

The conclusive scene: Mao and the Red Guards
in July 1968.

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The Conclusive Scene:

Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968

Alessandro Russo

In the very early hours of July 28, 1968, some of the most famous figures of the subjective turbulence that in the two previous years had invested the fundamental conditions of politics in China—the Red Guards and the Maoist leaders—met in a long and dramatic face-to-face meeting, a transcript of which was kept in such a deliberately meticulous way that even the emotional tones of the dialogue were recorded.¹ The result, thanks to compilers endowed with a remarkable literary culture (probably one or more of Mao's secretaries), is much more than the bare proceedings of the meeting. One would be inclined to call it rather a theatrical *pièce* whose "authors" are the "characters" themselves. These characters were subjective figures who met in the final moment of the political situation in which their existence is grounded. As of the next day, the situation would be totally different—the Red Guards would not exist anymore as independent organizations, and **[End Page 535]** in the following months they would be dissolved, with consequences that would unavoidably rebound on Mao and on his allies.

The meeting was held in a hall at Zhongnanhai, the small lake in the center of Beijing, around which the headquarters of the party-state are situated. On one side were Mao and the "Central Group for the Cultural Revolution," the restricted group of central leaders that had remained politically active in the last two years (most of the high ranks of the party-state had been paralyzed since the summer of 1966). On the other side were the five most important leaders of the Red Guards in the Beijing campuses. The meeting's main topic was the consequences of the political exhaustion of the Red Guards. In August 1966 they had been greeted as "new forms of organization created by the masses" that were to have a "permanent character" of political and institutional innovation (as declared in the *Decision in Sixteen Points*, the main programmatic document of the Cultural Revolution). However, especially during the last year, they had decomposed into small paramilitary groups lacking any political distinction, engaged in increasingly grotesque brawls to establish the absolute supremacy of their own faction.

In the last few months most of the militants, bewildered by the political crisis of their organizations, had quit all forms of activism and swelled the ranks of the so-called faction of the disengaged (*xiaoyaopai*), which in fact was not a real "faction." On the other hand, the more the number of militants decreased, the more the clashes became violent on some Beijing campuses, in particular at Qinghua University, where with crude, but equally deadly, weapons, the "hardliners" of the two factions (a few thousand people altogether) continued to fight.

The day before, July 27, on Mao's initiative, and following crowded meetings in several factories, tens of thousands of disarmed workers invaded the Qinghua campus peacefully, shouting slogans against the armed struggle, with lines of demonstrators standing between the two factions to prevent them from fighting.² The workers had been violently attacked by the students (five workers were killed and hundreds wounded), but, with an extraordinary sense of self-discipline, the workers' only reaction was to continue to shout slogans against the armed struggle. The workers finally were able to disarm the two factions and occupy the key spots of the campus. At **[End Page 536]** the moment of the meeting in Zhongnanhai, which began at 3 A.M. and lasted until 8 A.M. (the preferred working hours for Mao and other Chinese leaders), the fighting at Qinghua had just ended.

The exceptional archival condition of the meeting's transcript, which allows a close reflection on that event, crystallizes a singular political intervention. Mao himself had required the recording and had also decided to distribute its contents on a large scale, for a reason that he clearly explained to...

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