

Diancheng Xie: From Crisis to Ideology: Can China's Youth Rediscover Mao Without Repeating the Past? A Blogpost

Inspired by *Though I Am Gone*

Why the Past Still Matters

In recent years, China's post-pandemic economic recovery has struggled to meet earlier expectations, leading to unfulfilled hopes and simmering discontent among the nation's youth. Official data showed that in June 2023, China's youth unemployment rate (ages 16–24) hit a historical high of 21.3%, prompting significant public concern (Reuters, 2024). Although it dipped to 14.2% by May 2024, this figure remains high (*Wall Street Journal*, 2024). Amid these employment anxieties, many young graduates—facing fierce job market competition, uncertain career prospects, and reliance on family support—are re-examining their ideological inheritances. A notable trend is the renewed interest in Mao Zedong's *Selected Works*, as images (NetEase, 2023) and Tsinghua University Library's borrowing chart (2023) revealed a surge in Maoist readings.



This development raises a critical question: How does China's rising youth unemployment—amid unfulfilled economic expectations—catalyse a renewed interest in Maoist thought, and what might this revival imply for China's future social and economic trajectory? Understanding this question is crucial. China's global rise is not simply economic; it is also ideological and social. As Mao (1957) famously stated

"The world belongs to you as well as to us, but in the end, it belongs to you"—a sentiment that highlights the pivotal role of youth in shaping the future of society. The direction of the nation's youth—their intellectual pursuits, their sense of justice, and their interpretation of history—will shape how China negotiates its future development path. Learning from past extremism could help prevent future episodes of unrest and safeguard stable, inclusive progress.

What *Though I Am Gone* Reveals

To contextualize this dilemma, Hu Jie's documentary *Though I Am Gone* (2007) offers a searing historical lesson. The film recounts the murder of Vice-Principal Bian Zhongyun in August 1966 at a prestigious girls' high school in Beijing. Her death occurred during the early days of the Cultural Revolution, a period characterized by fervent Maoist radicalism, intense ideological struggle, and widespread violence against perceived 'class enemies.' The documentary, assembled from personal letters, interviews, and especially the photographs taken by Bian's husband, presents a stark, unembellished narrative of brutality committed by ordinary students under the spell of revolutionary slogans.

The film highlights key points: First, it sets the scene of August 1966, a moment when Mao Zedong's calls to identify and root out 'counterrevolutionaries' granted students moral license to attack authority figures. Second, *Though I Am Gone* meticulously reconstructs the killing of Bian Zhongyun, illustrating how quickly basic norms of respect and decency could dissolve in an atmosphere charged with political hysteria. Third, the documentary features interviews with former students, now elderly, grappling with memories of their actions. Their recollections range from remorseful confusion to lingering shock, shedding light on the psychological complexity of violence enabled by ideology. Lastly, the film underscores the long silence that followed these events. For decades, acknowledging these crimes was taboo, leaving moral wounds unhealed and lessons half-forgotten.

Anecdotes from the documentary convey both the horror and banality of this violence. One witness recount how slogans of class struggle and purging enemies sounded righteous in the abstract but quickly turned lethal when applied to real people. Another detail reveals how evidence of the murder—photographs of the victim's body—was painstakingly preserved by Bian's husband, standing as a mute testimony to the capacity of ordinary citizens, influenced by political fervour, to commit atrocities.

Confronting an Unsettled Past

Watching *Though I Am Gone* evokes intense emotions: grief for the victim and her family, disbelief that teenagers could commit such brutality, and deep sadness at the moral vacuum that emerged under extreme ideological pressure. It also prompts anxiety about the fragility of social norms. How easily can well-intentioned societal

goals be twisted into irrational violence? For anyone reflecting on contemporary China, the documentary resonates with current social challenges. If today's youth face profound economic and social uncertainties, might the lure of a simplifying ideology, combined with frustration, lead them down a destructive path?

In my own life, I have seen how stress and hardship can make communities susceptible to ideologies promising quick fixes. The documentary reminds me that without a critical understanding of history, admiration for past leaders or revolutionary slogans can become dangerously superficial. It emphasizes the need for vigilance in how we interpret historical legacies, and it inspires caution in encouraging any ideology without confronting its darker chapters.

Why *Though I Am Gone* Speaks to Today"

Does *Though I Am Gone* help us understand today's ideological revival among Chinese youth? Absolutely. The documentary's lessons are as much about historical violence as they are about memory and responsibility. Young people turning to Mao's works might reflect dissatisfaction with neoliberal market logics, also may be seeking moral clarity, fairness, and social solidarity—values that seem increasingly elusive in a cutthroat job market. Yet *Though I Am Gone* warns us of what can happen when ideals are weaponized without nuance. Understanding the Cultural Revolution's lessons is crucial: while Maoist concepts might offer an appealing moral compass, they also carry a legacy of violent excess and social fragmentation.

In this sense, the documentary clarifies the stakes of contemporary re-engagement with Maoist thought. If young readers fail to critically reckon with the past, they risk revisiting old extremes. Conversely, if they approach Mao's writings with historical awareness—understanding the catastrophic outcomes of the Cultural Revolution—then this ideological revival could become a force for thoughtful reform rather than destructive vengeance. *Though I Am Gone* deepened my appreciation of the complexities, alerting me to the importance of integrating history lessons into contemporary discourse on employment anxiety and educational disenchantment.

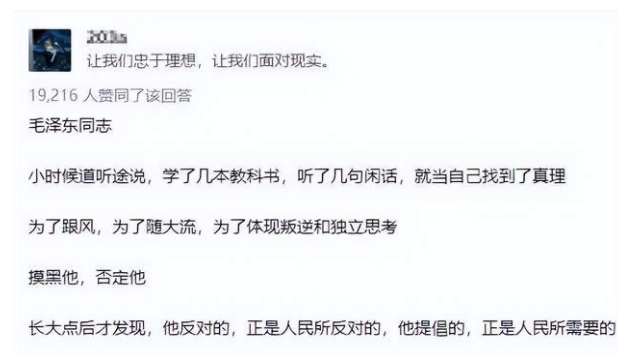
Interpreting Maoist Revival: Lessons for China's Future

How does contemporary Chinese youth's renewed interest in Maoist ideology—catalysed by heightened economic pressures—inform our understanding of China's future development path, and what lessons might history offer to ensure this ideological re-engagement avoids destructive extremes?

To answer this, we must consider historical patterns, contemporary socioeconomics, and scholarly insights. From the course modules on China's post-reform era, we know that since the 1980s, China's leadership has promoted a narrative of 'opening up' and modernization that has significantly altered social fabrics and power distributions. Deng Xiaoping's 'Reform and Opening Up' reoriented China away from radical class

struggle toward market-driven pragmatism. Yet recent challenges—an aging population, environmental stressors, escalating U.S.-China tensions, and the COVID-19 pandemic’s economic fallout—have shaken the consensus that steady economic growth guarantees broad-based prosperity.

Today, youth unemployment challenges China’s promise of stable modernization. The mismatch between a highly educated population and limited high-quality job openings nurtures frustration (*Wall Street Journal*, 2024). Mao’s *Selected Works* resonate because they evoke a time when class struggle, rather than market competition, defined success. They may find solace in Mao’s critique of elitism, believing that a more egalitarian vision can address current inequalities. As social media posts (NetEase, 2023), many youth are grappling with ideological questions, drawing on Maoist concepts to interpret their frustrations with contemporary inequalities.



对不起，教员。
我对不起您。
我误会了您
我们好多人都误会了您
好多好多
现在，我们好想你，好希望你回来
但是我知道，你不在.....
我在打字的时候一直哭，一直哭，一直哭
对不起，教员

The first image reflects a longing for ideological clarity and justice, while the second highlights emotional regret and acknowledgment of past errors, offering a poignant reminder of the complexities inherent in revisiting historical legacies.

Yet these aspirations must be tempered by historical insight. Hu Jie’s documentary suggests that romanticizing Maoist thought without acknowledging past atrocities is perilous. Recent scholarship argues that critical historical memory can serve as a

safeguard. Mitter (2010) emphasizes the importance of remembering China's traumas—both wartime and revolutionary—to prevent their recurrence.

If youth re-engagement with Maoist texts is accompanied by active public history education—encouraging debates, open archives, and scholarly commentary—then the painful lessons of the Cultural Revolution can inoculate against a return to violence. Greater historical literacy fosters critical thinking. Informed by nuanced analyses, such as those offered by Andrew Walde, young Chinese can appreciate the idealism in Mao's rhetoric while rejecting any impulse toward violent methods.

This equilibrium demands responsibility from multiple stakeholders. Government bodies can facilitate honest historical discussions rather than stifling them, ensuring that official narratives do not gloss over past mistakes (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2006). Universities can integrate critical historiography and political theory into their curricula, allowing students to see the full spectrum of Maoist thought—from egalitarian inspirations to devastating consequences.

Conclusion: Implications for China's Future

In short, *Though I Am Gone* and scholarly works on the Cultural Revolution highlight that violent outcomes were not inevitable but emerged from the uncritical application of absolutist ideologies. Today's youth, confronted by new hardships, have an opportunity to learn from history. Their choice is not binary: they need not wholly reject Maoist ideals, nor must they embrace them uncritically. Instead, a balanced approach—recognizing the past's darkness and the complexity of present challenges—could help channel ideological energies into advocacy for fairer labour practices, more accessible education, and more responsive governance.

The implications for China's future are profound. A constructive re-engagement with Maoist legacies, informed by painful truths about the Cultural Revolution, can inspire social initiatives that address youth dissatisfaction without resorting to violence. This could help stabilize China's trajectory, ensuring that new challenges—be they unemployment, environmental stress, or social inequality—are met with empathy, critical debate, and evidence-based policies rather than with ideological purges. For policymakers, educators, and civil society, the call is to amplify historical voices like Hu Jie's and to ensure that young people's search for meaning in Maoist texts does not become a prelude to new forms of harm. The lessons learned here may also serve other societies facing ideological polarizations, showing that honest engagement with history is integral to forging a peaceful, equitable future.

Word Count: 1593

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