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The Dao County Massacre of 1967

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The 1967 mass killing in Dao County, known as the Dao County Massacre, was 66 days of mass destruction in Hunan Province, China, lasting from August 13 to October 17, 1967. It resulted in 4,519 dead, of whom 4,193 were killed outright and 326 were forced to commit suicide. In Dao County, 38 communes and townships, 485 production brigades, 1,529 production teams, and 2,681 households (with family members killed) were involved; 117 households were entirely wiped out. The brutality of the massacre also spread to 10 neighboring cities and counties, and led to a further 4,000 deaths. Statistics shows that the death toll reached 1.2 percent of the population of Dao County (Zhang, 2002). This massacre was one of the worst mass killings that occurred during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China. Since the county is located in the southern border of Hunan Province neighboring on Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, the massacre afterwards provoked similar slaughters in those two provinces. Since most studies of the Cultural Revolution until now have focused on China s main cities (Su, 2006), the Dao County massacre demonstrates that events at provincial grassroots level were sometimes far more complex and even worse than in the cities.

There are two principal features of this massacre. The first one is that it took place during the Cultural Revolution. The other is that nearly 90 percent of the victims were labeled as class enemies , i.e., the so-called Black Five Categories (landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists) and their family members. Therefore, it should fit the term of classicide coined by Michael Mann, representing a special analytical category of political mass violence targeting all class enemies. (Mann, 2005: 17) However, according to the standards of Western sociology, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists are generally considered to be political, not social enemies, so the massacre was a blend of politicide and classicide .

Context

The turbulent era of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is widely known as a pivotal historical event and the one of the most ruthless humanitarian calamities of the entire fifty years of the People s Republic of China (PRC). Purportedly to prevent China from deviating from its socialist path, Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mobilized the masses in a battle against what he considered to be the bourgeoisie within the ruling party. According to Mao, one of the main tasks of his revolution was to purge those power holders in the party who take the capitalist road (also known as capitalist-roaders). Some of the leaders so labeled took a less radical approach than Mao s to China s economic development " including Mao s first chosen successor, President Liu Shaoqi, who Mao was beginning to view as his main political rival in the CCP leadership in the early 1960s. Nevertheless they were all committed communists and had never conceived a program, as charged, to restore capitalism in China. In addition, the Cultural Revolution had a far greater impact on the lives of ordinary people and Chinese society in general than any other political movement in the history of the PRC. Citizens classified in the Black Five Categories were regarded as another group of class enemies. They were invariably persecuted and remained downtrodden throughout the entire decade. As the natural targets of the Cultural Revolution, a large percentage of school teachers and college professors were persecuted as bourgeois intellectuals in the early stages and subjected to the orders of factory workers and then the soldiers sent by Mao to take control of the country s schools in the later years of the Cultural Revolution. Enthusiastic urban youths at middle schools and colleges formed Red Guard organizations and served as Mao s crusading army against the traditional party and state establishment. Mao officially launched his Revolution on May 16, 1966, when an enlarged CCP Politburo meeting was held in Beijing to purge the so-called Peng (Zhen)-Luo (Ruiqing)-Lu (Dingyi)-Yang (Shangkun) Anti-Party Clique. These four leading CCP Politburo members were viewed by Mao as being close associates of his political rival Liu Shaoqi. In early August, Mao convened the Eleventh Plenum of the CCP Eighth Central Committee in Beijing. At the Plenum, Mao

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wrote a big-character poster entitled Bombard the Headquarters, implying that Liu and his supporters were using a measure of bourgeois dictatorship. The Plenum adopted a radical guideline designating the purge of capitalist-roaders and all other class enemies as the focus of the Cultural Revolution. In the meantime, Mao made a decisive move to mobilize thousands of student Red Guards in his effort to topple Liu and to shake up the entire party and society, which triggered the first nationwide wave of violence. During this period, millions of innocent people such as the so-called Black Five Categories and bourgeois intellectuals were persecuted, their households were ransacked, and they and their family members were expelled from the major cities and sent to poverty-stricken rural areas (Guo, 2006: 238-240 and Ding, 1999). In January 1967, Mao further called on all of the Red Guards and other mass organizations to launch a nationwide power-seizure campaign, in which the mass organizations assumed authority in local and provincial government. The power-seizure operation, however, became a violent competition amongst the mass organizations, and the army s involvement following Mao s late-January order to support the left failed to ease the tension and conflicts. Although the new power organs, the revolutionary committees , were beginning to be established at various levels in early 1967, factional violence nevertheless escalated to armed conflict in many parts of China. By late 1967 and early 1968, an estimated one million guns were in the hands of civilians. China, in Mao s own words, was in a state of all-round civil war, resulting in heavy casualties. While the power-seizure campaign and the subsequent factional violence took place at local and provincial levels in 1967 and 1968, a chaotic and lawless mass dictatorship was being established. Once again, weak social groups such as the Black Five Categories and their family members soon became tragic prey. Any local governments or revolutionary factional groups could discriminate against them, persecute them, and sometimes kill them lawlessly to enhance their authority. In the summer of 1967, the mass organizations in Dao County were divided into two factional groups: the Revolutionary Alliance and the Red Alliance. The former consisted mainly of rebellious students while the latter was made up of mostly poor and lower-middle peasants led by local CCP officials and militia personnel. On August 8, the Revolutionary Alliance, the rebel organization that dominated the downtown area, stormed the county militia headquarters, confiscated all the weapons, and forced its rival Red Alliance to retreat its base to the countryside. On August 13, a bloody armed struggle occurred in the downtown area, which ended with the defeat of the Red Alliance (Zhang, 2002). The leaders of the Red Alliance tried to find indirect ways of attacking the Revolutionary Alliance. Because they believed that some members of the Revolutionary Alliance were from bad family backgrounds such as the Black Five Categories, the members of the Red Alliance (many of them local officials) and their followers in the local militia (most of them demobilized soldiers) planned to slaughter all those from the Black Five Categories in the countryside, along with their family members, including children, to demonstrate that their class consciousness was greater than that of their rival faction. However, China s theory of class struggle was not new, nor was its effects unprecedented in dehumanizing certain groups of the population. For violence as extreme as this mass killing to take place, an additional process needed to be prearranged. In other words, the perpetrators needed to find a good excuse to trigger the massacre. Since there was no way of proving any inappropriate behavior by the Black Five class enemies, the perpetrators had to manufacture a pending danger of inaction and a tangible threat to justify the planned terror.

Decision-Makers, Organizers and Actors

A strong excuse was provided in the form of a malicious rumor and peddled officially by the leaders of the Dao County militia headquarters, who were armed forces officers in active service representing the People s Liberation Army (Zhang, 2002). In the chaotic year of 1967, before the local revolutionary committee was established, those army officers were the authorized administrators of the county s leading group for grasping revolution and promoting production . At a countywide meeting on August 5 and August 11, Liu Shibing, the Political Commissar of the county militia headquarters falsified a conspiracy rumor: 1) Chiang Kai-shek s Nationalist troops were going to attack mainland China, and the county s class enemies, particularly the Black Five Categories, planed to rise in rebellion in cooperation with Chiang s

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war plan, and 2) a number of Black Five Categories had plotted to kill all party members and poor- and lower-middle peasant leaders in the county. Liu Shibing, along with Xiong Binen, Deputy-Secretariat of the Dao County CCP Committee, strongly urged all levels of militia personnel and security officers to start an urgent preemptive attack against the class enemies. Although they did not spell out the word kill , all levels of party leadership understood the meaning of this strong signal. There is no doubt that those government officials at the highest county rank were the decision-makers. They not only manufactured an imminent threat to justify the approaching massacre but also instructed their subordinators to execute the killing as well. Substantial oral evidence from family members of surviving victims and bystanders suggests that the leaders of the Red Alliance, mostly CCP and militia officials at district and commune/township level, were directly in charge of the killing. Throughout the massacre, six districts, which made up 55 percent of the total districts in the county, suffered the deliberate and organized killing by district-level government leaders. Moreover, 16 communes/township carried out the same plotted and organized murders accounting for 44 percent of the total number of communes in Dao County (Zhang, 2002 and Yan, 1996). The district and commune level instigators created their own brutal and lawless way of organizing the massacres in their areas. Prior to the executions there would often hold a short trial (lasting only a few minutes) in the lawlessly created Supreme Court of the Poor and Lower-middle Peasants . The judges were unsurprisingly the local leaders who prearranged the killing. After the victims were sentenced to death, they were trussed up by armed militia and taken to a mass rally for denouncing their crimes. Then, they were killed in public or by the public, the mob. Sometimes the local CCP and militia officials considered that it might be dangerous to take the victims to the public. They would then quietly send a team of armed militia to the victims homes to carry out the slaughter. Those directly involved in the executions were immediately rewarded for their work with higher salaries than they earned by their regular employment in the commune or district. It was also reported that a number of local CCP and militia officials personally led the killing. The mass killing was by no means committed by misled and spontaneous crowds. According to an official statistics in *The Dao County Annals* in 1994, a total of 7,281 perpetrators were involved in the massacre. Of these, 402 killers were local CCP officers and a majority of them were CCP or militia members. However, a later investigation report shows that the number of perpetrators was nearly as high as 14,000. A number of local rapists, robbers and rogues also participated in the killing (Zhang, 2002). Since Chinese official documents always reduced the numbers of either perpetrators or victims of massacres, the number of 14,000 from the later investigation based on internal documents may be more reliable. Their class status of those perpetrators was poor and lower-middle peasants . In some of the most notorious incidents, the female victims were first raped by the murderer and then executed. In all incidents, the victims property and personal belongings were confiscated by the killers afterwards. Various weapons were used for the mass killings, including rifles, hunting rifles, air guns, knives, swords, spears, explosives and clubs. There were at least 10 brutal ways of carrying out the executions: 1) shooting; 2) decapitation; 3) drowning the victim in a pond or river; 4) tying up all family members and blowing them up; 5) throwing victims into a deep well and starving them to death; 6) burying them alive; 7) clubbing the victims to death in public; 8) strangling or hanging; 9) burning, and 10) throwing little children to their deaths (Zhang, 2002). There is no documentary evidence to prove that the massacre was deliberately directed by Mao Zedong or any of the CCP Central Committee leaders. However, the massacre was the result of their long-standing policy on the so-called life-and-death class struggle between the poor and lower-middle peasants and their enemy, the Black Five Categories. In the 1980s, the Chinese government arrested a few of the killers who were guilty of the most heinous crimes in the massacre. However, not one of them pleaded guilty. They defended themselves in court by using the core Maoist and CCP ideology of class struggle, which they claimed incited people to eliminate class enemies both mentally and physically.

Victims

During the whole massacre not only in Dao County but in other bordering areas of Hunan Province as well, a total of 9,093 victims were slaughtered or forced to commit suicide in the mass violence. This extremely

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high number of victims may be categorized according to their class status: 3,576 people from the so called Black Five Categories; 4,057 family members or children of the Black Five Categories; 1,049 poor and lower-middle peasants but with a certain degree of historical issues (they were usually treated as semi-class enemies), while the remaining 411 people had other class statuses such as school students and craftsmen (Zhang, 2002). The victims can also be categorized by age: the oldest was a 78-year-old grandfather; the youngest a 10-day-old infant. The malicious motivation used by the perpetrators for slaughtering the infant was the cold-blooded policy of cutting the weeds and digging up the roots i.e. preventing him/her from avenging its parents in the future . To carry out the exterminations, some organizers of the massacre even sent urgent telegram to the future victims sons or daughters living in other areas or provinces. The telegram would contain false messages such as Your parents have a medical emergency and need you to return home as soon as possible. However, once the victims family members were tricked into returning home, they were immediately killed by the local armed militias (Yan, 1996; Zhang, 2002). Sometimes there was a hidden motivation for the killing that was not based on class status but personal resentment. On August 29, 1967, after receiving serious complaints from survivors of the massacre, the CCP Central Committee and the Hunan Provincial Revolutionary Committee sent the 47th Field Army to order all local CCP and militia members to stop the killing. However, on the very same evening, a chief judge of a supreme court of poor and lower-middle peasants at commune/township level, rushed to arrest and sentence to death a family of four. The victims were shocked because all four were poor and lower-middle peasants. However, when they explained their class status and protested the death penalty, the judge simply denounced them as active counter-revolutionaries . It turned out that the so-called judge was a neighbor of the family and there had been historical conflicts between his family and theirs. This was a typical case of abusing public power to retaliate against a personal enemy. Unfortunately, it was only one of many examples during the massacre (Zhang, 2002). Young and pretty female victims sometimes survived if an unmarried male instigator or perpetrator wanted to force them into marriage. However, the female victims husbands or children would be killed first before they were allowed to live under the condition of the re-marriage. In some cases, the male killers had admired the victims beauty before the killings or were simply jealous rivals from previous love affairs. There were also extreme cases in which pretty young females were first gang-raped by several killers and then murdered, one example being that a young girl from Guangdong Province was raped and murdered when she visited the town of East Gat**e** (Dongmen) in Dao County on September 2, 1967 (Zhang, 2002). Because of the great popular indignation, 12 rapist-killers were arrested and then sentenced for under 10 years imprisonment in the period of 1968 to 1974. This represented only a small handful of all those cold-blooded murders. After completing an official investigation in 1986, the government arrested another 42 infamous killers and sentenced them for some 10 years imprisonment (Hunan, 1994: 158). The fact that only 52 killers were punished by law and none were sentenced to death, aroused even more popular indignation in Dao County. The tally of 52 imprisoned killers is only 0.0037 percent of the total number of 14,000 who participated in this slaughter. However, the Chinese government defended its decision by using the pretext that the killings took place in the special and chaotic Cultural Revolution era.

Witnesses

There were many eye-witnesses to the massacre but very few published accounts. From June 1984 to the end of 1986, the new authority of Lingling region in Hunan Province, which has jurisdiction over Dao County, sent a work team of 400 cadres to the county to investigate the massacre. Thousands of witnesses including formal perpetrators were interrogated and their testimonies or forced confessions were recorded. The whole case was examined very comprehensively by this huge work team. However, the detailed findings and conclusions were never officially published by the government. On the contrary, all of the files were, and still are, marked as highly classified materials by the CCP authorities and remain locked in secret government archives. For over 30 years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, research in China on this era, especially on any cases of massacres, has been difficult despite its obvious considerable

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importance. Although the Cultural Revolution was launched by the CCP and its leader Mao Zedong, the current Chinese government and CCP still discount the significance of looking into the incident and even forbid Chinese scholars from studying it independently. The CCP s unwillingness to confront the truth about what official historians acknowledged as ten years of turmoil is understandable. According to some official statistics, about two million Chinese were killed and another 100 million were the victims of CCP-sanctioned crimes and atrocities committed during the Cultural Revolution (Cheng Min, 1996; Ding, 2003). The Cultural Revolution marked one of the darkest and most tragic periods in human history. To avoid accountability, the Chinese government has banned the media from reporting the historical truth and has used its controlled press to revise and distort history. In one way or the other, the CCP has tried to force people into forgetting the historical truth of the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, skepticism about and resistance to, the Cultural Revolution on the part of the Chinese people, especially the younger generation, existed throughout that turbulent era and beyond. On October 15, 1991, He Qinglian, a young female economist in China, published a narrative in a Hong Kong based journal. This was the first time a witness exposed the truth of the Dao County massacre. When the mass killings took place in the summer of 1967, Qinglian was only 12 years old and lived in Zhaoyang County, a neighboring area to Dao County. However, she saw the corpses of hundreds of victims floating down the river from Dao County and the killing zones around it. According to her testimony, all the dead bodies evidenced that the victims were brutally slaughtered before they were thrown into the river. They were all trussed up with ropes or thick steel wires. Some, such as mothers and young children or family members, were tied together by steel wires through their scapulas (He, 1991:50). He s testimony shocked the overseas Chinese media. A number of short messages and articles from other witnesses started to appear on the Internet to confirm her courageous exposure. However, the authors seemed very nervous about releasing their real identities, and there were no further detailed accounts. Three years later, the local government published *The Dao County Annals*, which for the first time officially acknowledged that illegal killings occurred in the summer of 1967. According to this county gazette, people from the Black Five Categories were killed but it did not release the accurate or even estimated number of victims and only indicated some government settlements in the 1980s for the mass killings. It stated first that 52 killers were arrested and sentenced, and second that the victims property was returned to the survivors and that the government paid out compensation of 200 Chinese Yuan (to the equivalent of USD $30 at the time) to each victim s family. Lastly, the government issued a Certificate of Rehabilitation to each dead victim to restore their reputation (Hunan, 1994: 158). Although *The Dao County Annals* still covered up the ruthless nature of the massacre, its vast scale, and the real reason for it, this was the fist time an official record was published inside China.

Memories

Apart from the report of the official investigation that was never published, no effort seems to have been made in the 1980s and early 1990s to collect testimonies from direct witnesses or the memories of the survivors. Besides the government forbidding this, there are two other reasons that may explain the lack of witnesses ready to express themselves about the massacre. First, most people involved in the mass killings, both survivors and perpetrators, were peasants in the remote countryside, who had received little or no education and were unable to write down their testimonies or memories independently. Second, under the Chinese communist regime, the truth about the massacre during the Cultural Revolution has always been blacked out by the media. Overall, the lack of written evidence from survivors of the massacre contrasts sharply with the large number of memoirs published by other survivors of the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, people s memories did not fade. In the late 1990s, a small group of writers in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, and government staff in Dao County, started to work together on a collective memoir to expose the truth of the Dao County massacre. After nearly 4 years of underground interviews with hundreds of survivors and imprisoned killers, they finally published a book-length report in 2001 entitled Massacre in Dao County, Hunan Province in a pro-democracy Hong Kong journal called *Open Magazine*, under a collective pseudonym Zhang Cheng to avoid possible political persecution by the

government. This is the most reliable report or memoir about the Dao County massacre recognized by scholars in the field of Cultural Revolution studies to date. It successfully combined the witnesses oral testimonies and governmental secret archives to describe the mass killing. By citing classified government documents, the report provided an accurate death toll of victims, categorized by their class status, age, gender and location. By interviewing the survivors, it recorded and portrayed the ruthless execution methods and terrible events. Most importantly, it revealed the context and the very nature of this massacre. Unlike the official publication that described the massacre as factional conflict during the turbulent Cultural Revolution (Hunan, 1994: 157), this report clearly demonstrated, based upon a large amount of oral and written evidence, that it was a classicide of class enemies . Thus the survivors testimonies and classified documents blend into a coherent collective memory of this historical massacre. Zhang Cheng s remarkable report soon became the repository of first-hand memories and has long been cited as prime evidence for the general interpretation of, and further research into, the massacre. Recent studies on the Dao County massacre in encyclopedias (Guo, 2006) or research papers (Su, 2006) about mass violence in the Cultural Revolution have cited numerous reports from Zhang s detailed account.

General and Legal Interpretation of the Facts

In late 1976, the post-Mao CCP leadership began to implement concrete measures to reverse Mao s Cultural Revolution policies in all areas. The pace of policy change gained speed after the reinstatement of Deng Xiaoping in July 1977. With regard to an overall evaluation of the Cultural Revolution, the central leadership took a major step in December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the CCP Eleventh Central Committee. At this meeting, the leadership decided to abandon Mao s theory of class struggle and to carry out a thorough nationwide review at every level, of all past cases of persecution. By the end of 1980, virtually all the cases against ordinary citizens during the Cultural Revolution " including the Dao County massacre and many others " were declared wrongful, false, and mistaken . However, the current CCP leadership believes that the entire legitimacy of Mao s legacy must be acknowledged and pursued, for it is concerned that a thoroughgoing critique of the Cultural Revolution might question its own legitimacy again. The apparent self-contradictions about the Cultural Resolution have been reflected in the self-contradictory comments about the Dao County massacre in official Chinese publications. On the one hand, after its eight month long investigation in 1986 the government denounced this terrible massacre as an illegal killing incident, but on the other, the government has kept all the important documents in its secret archives marked highly classified, and any serious studies of the massacre are invariably censored in mainland China. In addition, the government publication pins all the blame on the factional strife among the mass organizations in 1967, which were regarded as the ultimate origin of the massacre and damage to the CCP and public security system by rebellious mass movements in the chaotic year of 1967 (Hunan, 1994: 154). In scholarly literature about the massacre, which is scarce (very few articles in books or journals so far), two main strands of interpretation can be discerned. One tends to emphasize the massacre as a result of the mass fictional strife. The other traces the origin of the massacre back to the deep roots of the CCP s long-standing ideology, policy and dictatorship of the proletariat state apparatus. The first strand is represented in Yan Jiaqi s book on the history of the Cultural Revolution, which mentioned the Dao County massacre for the first time in the academic field. He points out that the factional struggle was greatly intensified in the turbulent summer of 1967, and became a convenient ploy to fabricate cases of class revenge and new directions in class struggle in order to manipulate class struggle for individual benefit. Under such circumstances, some people in Dao County started a rumor that the Black Five Categories would rise in rebellion and then kill the poor and lower-middle peasants. Thus alerted, the poor and lower-middle peasants hastily set up Supreme Court of the Poor and Lower-middle Peasants to sentence to death those they considered to be a threat (Yan, 1996: 378-379). The second strand is represented by Song Yongyi s book in particular (Song, 2002). His central argument is that the massacre was not a consequence of mass factionalism but the violence of the CCP state apparatus. As he emphasizes, there was no proof that any Black Five Categories and their family members were involved in mass

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factional activities in Dao County in 1967. Likewise, not all mass organizations participated in the massacre but only the Red Alliance, which had a strong party and army ties. Finally, a careful analysis of the decision-makers and organizers of the mass killing leads us to a noticeable discovery: in the main, they were not the mass factional leaders but CCP leaders at county level, army officer (militia personnel) and public security officials all at county level, and who were the official representatives of the CCP state apparatus in the county. In fact, the public security system in the county was not damaged by the mass movement but rather was directly involved in the 1967 killings. In this perspective, the mass factional strife is only the surface of the event, and the concealed nature of the massacre was CCP state violence (Song, 2002:19-20). By comparing several Cultural Revolution massacres, Su Yang, another Chinese scholar in the field of the Cultural Revolution studies, indicates that the state and local governments were involved in all the excessive mass violence in a paradoxical way. From the point of view of CCP policy, the fact that the victims were mostly Black Five Categories families suggests the massacre was extermination, in line with the party s long-standing class-elimination policy. The violence was rooted in the Stalinist doctrine of unmasking hidden enemies. Interviews with perpetrators many years later also indicate that most of them carried out the slaughter as the policy of the communist state. In addition, the fact that instigators and perpetrators were mostly local government and militia leaders/members would confirm the political nature of the massacre. Thus, the slaughter was due to the local state rather than the conflicts between independent mass groups. He further states that local officials may have seen the terror as a convenient way of consolidating their grip on power in the local community (Su, 2006: 116). In fact, the persecution of the class enemies as scapegoats was a constant practice in the CCP-organized political campaigns since the late 1940s. Compared with Land Reform and other movements, the Cultural Revolution may be less original that generally thought. In his analysis of the state sponsorship of mass killing, Su Yang further examines it from two aspects. First, the central authority in Beijing played up the class struggle rhetoric as the basic problem-solving method in 1967, and thus had a sponsoring role in the mass killing. However, as evidenced in the policy pronouncements, the central authority also saw extreme violence at local level as an indication of unwanted disorder, which was why the army was sent to restore order in Dan County at the end of August 1967. One question was naturally raised: why could the massacre not be stopped effectively by the central and provincial authorities? Su Yang has duly noted that the official policy from the center to stop the killing did not carry any real punishment. It was only an admonition, which was usually meant to serve as a guideline for the future. In fact, there is no evidence of any punishment during or immediately after the massacre (Su, 2006: 119). In exploring the state sponsorship of the massacre in particular, Mao Zedong s role in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1967) has also attracted the attention of scholars. Although Mao explained that the movement should be processed as a verbal attack not armed struggle, his additional instructions actually opposed verbal attack and encouraged mass violence. Aside from establishing the CCP s long-standing ideology and policy of extermination of class enemies, Mao also declared that beating the class enemies on the streets in 1966 was excusable. He encouraged armed factional strife in 1967 by praising the all-round civil war to come in the beginning of 1967. All of his instructions about mass violence during the Cultural Revolution were not explicit endorsements but indirect support to spread and upgrade the excessive mass violence (Xu, 2002: 12).

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