forth.⁵⁹ These policies were promoted by Mao and by his radical followers in the party leadership during the Cultural Revolution decade, and they were able to do so because of the upheaval brought about by the rebel movement. These policies were not, however, what drove workers to join the rebel movement, or what divided rebel workers from their conservative colleagues. Indeed, the kind of workers most likely to be inspired by these practical reforms—those who took responsibility for factory affairs, got involved in technical innovation, and were recognized as “advanced producers”—were more likely to be found in the conservative camp.

Throughout their brief existence, the rebel organizations’ main purpose was to attack the overbearing control of the party organization in their workplaces. Inspired by Mao’s slogan “to rebel is justified,” the earliest rebel fighting groups coalesced around a common aspiration to challenge the authority of party officials, which in the past had been unassailable. They criticized the privileges enjoyed by leading cadres, and they were particularly eager to condemn their arrogant and domineering behavior and their suppression of contrary views. They detested the culture of conformism, tutelage, and patronage promoted by the party organization and condemned the “slave mentality” of those who supported the party committee.

The criticisms of the party establishment raised by Cultural Revolution rebels were in many ways similar to those raised by intellectuals in 1957. This is not surprising because in both cases the critics were responding to Mao’s call to criticize what he identified as the bureaucratism of party officials. There were, however, critical differences. First, the intellectuals who spoke up in 1957 could easily be denounced as defenders of the old order, in which they had been among the privileged elites. This was especially true because although the critics of 1957 usually carefully couched their criticisms in socialist language, the vantage point from which they raised these criticisms was typically to the Right of the party. Many favored a more liberal version of socialism, they condemned Leftist practices by dogmatic officials, enunciating views easily associated with those of contemporary liberal critics of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe.

In contrast, the worker rebels of 1966 could not be so easily dismissed. They were less vulnerable precisely because they were workers, celebrated as the leading class in socialist construction, but also because their criticisms were raised unambiguously from the Left. Their fiery denunciations were made under Mao Zedong’s banner, and they condemned party cadres

⁵⁹ See Andors (1977) and Bettelheim (1974).

as revisionist betrayers of the Communist cause. This language was not simply strategic; it came naturally to a generation of workers educated by the Communist Party. The liberal ideas of the 1957 critics were proscribed in China after of the Anti-Rightist movement, and they were foreign to Cultural Revolution rebels.

Moreover, although rebel workers directed their main fire at Communist officials, they had no compunction about also criticizing members of the old elite, including leading non-Communist technical cadres in their factories. These individuals were legitimate targets under the official guidelines for the movement, including the Sixteen Points, and many had been favorite targets of the semi-official Red Guards in the summer and fall of 1966. Even when factory rebels criticized party leaders, contemporary criticisms were often combined with accusations involving “historical problems” and problematic family ties, a line of attack more reminiscent of the Anti-Rightist movement and the Four Cleans campaign than the 1957 *daming dafang* movement. Thus, although the primary target of both the Party Rectification campaign and the Cultural Revolution was the party officialdom, the protagonists and the discourse of the two movements were very different.

The discourse—not to mention the actions—of the Cultural Revolution was also much more radical and much less civil than that of the 1957 *daming dafang* movement. This was the result of Mao’s decision to define the main targets of the movement—the capitalist roaders—as class enemies. In practice, as many scholars have noted, the precise meaning of this term was quite ambiguous.⁶⁰ The size of the group to which the term capitalist roaders referred was also unclear. On the one hand, Mao insisted that the great majority of Communist cadres were “good or relatively good.” On the other hand, people in every work unit were encouraged to treat the leaders of their unit as if they were all capitalist roaders. In practice, in every factory we investigated all leader—from workshop directors to factory heads—were removed from power at least temporarily, and most had to endure struggle-criticism meetings and admit their mistakes before their subordinates.

“At first it wasn’t clear who was a capitalist roader—you didn’t know,” an electronics worker recalled. “So it was up to you to expose them, it was up to the masses to decide.” For the rebels in his factory, he recounted, the main practical offense associated with taking the capitalist road was abusing workers and suppressing criticism. Looking back, he believed the ordeal had a powerful impact on cadre behavior. “There was a big change in cadres’ attitude towards the masses,” he said. “Cadres who have been attacked—who have been through the masses putting up big character posters—are different than those who have not been attacked. The old capitalist roaders who had been overthrown and then came back to work, their work style was much better.”⁶¹ A workshop director in a ball bearing factory had a similar assessment, but was not as sanguine about the results. “During the Cultural Revolution,” he reported, “there was a big change. Peoples’ thinking was not stable, it was a little anarchic, so relations [between cadres and workers] were not as good. ...They criticized the old cadres for *guankaya*

⁶⁰ See Krauss 1981.

⁶¹ Interviewee A3.

(controlling, restricting, and repressing). ...So [afterwards] the cadres did not manage things as tightly. ...They were scared of making a mistake.”⁶²

Because the Cultural Revolution was much more freewheeling, it was more unpredictable than previous movements and there often were sharp differences of opinion. Competing mass organizations convened “criticism-struggle” meetings in which factory leaders were criticized by subordinates. “It was true democracy,” a rebel railroad worker told us, although from his description it is clear that the leaders being criticized probably did not agree with this assessment. “When we called meetings there were debates. The leaders didn’t dare talk—they were the targets. We made them make self-criticisms. The conservatives insisted that the party committee had not made any mistakes. It was a debate among the masses. We debated all the time—when we were working, when we ate, after work.”⁶³

Reining in big democracy

In January 1967, Mao called on rebels throughout the country to overthrow the party committees in their workplaces and municipalities and “seize power.” As might be expected, this led a chaotic struggle for power among competing mass organizations. Teams of military officers were dispatched to larger factories as arbitrators, and contention over who was to be named to new “revolutionary committees” led to complex and shifting alliances. Factional contention continued for nearly two years and in many places generated violent confrontations. Depending on the results of these battles, leaders of some rebel groups were integrated into the new governing bodies, while leaders of others were excluded.

Just as happened in 1957, the initial *daming dafang* period of the Cultural Revolution was concluded with a fearsome round of repression. This time, however, the *daming dafang* period was much more protracted, disruptive, and violent, and the subsequent period of repression was also much harsher. In late 1968 and early 1969, all rebel groups were compelled to disband; those that resisted were violently suppressed. A series of repressive campaigns, conducted largely by local military authorities, crushed all outward indications of factional activity, and, just as in 1957, a remarkable period of *daming dafang* gave way to a period of enforced reticence.

In both episodes, Mao was complicit in the suppression of those he had called upon to speak out. In the end, he was unwilling to countenance lasting autonomous organizations. In late 1968, as Mao was trying to curb the unruly semi-autonomous forces he had unleashed and begin to revive the party organization, a steady stream of headlines in *People’s Daily* insisted on the need for unitary leadership (*yiyuanhua lingdao*). Ultimately, Mao remained committed to this principle and it was necessary, therefore, to rein in big democracy.

⁶² Interviewee H14.

⁶³ Interviewee H2.

Instead of permanent autonomous organizations, Mao placed his hope on repeated upheavals. This idea was rooted in his notion of the cyclical nature of politics, featuring alternating phases of “unity-struggle-unity.” In late 1967, not long before he ordered the rebel organizations to disband, he warned that there would be more such upheavals: “The current Cultural Revolution is only the first; there will have to be many more in the future... All members of the party and all the people of the country must not think that after one, two, three, or four cultural revolutions things will be calm and peaceful.”⁶⁴ During the remaining years of his life, however, Mao recognized that neither the party nor the populace had the stomach for another movement as tumultuous as the one they had just lived through. And the model he had created of episodic, freewheeling mass supervision—which was dependent on his personal authority—did not survive his death.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that the 1957 Party Rectification and the Cultural Revolution shared common features that made them unique among the many mass political movements initiated by Mao Zedong during the first three decades of Communist power in China. The main purpose of both was to mobilize criticism of Communist cadres from below, focusing especially on what the CCP called bureaucratic behavior. Although the two movements shared these features with a number of other major campaigns during this period, these were the only two in which Mao experimented with *daming dafang*, that is, freewheeling mass criticism.

The first of these experiments, the 1957 Party Rectification campaign, was an unmitigated failure. The scope was largely limited to intellectuals; hesitant efforts to involve workers hardly got off the ground. Moreover, the movement lasted only a few weeks before it gave way to a massive backlash in which those who had spoken up were punished, many severely. Because the movement was largely limited to intellectual circles and the party’s critics typically raised their objections from liberal perspectives, they were easily attacked as anti-socialist. Communist cadres certainly did not learn to accept criticism from below; instead the Anti-Rightist movement muted criticism of party officials for years to come.

On the eve of the 1957 campaign, Mao had warned his comrades that if they did not allow the party to be rectified through “mild rain and gentle winds” they would face much more turbulent unrest, which he called big democracy. In 1966, convinced that Communist officials had failed to heed his warning and were becoming a “bureaucratic class,” he attempted to unleash a form of big democracy that he could manipulate. *Daming dafang* returned, but in a much less civil form.

Compared to the abortive 1957 campaign, the Cultural Revolution was far more extensive, deeper, and more protracted. It was much broader, including—in addition to intellectuals—tens of millions of workers and peasants; while it was once again launched in schools, factories

⁶⁴ Mao 1996, Vol. 12, pp. 352.

soon became key centers of the movement. Once again party leaders were warned not to suppress their critics, but this time local party organizations were effectively paralyzed. Mao encouraged people to form their own rebel organizations, and groups of rebel workers, autonomous from the party organization but loyal to Mao, became ardent agents of his campaign to uproot bureaucratism, enthusiastically attacking and overthrowing local authorities.

The Cultural Revolution was, as a consequence, much more successful in compelling Communist cadres to face mass criticism. It led to a complete overhaul of the leadership of every factory, school, and government office. The costs, however, were also enormous. The movement shook the foundations of the social and political order the CCP had established and led the country to the brink of civil war. Ultimately, it culminated in waves of repression far more severe and violent than the Anti-Rightist movement had been.

Under Mao, *daming dafang* was not a permanent condition, but a movement that had a beginning and an end. Observing both episodes, it is clear that the beginning required Mao's impetus and protection and the end necessarily involved repression. Mao's intentions in 1957 have been debated ever since. Some scholars have claimed that he initiated the Party Rectification campaign only to lure party critics into raising their voices so they could be suppressed, an interpretation that is supported by Mao's own statements during the Anti-Rightist campaign.⁶⁵ Others, including Roderick MacFarquhar, have disputed this interpretation, arguing that after the Party Rectification campaign gave rise to unexpectedly sharp criticisms of the CCP, Mao was compelled to retreat, conceding to other party leaders who had opposed his *daming dafang* initiative.⁶⁶ This explanation is supported by subsequent events. The revival of *daming dafang* in a much more potent form in 1966 leaves little doubt that Mao's call to criticize the party's shortcomings in 1957 was more than a ploy. In the years that followed, Mao remained deeply disturbed by the domineering behavior of his party officials and he continued to see criticism from below as the only possible antidote. At the same time, the bouts of repression that followed both experiments clearly indicates that Mao was not averse to suppressing those who responded to his call. Moreover, this kind of repression seems to have been a necessary element in Mao's improvisational strategy, as he tried to harness big democracy to reform the party he had brought to power.

Epilogue

After Mao's death in 1976, big democracy became anathema in official party discourse. In the critiques of the Cultural Revolution penned by party officials and intellectuals who had been its victims, the term became a synonym for chaos, anarchism, lawlessness, and mindless

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Chang and Halliday 2005.

⁶⁶ MacFarquhar 1960, p. 12 and MacFarquhar 1974, p. 280. Also see Dittmer 1987, p. 65, and Walder 2015, pp. 148-151.

violence.⁶⁷ The new leadership that coalesced around Deng Xiaoping soon removed all traces of big democracy from the PRC Constitution, eliminating the “four bigs” (*daming dafang da bianlun dazibao*) in 1980 and the right to strike in 1982.⁶⁸

In the late 1980s, the term big democracy reappeared in *People's Daily* articles, but only as an indictment of the student demonstrations of those years. In dozens of articles, the legacy of big democracy was invoked in order to denounce student activists for inciting disorder. A piece published in the July 8, 1989 edition of the newspaper condemned in particularly strong terms the protesters who had been driven out of Tiananmen Square the previous month, charging them with trying to foment big democracy in order to bring down the social order.⁶⁹ Since then, the term has never again appeared in the pages of the *People's Daily*.

Other notes (to myself)

1. Engage theory?
2. Engage Schurmann and others who compare CR to *daming dafang*.
3. Cite scholarship that sees CR as similar to Anti-Rightist movement. Look for ways to engage.
4. 1957: constructive criticism. 1966: destructive (*da minzhu*)
5. Cite Yin Hongbiao book and articles in which he highlights the continuity in grievances in 1957, 1966, 1979, 1989. Political context and discourse, however, changed.
6. More on strikes and protests by workers in 1956-7 (cite Frazier, Perry, Feng Chen, Huaiyin Li).
7. Yiyuanhua lingdao. Cycles, Mao and the party.
8. Journal to submit to? *Journal of Asian Studies*? *Modern China*?

⁶⁷ See, for instance, “*Chedi fouding ‘da minzhu’*” (Thoroughly oppose ‘big democracy.’), *Renmin ribao*, August 15, 1984.

⁶⁸ Chang 2003.

⁶⁹ “Zhengxie qijie changweihui diqici huiyi jinxing dahui fayan sizhong quanhui zhenfen minxin yiyi shenyuan dangqian zhuahao sijian dashi shen de renxin” 政协七届常委会第七次会议进行大会发言 四中全会振奋民心意义深远 当前抓好 四件大事深得人心” (Speech at the Seventh Standing Committee meeting of the Seventh CPPCC: Fourth Plenary Session cheers up the masses; carrying out the four major works has won people's support). *Renmin ribao*, July 8, 1989.

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Figure 1
***People's Daily* articles containing "mass supervision," 1949-1968**

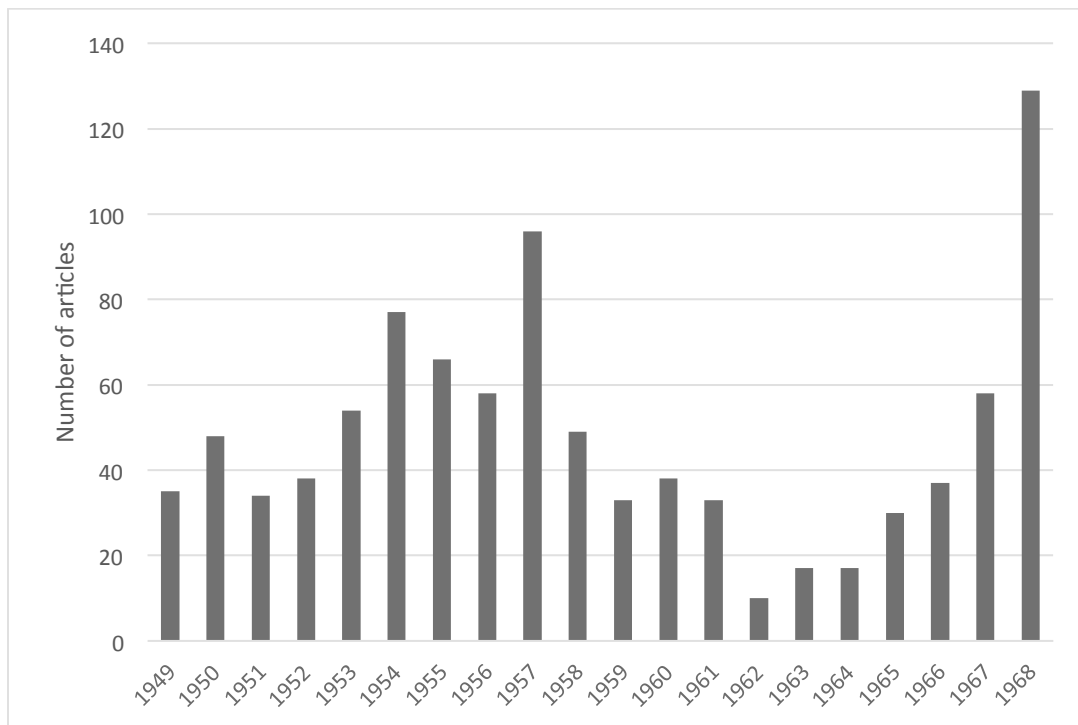


Figure 2

People's Daily mass supervision articles, 1949-1968: Targeted groups (overall distribution)

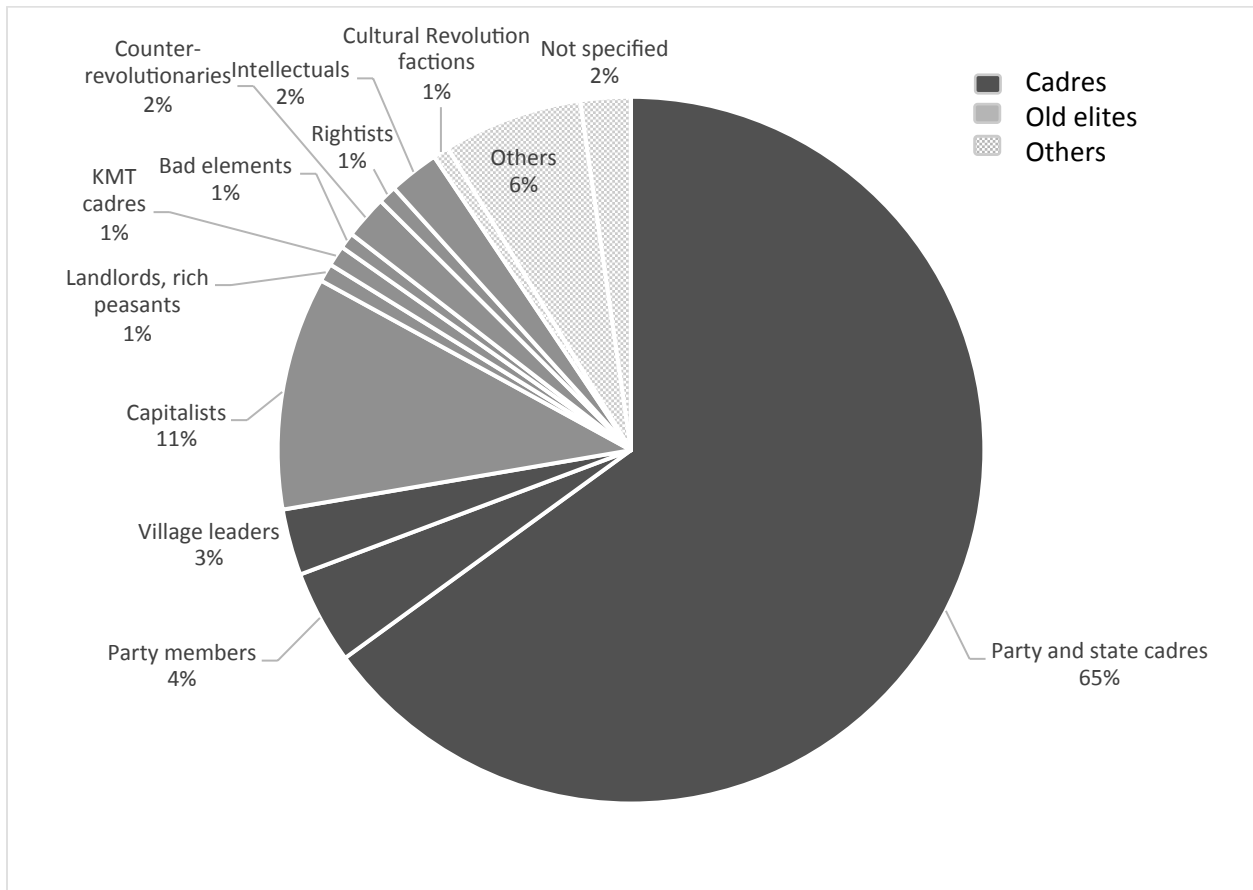


Figure 3

People's Daily mass supervision articles, 1949-1968: Targeted groups (annual distribution)

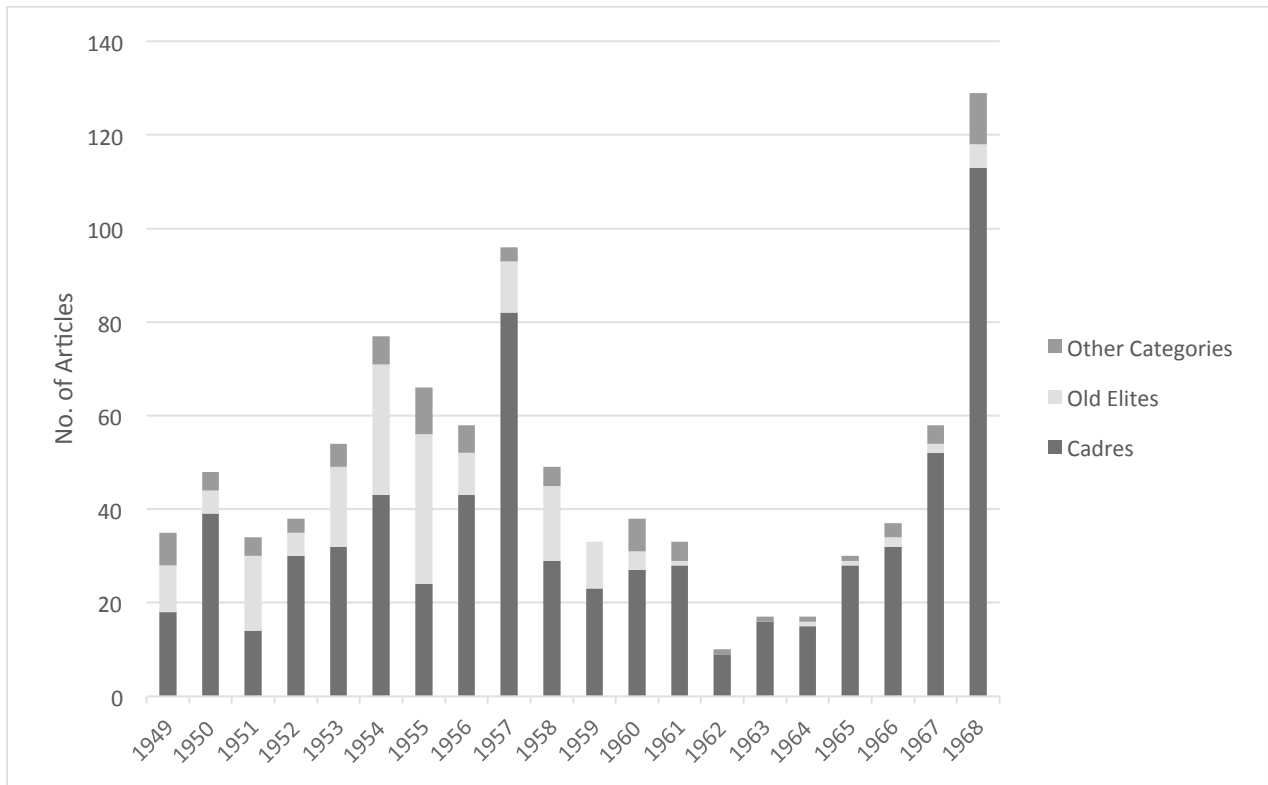


Figure 4

People's Daily mass supervision articles, 1949-1968: Targeted behaviors (overall distribution)

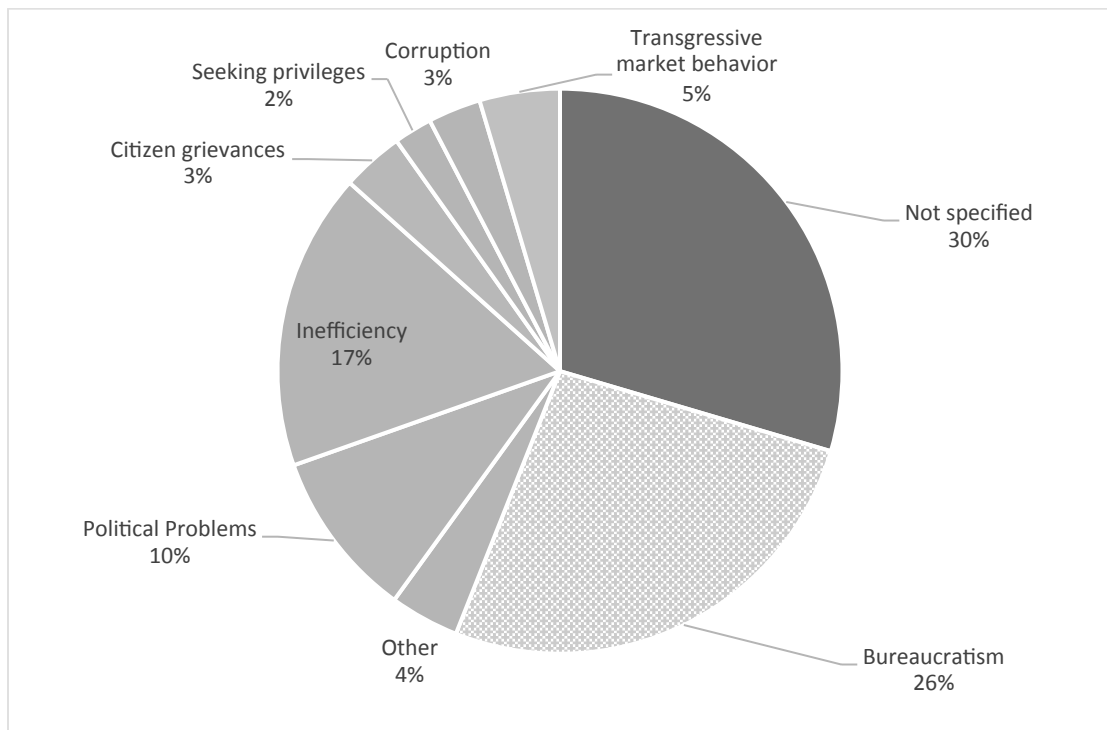


Figure 5

***People's Daily* mass supervision articles, 1949-1968: Targeted behaviors (annual distribution)**

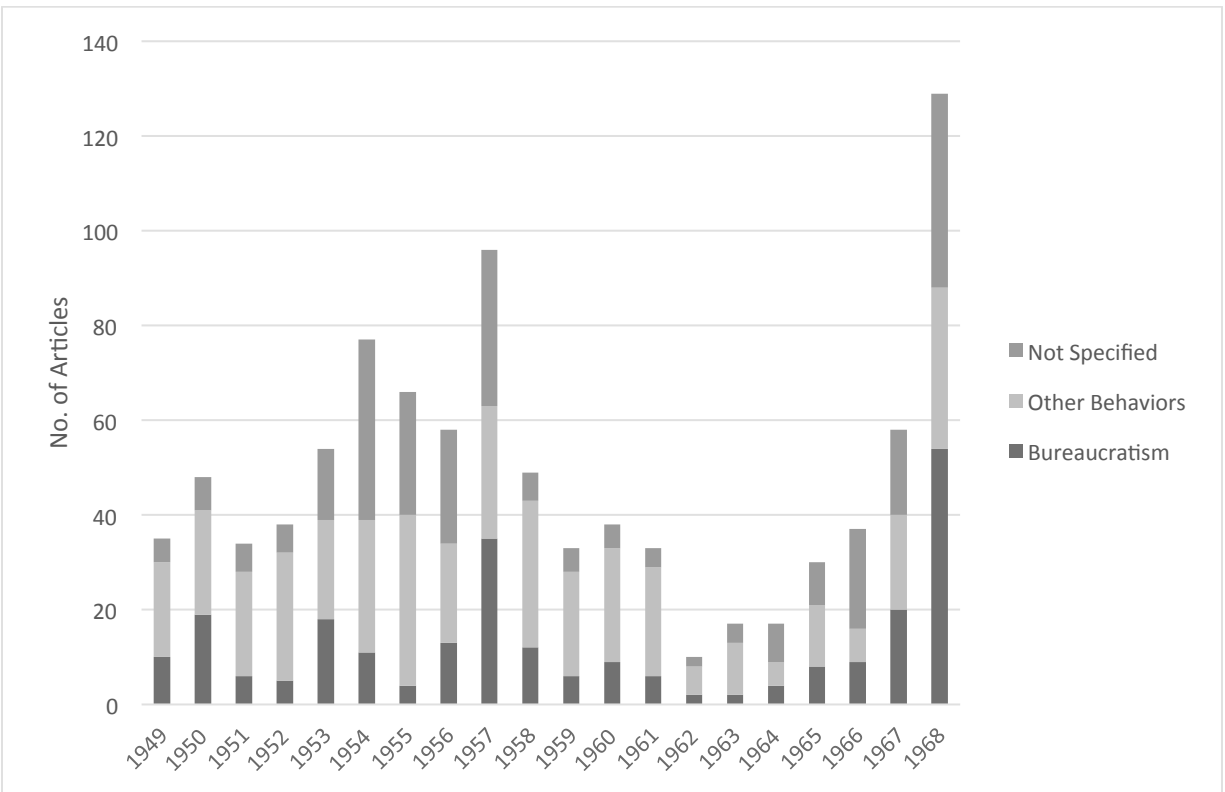


Figure 6

People's Daily articles containing "daming dafang," "da bianlun," or "da chuanlian," 1949-1976

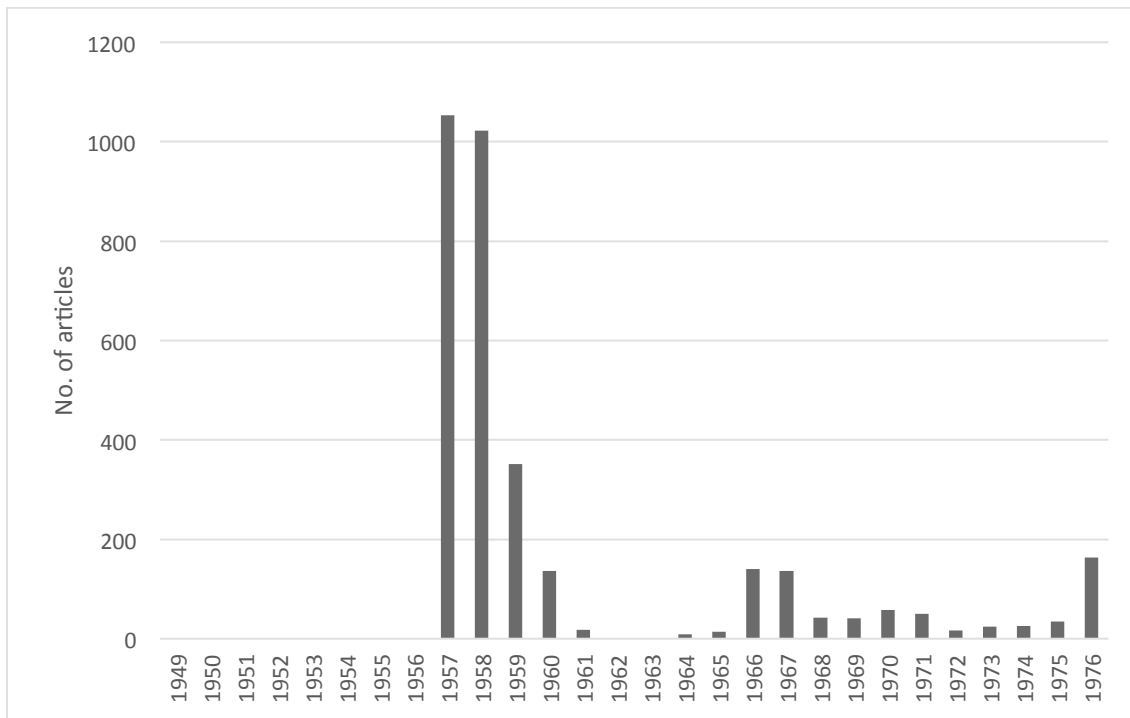


Figure 7
***People's Daily* articles containing "big democracy," 1949-1976**

