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**Overcoming Mobilisation Restrictions Under Authoritarian  
Government: Comparative Case Study of Rural China**

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## **Introduction**

Social mobilisations are often restricted by the government in authoritarian countries, especially in countries like China, which have strong state capacity and ideological motivation to prevent contentious challenges or insurgency against central leadership and its ideology. In authoritarian China, most social movements are not initiated or accepted by the national government. Instead, the government strategically mobilises society to achieve nation-building goals, promoting its ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism in Mao's era and recent time.

Authoritarian China and its centralised government often apply three methods to tame civilians: containment, coercion/repression, and Co-optation (Wang 2021). The Chinese government adopts these methods to tame civilians for obedience, which is surprisingly successful, and it is very rare to observe massive, nation-wide upheaval. In other words, neither civilians nor local political leaders attempt to overturn its national government because of grievance. As a result, interesting research puzzles in the study of Chinese contentious politics are: Why do civilians not revolt against the government? How is local mobilisation possible under restrictions? What conditions aid social mobilisation, especially rural mobilisation?

My research aims to contribute study of contentious politics, rural mobilisation and Chinese politics. These sub-fields of political science lack a conceptual framework to connect rural civilians with national political movements. Previous scholarship has predominantly focused on the national level during chaotic era of the 1960s to late 1970s (Shambaugh 2024). Researchers have either concentrated on macro politics, exploring different patterns of top-down mobilisation (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Lee 1978), or on ethnographic and historical analyses of rural politics and mass killings (Walder 2016; 2019; 2023). More recent scholarship has redirected attention to rural mobilisations prompted by social grievances, emphasising political

communication, rural bureaucratic ties, and welfare policies to highlight statecraft economy and rural development (Fu 2017; Huang 2018; Huang and Kim 2020; Xu 2021). However, research on the mobilisations of rural civilians has been downplayed and neglected during the transitional period between the late-Mao and post-Mao era, in which rural mobilisation during this juncture became a primary motivation for subsequent economic and political reforms in China (Liu et al. 2013; Shih 2022).

To contribute to this line of research, which has been done in a more historical and ethnographical approach. My main argument is that local political elites twisted Maoism and nationalism to legitimise local mobilisation, through which diverse local interests were achieved, breaking restrictions from the national government. This collective mobilisation challenged the control of the authoritarian government and forced the government to reform a more liberal society in responding to local demands. Local political leaders and local civilians mobilised against national interests. Also, I add that localised ideology plays a vital role in the success of local mobilisations during top-down campaigns, which decentralised power and thereby enabled rural mobilisation in authoritarian China.

Nationalism and Maoism are being used as two major legitimisation tools to perform local loyalty to the central government. In making this argument, I follow Tilly and Weberian social movement theory, particularly their theory on "charismatic" movements as a process of normative formation. This theory often explains irrational collective action following state leaders, but I interpret it as a social consequence (Pettenkofer 2008) where local mobilisation communities achieve their own interests, which result in impairing national capacity and power centralisation under conditions of ideological obedience to "charismatic" leaders. During the social movement, the central government showed high tolerance for local mobilisation due to its belief in

governmental legitimisation and local loyalty. However, this tolerance persisted only up to a point. Once the central government perceived local mobilisation as a threat to its legitimacy or national security, it repressed the mobilisation. I have chosen to focus on the Cultural Revolution because it was a critical juncture in Chinese political reformation, marking the transition from Mao's era to subsequent political and economic reforms. This overarching perspective aligns well with evidence from recent scholarship on state-society relations and repression strategies (Shambaugh 2024; Shih 2022; Wang 2021).

My argument unfolds in four sections. In the first section, I engage with previous scholarship to explain the governmental restrictions over social mobilisation movements. In the second section, I theorise the mechanisms by which rural communities mobilise and overcome governmental restrictions (See also Appendix 1). Thirdly, I examine my argument and theoretical approaches through qualitative methods. My empirical study compares two case studies—Feng County and the Liuzhou Region—with controlled variables to examine how local mobilisation organisations consistently use nationalist ideology to demonstrate loyalty to the CCP, presenting a gesture of obedience by participating in mass ideological movements while simultaneously challenging national interests for local gains. Lastly, following the empirical study, I will discuss the "next steps" of my research, suggesting academic engagement with more recent work on contentious politics, propaganda studies, social welfare, and state-society relations.

## **Literature Review**

Movement in China is often sponsored by government for its strong state-building purpose, in which the authoritarian government organised civilians to participate ideological movement to achieve power centralisations (Perry and Wolf 2024). Recent scholarships in contentious politics and Chinese politics, such as those by Fu (2017), Gueorguiev (2017), Huang (2020), Lee (2014),

Looney (2021), Shambaugh (2024), Shih (2022), Xu (2020), and many others have researched diverse fields within contentious politics and collectively conclude that the salience of centralisation ideology affects civilian mobilisation models, highlighting Xi's Marxist-Leninist ideology as an heir to Mao's era. Research in contentious politics suggests a connection between Mao's era and Xi's era. As Wang (2021) pointed out the long-lasting coercive effects of Cultural Revolution in restricting social movement, which shows the potential to bridge contentious politics from the past to today. This motivates my research to understand social mobilisation, particularly rural mobilisation, during the Cultural Revolution as an example of how rural civilians overcame restrictions under Marxist-Leninist society with strong ideology of "charismatic" leaders.

The Cultural Revolution is a well-studied era, with scholarships moving from high politics implications and macro-level analysis to examine the motivations behind Mao's national movement and factional politics in the 1980s and early 2000s (Chan, Rosen, and Unger 1980; Lee 1978; MacFarquhar 1997). Later scholarships have shifted from macro to meso and micro-level analysis, with a popular trend being to focus on a specific province to analyse the Cultural Revolution, instead of a nationwide analysis because more documents and field research were approved by the soft-authoritarian government before 2013 and Xi's administration. Leading scholars like Andrew Walder and Su Yang have researched the Cultural Revolution across many localities, providing comprehensive studies through historical, ethnographical, and statistical methods. Their work on mass killings (Walder 2023; Yang 2003; 2011), repression (Walder 2022; 2023), faction politics (Walder and Lu 2016), and comprehensive statistical analysis on national movement trend and government records (Walder and Yang 2003; Walder 2019) indicated the line of research in Cultural Revolution through micro analysis. All these researchers concluded that factional competition played a significant role and identified urban mobilisation as a movement

driven by political stakes, while rural mobilisations were often spill-over effects of urban movements.

I agree with their conclusion; however, their research, and many others in the discipline, did not fully qualify rural mobilisation but concluded it as part of urban movements. The discipline lacks a theoretical mechanism to explain the strategy and motivation of rural mobilisation, in which rural civilians overcame national-level restrictions with motivations different from urban political mobilisations. The use of localised ideology did not follow the design of Maoism and Mao's revolution to avoid violence and social fragmentation. To help understanding of the period of my study I will briefly explain the historical context before and during the Cultural Revolution.

### **Historical Context**

Top-down mass mobilisation campaigns were very common in Chinese politics, especially during Mao's era. The huge success of the civil war entrenched Mao's belief (Maoism) in the power of the masses, leading him to believe that collective human power could overcome the class conflicts and social grievance, building a unified Marxist-Leninist China with high-level of centralisation. After the accomplishment of territorial control and capital redistribution, Mao launched two ideological campaigns back-to-back. In early 1956, Mao initiated a rectification movement, calling for public engagement in political activities and inviting critical suggestions for the central government and himself; however, intellectual activists exceeded his tolerance by attempting to delegitimise the CCP's ideology and authority. As the results, the participants, especially intellectuals, were labelled as “class enemies” and “extreme right revisionists”. An Anti-Right movement started from 1952 and lasted until the start of the Cultural Revolution. During the Anti-Right movement, “Anti Three Evils and Five Evils” (*san fan wu fan*) targeted “right

opportunists” who illicitly occupied national interests by corrupting in the early rectification movement (Hu 1994; Tasi 1999).

These mass movement were an important tactic of the CCP government for organising large-scale social mobilisation, where the central government formulated collective social movements to achieve national engineering goals. However, these social mobilisations did not benefit the civilians but instead further increased grievances, particularly in rural society, where social grievances outweighed the national collective interests of rural civil mobilisation. In the 1966 the Cultural Revolution started as a national political campaign. Previous scholarships have attributed two possible motivations to the CCP leadership. First, in this movement, Mao, described as the "core" leader of the CCP, was losing power due to earlier social movements where his "charismatic" personal cult opposed the CCP bureaucracy, leading him to launch the Cultural Revolution to reclaim power by encouraging social movements against ideological opponents (Andreas 2007; Lieberthal 2004; MacFarquhar 1997; Wang 1999). Secondly, the Cultural Revolution has been portrayed as a class struggle in which the CCP called upon all party members to eliminate, denounce, and criticise bourgeois capitalists, particularly these "class enemies" within the bureaucracy (Tsai 1999; Walder 2013; 2016; Wang 1999; Wu 1993). These two descriptions of the Cultural Revolution are persuasive in their own ways; however, they only focus on the massive top-down campaign, neglecting rural mobilisation and how it differed from the massive campaign, which was the nature of mobilisation studies before the mid-1990s (O'Brien & Li 2006; Zhao 2008; 2010).

The Cultural Revolution helped many localised mobilisations. Local rebel groups and insurgents fought each other, with factions organising localised mobilisations to pursue local interests, breaking the restraints of mobilisation while undermining the goal of the national mass

movement. Localised civilians and political leaders were very rational and strategic driven actors who saw the national mass campaign as an “opportunity”. As Wang (1999) concluded, cadres were not only pretentious ideological guards but also participated in the Cultural Revolution to obtain higher positions and become power holders. Thus far, it should be clear that the previous studies depicted the mechanism of top-down mass campaigns. The most detailed and localised research has been conducted by Walder (2013, 2016, 2023) and Yang (2011), who opened a new line of micro-study focusing on specific regions and the functioning of the bureaucratic system during the Cultural Revolution, based on very detailed interviews and archival work. Their research is very valuable for the study of Chinese mobilisation, especially rural mobilisation. However, they still leave an important question unanswered: how do local people mobilise, overcoming restraints from an authoritarian government during a mass ideological campaign?

### **Organisational Mobilisation and Movement: Restriction**

Social mobilisation movements must achieve four goals, as enumerated by Klandermans and Oegema (1987): 1) civilians must be capable of mobilisation through their consistent engagement in a social mobilisation movement; 2) organised mobilisation groups must build connection with external groups and these groups are capable to provide information and aid for the mobilisation; 3) localised social-ties and community norms play vital role in motivating civil participation in a mobilisation movement; 4) the restrictions and barriers to mobilisation must be eliminated or significantly reduced to a degree that the costs of participation is not decisive factor.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese central government prevented these four criteria from being met. Economically, the planned economy and the policy in the great leap forward gave the central government strong incentives to prevent social movements. The national government prioritised industrial producibility over agricultural producibility, requiring local



civilians to participate in collective agricultural works at commune. Local leaders were entitled with balancing local consumption with the production quota (Walder 2016; 2023; Yang 2011). This entitlement forced local political leaders to choose between political promotion and facing social pressure at the local commune or village. Meanwhile, superior legislation demanded that local political leaders meet the production quota. The planned economy restricted local mobilisation in two ways. Firstly, it developed strict quotas and demanded local production to meet these quotas, directly influencing the evaluation of local political promotions. Secondly, the economic structure eliminated the capacity for social mobilisation by categorising civilians into communes and villages, limiting social connections by dividing civilians into registered production units. Many civilians were forced to form communes and local cadres displaced civilians into production units.

I argue that the Chinese government relied on its bureaucracy, legislation, government-civilian social ties, and ideology (Nationalism, Maoism, Marxist-Leninism) to tame potential threats, thereby proving Weber's argument, as argued by Michel (1959), that organisational governments naturally concentrate power, forcing revolutionary groups to yield power to the centre. Politically, the bureaucracy effectively restricts the capacity of local political leaders and local mobilisation. The system recruited a large group of communist activists who believed in nationalism building during the expansion of the CCP. Therefore, governmental bureaus held a strong belief in prioritising national interests above all else, unconditionally following the lead of the national government (Doyon and Yang 2022). As a result, in rural China, famine became very common during the Great Leap Forward and the Anti-Right Movement due to national policies turning agricultural to capitals, which increased public grievance. The bureaucracy closely scrutinised local affairs through communes and local political leaders. The central government

delivered its commands and Mao's nationalist propaganda through a top-down linear bureaucracy, alongside with a promotion system that measured the contributions of bureaus toward national interest and their ideological loyalty to the party. This well-structured linear bureaucracy and legislation enable the organised punishment. This system is incredibly effective, for instance, in the CCP's early top-down political mobilisation Counter-Revolutionaries movement (1950-1957), approximately three million counterrevolutionaries being punished through its legislation system. Tsai (1999) concluded that the communalisation and collectivisation entrenched the governmental control of "every aspect of people's everyday life".

Supplementing the bureaucratic success in taming social movement, the Hukou deepen the exploitation over rural areas by discriminately provide capital for urban development and national industrialisation. To restrain mobilisation and cut possible social ties, the CCP government designed a strategic household registration system – Hukou. This system effectively aided the development of national interests by freeing labour from feudal land, allowing rural peasants to produce agricultural capital for urban and national development (Cheng 2019; Grummitt 1968; Wallace 2014; see also: Tsai 1999). Hukou prevents any form of social mobilisation to connect rural and urban in China. Rural civilians could not live or work in city legally upon request by the superior legislation, which is rare to see. Rural households served as agricultural providers, producing agricultural capital for radical urban expansion and industrialisation. In Mao's vision, this would help China to achieve equivalent industrial power in the battle against the West. In other words, as said by Liu Shaoqi the government policy was for the rural countryside to support the city at all costs (Tsai 1999, 27).

I argue that ideology is also an essential tool in preventing civilian mobilisations. The Chinese government and Mao held a very strong nation-building ideology and nationalist thinking,

in which the CCP and Mao proved their capacity to uphold their ideological commitments. In Chinese social movements, ideology has always played an important role, especially the “charismatic ideology”, shaping the social movement. Many scholars have downplayed the role of charismatic political ideology in social movements for two reasons: first, the tendency towards irrational decision-making, and second, the inherent opposition to bureaucratic nation-building (McAdam 1982). Early studies of the Cultural Revolution illustrate the focus on symbolic enthusiasm, in which the mass of civilians collectively admire Mao’s personal cult, falling into euphoria (Lifton 1968). However, more recent scholarship has pointed out that ideological movements, such as the charismatic movement, can coexist with bureaucracy to some extent, allowing participants to operate with some degree of rationality (Andres 2007; Walder 2013; Wang 1999). Therefore, in authoritarian China, self-interested mobilisation is difficult to achieve without ideological legitimisation by its charismatic leaders. Having explained the restrictions placed on rural mobilisations during this period, the next section addresses how civilians overcame these restrictions from bureaucratic breakdown, collective action due to collectivisation movement, and localised ideology.

### **Organisational Mobilisation and Movement: Overcame Restrictions**

During the movement rural civilians overcame restrictions on political structure, bureaucracy, economics policies, and ideology. Firstly, the national mass campaign challenged structural stability, as the CCP leadership urged civilians to organise together to identify and punish large numbers of rightist class enemies, particularly those within the bureaucracy. Especially in the rural China, large number of bureaus and cadres were identified as class enemy. In November 1964, the CCP issued a document stating that leadership in many areas had been taken over by "rotten" elements (*fubai fengzi*). Some regions were controlled by landlords, rich

peasants, counterrevolutionaries, and other bad elements, who were seen as new bourgeois class enemies. For example, in Nanning Prefecture, approximately 73 percent of bureaus and cadres were classified as "bad class" (Guo and Lin 2005, 243-251). In other words, the Cultural Revolution indicated the strong incentives of CCP leadership in eliminating ideological enemy, in which the CCP organised a "charismatic" ideological movement to centralise power to its "core" leaderships. Naturally, as Andreas (2007) explained, "charismatic" and "core" leadership is often difficult to reconcile with a well-structured bureaucracy, and before the Cultural Revolution, the CCP had long been challenged by its own bureaucracy due to decentralised power. The Cultural Revolution and Maoism fragmented bureaucratic system, in which reduced capacity of government in the early stage of the movement.

However, Mao encouraged the mass civilian, especially students and workers, to seize power from bureaucrats, which ironically helped civil mobilisation by legitimately reducing governmental restrictions. The power seizure happened nationwide, but it affected provincial and urban governments the most because most students and workers were concentrated in these two legislations (Walder and Yang 2003; Walder 2015; 2016). In fact, the prefectural and rural power seizures were side effects of the power seizures among superior legislations, where local bureaucracy overreacted to the superior power seizure, deepening grievances (Walder and Lu 2017). After the prior Anti-Right movement and massive power seizures among higher legislations, rural bureaucrats who served as local patrons, providing selective access to interests, afraid of losing power. Their positions were not stable under the theme of the nationwide ideological movement (Oi 1985). As the result, I argue that local political leaders (patrons) had to provide reciprocity, aligning their interests with local civilians in mobilising society for mutual benefits.

In short, this nationalism and Maoism top-down political campaign fragmented the bureaucratic restriction on social mobilisations.

Secondly, perhaps counterintuitively, social structural restrictions like communes and collectivisation helped to rural mobilisation during the Cultural Revolution because they facilitated collective action at rural areas. Following Tilly (1978), social mobilisation requires organisation, that the commune and prior collectivisation efforts based on family clans and feudal legislation sufficiently aided the formation of social organisation. Clan and lineage roots helped rural society to organise effectively. Yang (2010) points out that in rural China, commune leaders and village elites were often prestigious individuals who had participated in the earlier civil war against Chiang Kai-shek (KMT). These people served as local elites in rural communities, organising rural politics based on kinship and clientelism politics to bridge local and superior legislations. In terms of ordinary civilians in the commune, I believe they often follow their leaders at local for reciprocal interests. Two fieldwork studies conducted by Chinese scholar during the period supported my argument that rural peasants had very low political engagement in rural politics. The lack of material goods reduced the willingness of local civilians to participate in local politics, increasing their clientelism interdependency with local political leaders (Li 1957; Zhang 1960).<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, similar to many other authoritarian movements, the Cultural Revolution was inherently ideologically driven. This movement destabilised ideological stability, as local political leaders and civilians were encouraged to follow only the ideology of the CCP leadership. Doctrine-like ideological propaganda was printed and widely promoted during the movement, disseminating Mao's thinking through the "Little Red Book" (Hu 1994). However, it is not necessary to conclude that civilians were committed to Mao's ideology as Mao wished. As mentioned earlier, civilians

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Chinese Anti-Rightist Campaign Database (1957-)* 中國反右運動數據庫 (1957-)

were not purely irrational. In fact, local civilians were very tactical and acted strategically, with local political leaders organising the community to mobilise collectively. Local political leaders understood the urgency of presenting their loyalty to the CCP leadership by demonstrating their ideological commitment. There were two common dimensions to illustrate local loyalty even during the violent struggle of the Cultural Revolution – contributing to national interests and highlighting ideological alignment with Mao’s leadership – to assure adherence to CCP.

Local political leaders were often unwilling to yield local interests to national interests during this mass movement, which local populations considered Cultural Revolution as an opportunity to mobilise their community, obtain local interests, and secure conditional autonomy. Therefore, the strategic move was to demonstrate ideological loyalty toward CCP leaderships. This motivation explained by widespread use of “Little Red Book” which was edited quotation from the Chairman Mao. In rural China, everyone obtained a "Little Red Book" for reference in their day-to-day life and as an important legal source to denounce class enemies. According to Leese (2011), his estimation based on the publication record illustrate that up to 440 local editions of Mao’s quotations were published by non-official editing with a total publish data over 10.8 billion of Mao texts or posters, which make Mao the most selling writer in the history.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, many families built altar with Mao’s picture, which Aijmer (1996) described as akin to Russian Orthodox Church paintings, illustrating a strong political ritual toward the "charismatic" leadership. Some scholars refer to this period as Mao’s political cult and ritual; however, I disagree with that because local civilians did not react irrationally to national propaganda (Aijmer 1996; Less 2011). In fact, rural civilians only followed the orders of their leaders and local norms to demonstrate loyalty and

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<sup>2</sup> The estimate is based on the numbers published in the Ministry of Culture’s internal news organ Culture Trends (Wenhua dongtai). See Liu Gao and Shi Feng (eds.), *Xin Zhongguo chuban wushi nian jishi* [Recollections about Fifty Years of Publishing in New China], Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1999, 97.

avoid repression for being class enemy. Local political leaders organised the local community to legitimise their mobilisation when the core national defence was promised. During this period, the CCP leadership did not repress any form of local mobilisation movement. The leadership requested the military to remain neutral initially. However, after several key breakthroughs, military intervention became necessary to ensure national interests by directly controlling localities.

Despite the ongoing disagreement on actual reasons for the Cultural Revolution, rural civilians achieved tremendous autonomy during the early movement to pursue local interests, though some civil mobilisations were readjusted due to illicit occupations. This finding contrasts with scholars who portray rural civilians' violence was driven by an irrationally belief in Maoism and from being misguided by factions. Rural civilians used localised ideology as a weapon to solve their grievance, working against Mao's request for a stable transition through organisations with minimum social disruptions.

### *Localised Ideology*

I have argued that ideological closeness with nationalism and Maoism was the key legitimisation that allowed rural mobilisation to avoid national repression. But what exactly does it mean? I define this localised ideology as a tool for local leaders to control peasants and differentiate themselves from anti-communism. This localised ideology supplements nationalism and Maoism, with local leaders often showing alignment with factions, which can represent local needs through effective social connections. Also due to low literacy rates, these localised ideologies were closely tied to faction's political interests because they controlled communication instruments at local to edit "Little Red Book" in urbanised areas. All localised ideologies shared roots in Maoism, particularly "Little Red Book," with localised editions enabling the adaptation of this ideology. Mao's perception of the Cultural Revolution requested civilians to liberate

themselves through revolutionary events, aiming to educate and readjust class enemies with minimal violence and disruption to socioeconomic order. However, rural civilians did not follow this propaganda but used Maoism and Mao's mass movement to achieve local interests through violence and power seizure, which harmed centralisation and national interests. Most importantly, the use of localised ideology weaponised rural civilians to denounce its competitors.

### **Rural Grievance and Repression**

Thus far, I have explained the structural setting of social mobilisation and why it was feasible for rural civilians to mobilise for local interests. Ideological closeness helped to do the heavy lifting to ensure the capacity for localised collective mobilisation under an authoritarian government. Now, in this section, I will explain the formation of local interests and my definition of threats to national interests followed by repression.

To explain that I have to address rural grievances, which drive rural civilians to seek mobilisation. Rural civilians suffered from material shortages as higher legislations exploited localities to invest in urban areas for national economic interests. The rural-urban cleavage triggered grievances before and during the Cultural Revolution. Local interests were mostly materially driven because of the misalignment between local demand and the national interests. By material goods, I refer to food, money, and goods. To depict it more, this misalignment could be concluded as: the social and political cleavage between rural areas and urbanised superior legislations. Additionally, the earlier famine due to the Great Leap Forward alarmed rural civilians that collectivisation and land reform did not benefit poor peasants but only freed them from a feudal economy for statecraft economy. Once the central government decided to invest in heavy industry and national defence, rural welfare was left behind. The rural economy was exploited by national policies on two dimensions. Firstly, the planned economy for industrialisation, secondly,



low productivity due to the unified grain purchase and sale policy. These two factors increased collective interest in mobilising to overcome material grievances. It is important to clarify that these grievances had been accumulating over a long period, potentially tracing back to the land reform and movements of the 1950s. Similarly, industrialisation was a long-term objective of communist China, viewed by social engineering leadership as a long-term goal that posed a relatively small threat to national interests.

Governmental repression and militarisation were not massive nor extremally brutal in most areas because economic mobilisation posed less of a threat to national security and repression potentially harm the CCP leadership. Most repression of mobilisations driven by economic grievances aimed to centralise political power and readjust previous misguided movements. This form of local interest was common during the Cultural Revolution, as most local mobilisations were materially driven. Hence, among many localities, rural mobilisers of all factions attempted to obtain more food, money, and other material goods (Walder and Yang 2003; Walder 2016; 2017; Zuo 1995).

In contrast, governmental repression was more severe when civilian mobilisation threatened key national security and development. For instance, in Guangxi province, grievances were more culturally and community driven. The repression was extremely brutal compared to other provinces because of two factors. Firstly, Guangxi is a border province connecting Vietnam and China with a well-constructed rail system, making it a logistic hub, crucial for connecting China with the Indochina, which is strategically important to China. Secondly, during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, Vietnam was fighting for the Vietnam war, and China considered the victory of communist Vietnam as directly contributing to its national security. The military occupied the entire province and disarmed all types of rural militia groups to regain control

(Walder 2023). Thus, repression, as a costly event, was more likely to happen when the key interests were harmed. Repression strategy in some areas like Guangxi was rapid than others because after the failure of demonstrating local ideological obedience, the challenge toward national security became threatening. During the national repression, heavy-handed suppression was often directed toward one faction while enhancing the other.

## **Factions**

Factions played an essential role in rural mobilisation, with most rural conflicts sponsored by factional organisations. During the Cultural Revolution, factions were not led by a unified organisation; however, in my research these groups were categorised into two decentralised factions, which responded to the January Storm (*yi yue feng bao*) in Shanghai (Walder 2019; 2023). Conservatives (*bao shou pai*) and Rebels (*zao fan pai*) were the two major factions. A caveat here is that in my research, I categorise factions into these two large groups, though many scholars use more detailed identifiers to map out with better accuracy (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006; Walder and Yang 2003; Walder 2019; 2023). In my research, I maintain some generality to better analyse the actual grievances of rural civilians in mobilisations rather than factional political competition.

The Conservatives were mostly supporters of the superior government and bureaucrats, who were generally in favour of party's mass mobilisations and collectivisations. The members of the Conservatives were predominantly of the "good class" (95%), and many of them were princelings (*tai zi dang*) with kinships to junior or senior party members and original party members (Hua and Walder 2010; see also Hua 1987). In contrast, the Rebels, comprising middle-class "bourgeois" and "bad classes" who organised Red Guards to seize governmental power (Ibid). Both factions claimed legitimacy and revolutionary advancement by consistently adhering to

Maoism. In analysing these groups, it becomes evident that there is no clear ideological distinction between the two factions, as they were poorly organised and highly localised.

In conclusion, I argue that rural mobilisation followed the same pattern as mass mobilisation, blending urban demands with rural grievances. I propose a different understanding of localised ideology, which was salient to unify local collectivisation and express loyalty toward the central government, where Maoism leadership sufficiently aided the capacity of rural mobilisation. Factions served as larger organisations, where participants-built ties to enhance their capacity for mobilisation. As a result, factions filled the final piece of the puzzle for rural mobilisations, breaking restraints.

## **Methods**

In this section, I compare two controlled case studies (Table 1) to illustrate my theoretical arguments. I examine two localities and their rural mobilisations, providing strong qualitative evidence by mixing archival sources with secondary analysis. Methodologically, I compare one representative county-level case and a special case to exemplify micro rural mobilisation in China. Additionally, I examine the correlation between rural mobilisation and higher political mobilisation at the provincial level. My research has been limited by time and accessibility to fieldwork. As a result, I lack direct interview data. To mitigate this, I have used archival data and compared it with fieldwork from secondary sources for accuracy. This method allows me to compare a large number of secondary fieldwork studies to identify commonalities between different localities. Feng county and Liuzhou are selected for my comparative case study to illustrate different motivation of social mobilisation through similar strategy to overcome restrictions, despite a similar claim to ideological loyalty as a means of avoiding governmental repression.

The study of the Cultural Revolution presents the challenge of insufficient and inaccurate data, as many government records from that period are of questionable reliability. Though more data became accessible after the 2010s, Walder notes significant incompleteness in many government records, suggesting that some information remains hidden. Oral history sources, like Huang (2023), recorded samples on a limited scale, potentially describing more detailed stories of one group rather than another. These caveats should be considered, but my research compares and cross-checks diverse sources and generally finds consistent evidence. I chose two representative localities that the central government closely investigated after the mass movements. These localities have comprehensive oral histories, chronography records, and previous field studies, which enable me to support my argument with robust evidence. I identify Feng County and Liuzhou Region as two cases for my study.

Table 1: Controlled and Uncontrolled Variables  
(*Feng County & Liuzhou Region*)

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Political Structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geopolitical Importance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of Factions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External Ties of Local Faction Leaders</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity of Local Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivations to Mobilise</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideological Commitment (Maoism, Nationalism, and Marxism-Leninism)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal Social Norms and Culture</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research Period (Late 1960s – Early 1970s)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies to Overcome Restrictions</li> </ul>	

## Case Studies

## *Feng County*

Feng County is located at the northwestern border of Jiangsu province, connecting Jiangsu and Anhui provinces. It is similar to many rural counties in China, leading by urbanised county capital surrounded by numerous villages and communes. The county primarily consists of rural land used for agricultural production, with several factories located near the urbanised areas. Feng County was required to report to three major superiors: the Provincial Government of Jiangsu in Nanjing for legislation and economic duties, the Nanjing Military District, and the Ji'nan Military District in Anhui province for security duties (Feng County Government 1997).

Feng County involved in the Cultural Revolution in May 1966. The county government remained fully functional until early December, when student movements and later faction formations began to disrupt its operations. The formation of student Red Guards was a response to earlier student movements in Nanjing, the provincial capital, organised by students from local high schools and middle schools<sup>3</sup>. During the same time, factions were officially established in the Feng County, supporting the student movement. As a result, rallies (*da ming da fang*) and big character posters (*da zi bao*) were frequently organised by the two factions to denounce each other for anti-communist ideology.

Among many workers' groups, two factions were mostly identifiable – Liansi and Paolian. Liansi was a Rebel faction, in which factions organised villagers to attack the Conservativisms – Paolian and the county government (Feng County Government 1997). The violent struggle (*wu dou*) intensified significantly between 1967 and 1968, during which local rural villages and communes gained substantial agency through violence, illicitly occupying large amounts of material goods during the fighting. However, not many territories were occupied illegally, except

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike urbanised areas, most counties only have high schools. Young Red Guards are easily motivated by national movements.

for urbanised areas. To tame the local violent struggle, the central government intervened by establishing a local government with joint appointments from both factions. However, the failure of Paolian to demonstrate its ideological alignment with the central government led to its repression, forcing it to yield power to Liansi.

### *Ideology and Ritual*

In January, Liansi and student Red Guards launched several "peace protests" against Paolian and the county government, demanding a power seizure in the county because Rebel factions accused county leaderships of being right-wing class enemies who sought to delegitimise communist China. Walder (2019) found in Zhang Liansheng's notebook, the county secretary, who claimed that he tried to self-criticise to ease the tension between the government and the Rebel group. However, this attempt backfired as the Rebel group demanded that he disband the county government to avoid making the same mistakes as Liu Shaoqi, who had been criticised by Chairman Mao for suppressing student movements in Beijing<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, the Paolian organised civilians based on their social ties and class to defend governmental legitimacy, aiming to protect the bureaucratic system. They feared losing their clientelism privileges in the urbanised county (Feng County Government 1997; Walder 2019). This has been concluded in the county's major events (*da shi ji*) in the County Chronography that the rebels organised to seize governmental power while establishing their close ideological commitment to Mao's Cultural Revolution. They did this by building propaganda buildings, organising civilians to sing propaganda song, and using the "four majors"—big speeches, big airs, big-character posters, and big debates—to criticise the local government. They paraded officials with "high hats" (*dai gao mao*) and forced them to "dismissals from office" and "expulsions from the party." This gesture of

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<sup>4</sup> Walder's (2019), Zhang Liansheng; "Mao Zhuxi huishou wo qianjin," June 5, 1968.

ideology worshipping sending the information of strong obedience at local in participating mass political mobilisations.

### *Violent Struggle*

In respond the nationwide factional movement, Mao asked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to remain neutral while assisting in maintaining social order as he expected peace revolution. In Feng County, PLA's Nanjing Military District sent a group of officers to the county capital to supervise bureaucratic operations. These groups consistently participated the daily operation of county committee. Officers built social ties with Paolian's leadership from villages and county capitals (Walder 2019). However, due to the January Storm (*yi yue feng bao*), more civilians and village cadres committed to the Liansi. They organised to seize power from the county government and the PLA investigator from Nanjing. They formed close relationships with the Ji'nan military district and the local People's Armed Department (PAD), a localised militia department composed of peasants. Military intervention led to the establishment of a military control committee, replacing the county government, whose power had been seized during the earlier movement. Walder concluded from his field research that an official from Nanjing's PLA leaked intelligence to Paolian as an example of political ties. Xu Fang, a PLA officer, informed Paolian's leadership that while they had the PLA's support, the PLA was ordered to leave. He suggested that Paolian prepare for attacks from PAD and Liansi and advised them to take over the local committee (Walder 2019, 63). Local factions built close relationship with a branch of PLA force during the violent struggle, which bridged the local factions with higher political infighting. However, the goal of local factional civil war was not directly sponsored by higher political infighting.

After the PLA withdrew, from December 1967 to May 1968, Liansi attacked multiple Paolian communes and urban occupations by using the weapon they have stolen from PDA

armoury. This period marked the peak of violent struggle. During this period, Liansi conducted a series of guerrilla-like battles against the Paolian for control of urban territories and material goods. Leaders representing Paolian and Liansi organised many violent struggles against each other in Feng County, particularly around the county capital, to legitimise control over the county revolutionary committee and demonstrate their ideological alignment with the CCP leadership. After Liansi and PAD took power in the county's revolution committee, Paolian aimed to delegitimise its role by denouncing its ideology. Walder (2019) cited the diary from Zhang Lianshen (1970),<sup>5</sup> finding that a group of Paolian cadres broke into the PAD's office to search for evidence to denounce Shao Wen and Zhang Liansheng and his Liansi faction. They accused Shao Wen of illegal occupation and revisionism and even hung a Japanese Imperial flag in the committee office with a letter accusing Shao Wen of his imperialist heritage. To respond, Liansi organised a new wave of attacks on Paolian, intensifying the local violent struggle. To regain centralised control, Mao withdrew his limitations on military repression, granting the military the power to intervene. On September 13, 1967, the Nanjing Military District intervened in Feng County's violent struggle. The 68th Army's intervention coerced Liansi, leading to their loss of major battlefields in the county. Most members returned to their communes and villages. However, the defeated Liansi communes and villages refused to recognise the legitimacy of military control and Paolian. As a result, Liansi refused to attend any peace negotiation meetings organised by the military. More fighting occurred over material goods due to material grievance and urban-rural cleavage, which I am presenting in the following section.

### *Addressing Material Grievance and Rural-Urban Cleavage*

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<sup>5</sup> "Zhang Liansheng tongzhi daibiao yuan Paolian," August 27, 1970.



Based on Zhang Liansheng's diary, Walder concluded that Liansi's decentralised communes and villages in the countryside attacked and raided grain depots, supply and marketing cooperatives, materials shipping stations, and banks to seize food, supplies and cash (2019, 72). Moreover, in 1968, most of the violent struggles revolved around food and material goods, with both Liansi and Paolian aiming for easier access to local resources. Meanwhile, the leaders of the two factions sought to fully control the county committee. Paolian requested the PLA to eliminate Liansi; however, the PLA refused to escalate the violence and withdrew from the county once they realised a peaceful settlement could not be achieved through their efforts. Liansi continued to lose its communes and villages because of Paolian's military advantages. To revenge the largest operation occurred in mid-1968 when the Liansi leader organised multiple communes and villages to seize control of the goods station, occupying 200,000 RMB in cash and 3.5 million catties of grain that were intended for taxation (Feng County Government 1997). This further supports my argument that in Feng County, rural community leaders mobilised their communities during the Cultural Revolution primarily to address material grievances, seeing it as an opportunity to obtain resources and benefits, often prioritising these over higher factional political goals.

On March 5th, the PLA and PAD organised a new dialogue between the leadership of Liansi and Paolian in Xuzhou, aiming for a peace settlement by supporting the "left" (*yong zuo*). Although the leaders of the two factions signed an agreement, Walder's fieldwork concluded that the agreement failed. Liansi activists re-entered the county capital, beating the welcoming delegation from the PLA and Paolian (Feng County Government 1997; Walder 2019). Liansi failed to control its village mobilisation groups, which continued to attack Paolian's communes and disrupt food supply chains. The PLA successfully managed to tame the leadership of both factions; however, these factions were extremely decentralised, and local small groups continued to fight

for their own interests. In the later stages of the peace settlement, the most significant and recognisable incident was an organised attack by approximately 1,000 Liansi members against the Shuhe Commune. During this attack, they robbed food and other goods from the Paolian-controlled commune (Walder 2019). Liansi organised its communes to prepare for the takeover of Paolian's communes and successfully occupied urbanised areas, such as the Zhang Wulou commune and Lizhai commune, which had abundant material goods (Walder 2019 and Feng County Government 1997). Walder concluded that the county fell into a "low-grade civil war" in the 1968. Among all these examples of violent struggles, food and material interests were mentioned repeatedly, indicating the motivation of local participants who aimed to obtain material interests for their grievance.

Throughout 1968, the battlefield intensified across the entire Xu Hai prefecture, including Feng County. This escalation deepened the concern of CCP leadership about losing local control without military intervention (Walder 2019). Consequently, Beijing authorised military intervention to regain control at the local level. This decision was communicated to the leadership of both Liansi and Paolian. Consequently, prompting both factions to organise their followers for further conflict and to gather evidence against their opponents to present at a party-organised study group in Beijing (Feng County Government 1997; See also *The History of Fengxian of the Communist Party of China*). Factions aimed to delegitimise the opponents by claiming the disloyalty to the central government. For instance, Liansi's leadership claimed to fight both in the county and the propaganda war in Beijing with slogan "Two Battlefields, One Target, Overwhelm the Opposite Side, Win the Victory" (Walder 2019, 82).<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the study class in Beijing did not help to achieve peace, as it mostly focused on ideological alignment with the party and PLA

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<sup>6</sup> See also "Li Zongzhou tongzhi daibiao yuan Liansi," (Comrade Li Zongzhou represent Liansi) August 27, 1970.

propaganda. The CCP government showed little interest in resolving the actual local issues. In Feng County, the factional war continued, with middle-class officers from both factions organising communes and villages to perpetrate illicit occupations in materially abundant urbanised areas.

After extensive negotiations in Beijing and at the prefectural level organised by the PLA propaganda team, a settlement was reached to develop a cooperative revolutionary committee in Feng County. Walder (2019) concluded from his fieldwork that Liansi organised thousands of its followers, moving them from their communes or villages to the urbanised county capital and communes near the industrial heart of the county to secure more resources and political power within the county committee. Though there is no direct evidence listing all the material gains of local civilians, the mobilisation from less resource-abundant areas to urbanised areas illustrates the material interests of civilians as a solid fact different to political stakes at city level. In contrast, the mid-high rank faction leaders were more interested in securing their seats in the county revolutionary committee, which later evolved into the county government.

In 1969, the "low-grade civil war" continued between Paolian and Liansi, with the PLA maintaining a promise of no military support for either faction. However, in the spring, some members of Paolian splintered off to form a militant group. This group, led by Shan Shutang, organised their followers to attack military storage facilities belonging to the PLA and PAD. Shan Shutang even arrested Zhang Liansheng, the county secretary and the head of Paolian, until PLA officers aggressively intervened, demanding his release along with his delegation (Walder 2019). Paolian militants kept attacking military facilities and the railway system, which connected coastal industrial areas of Jiangsu and inland industrial areas in Anhui province and other inland areas. Chen (2013) points out in a report for the CCP Party History and Archives Academy that, due to the Cultural Revolution and factionalist attacks on the railway system in Shanghai, Jiangsu Xuzhou,

and Xuhai regions, the Central Committee decided to implement a different approach for assessing local loyalty and leftist commitment among all factions. Walder (2019) found similar evidence from his fieldwork, indicating that Deng Xiaoping re-evaluated the impact of the factional “civil war” in Feng County and other counties. In the Xuhai region, Deng made three key decisions to address this issue. First, Deng redefined the local factions and their ideology spectrum; secondly, he sent over the very famous Capital Workers Propaganda Team (*shou du wen gong tuan*) to Feng County, aligning local ideology with Maoism; third, he expanded the size of county committee which included more factional leaders (98). This announcement marked the shift of higher legislation that CCP leadership reevaluated their control over localities finding the fragmentation of local bureaucracy.

### *Repression and Aftermath*

In June, the leadership decided to accelerate the mission of regaining control in Jiangsu. They requested Paolian and Liansi leaderships to organise local government with even delegation power, led by PAD and PLA officers (Walder 2019). The central government planned to rebuild the bureaucratic structure to correct the mistakes of factional political infighting and mitigate its harm to centralised control. After that the new revolutionary committee blamed most of attack to the militant affiliated to Paolina – the “New Paolian” (*xin pao lian*). Also, the failed leaders like Wang and his political ties in PLA were punished, which significantly weakened the political influence of Paolian in the revolutionary committee. Though the county revolutionary committee was designed with an ostensibly “fair” distribution between Paolian and Liansi leaders, the committee head, Shao Wen leaned towards Liansi and PAD, resulting in Paolian leaders facing procedural difficulties that blocked their participation in the committee and shifted their power to grassroots cadres who supported Liansi (Walder 2019). Walder found in the notebook of Shao

Limin, a local official, that Shao Wen promoted most cadres from rural areas and legitimised their revolutionary thinking while stating, “if local revolutionists could not be found, the local PAD leader should lead the rural areas” (113). This power shift benefited the Liansi and PAD more after the CCP leadership rebuilt its bureaucracy to merge Feng County’s revolutionary committee into the provincial committee. Additionally, the Ji’nan Military District gained more trust from Beijing and became more involved in the local bureaucratic reformation. Walder (2019) found in his fieldwork that by the late 1969 many Paolian leaders had lost their positions in the county revolutionary committee, being "punished economically" and "suppressed politically" (115).

A series of political suppression started in the Jiangsu province in Feb 1972 (Walder 2015; 2019). The ideological justification movement, known as "one strike, three antis" (*yi da san fan*), aimed to arrest individuals opposing Mao’s initial revolution and its authority to centralise power. (Wang 2011). During this period, many commune cadres were denounced and arrested because they often formed "nominal kinships" (*ren gan qin*) and boycotts (*bai ba zi*) with factional leaders during the early violent struggles (Walder 2019, 125). These feudal kinship political ties were essential to grassroots politics in China. Kinship politics bridged grassroots communities with rural political leaders and higher-level authorities, enabling individuals to expand their political connections and enhance the mobilisation capacity of local society. After the death of Linbiao, Mao announced that “local military control should soon be ended”; therefore, Shao Wen lost his position in the county committee. Despite the political infighting between the leaders of Paolian and Liansi, who accused each other of wrongfully implementing Chairman Mao's orders and opposing Maoism, thereby tarnishing the Cultural Revolution, the movement eventually came to an end in Feng County. This marked the conclusion of the decade-long turmoil known as the ten years of havoc (*shi nian dong luan*).

In Feng County, as in many other counties during the Cultural Revolution, the ideological alignment between factions and the national interests of a centralised ideology was crucial for gaining political power. Factional leaders competed for political dominance by emphasising their ideological "leftness." While rural civilians participated in factional struggles and ideological debates, micro-communities like communes and villages were often driven by self-interest and the need to secure material resources due to food shortages. These rural micro-communities had strong incentives to mobilise based on their material grievances and the rural-urban cleavage. The "charismatic" nature of the Cultural Revolution and the factionalism enabled rural mobilisation, which helped to avoid direct repression. In Feng County, national repression was delayed until it became evident that the national economy and local control were deteriorating. This realisation came late in the Cultural Revolution when CCP leadership recognised the challenge. The case of Feng County, along with other localities, compelled CCP leadership to adjust its bureaucratic system and mobilisation strategy, aiming to bridge local needs with superior authorities. In the next case, a different grievance is present, where rural civilians mobilised for cultural grievances by strategically applying a similar model to overcome restrictions. However, the violence and repression in Liuzhou were massive and brutal.

### *Liuzhou Region*

Liuzhou County is in the centre of Guangxi Province, a historically underdeveloped border province that connects China with its Indo-China neighbours. Liuzhou is a relatively larger jurisdiction than Feng County, encompassing 10 counties. However, the geographic complexity of Guangxi Province made travel between areas difficult and hindered the development of highly centralised urban areas. As a result, the urbanisation rate remained low, and economic disparities were not the primary grievance driving local mobilisation. Despite this, Guangxi Province

experienced some of the most intense repression and factional violent struggles during the Cultural Revolution. It seems like there was a very different motivation of social mobilisation and repression in Guangxi. What makes it so special and unique among all other localities and why?

To better understand the circumstance of the Liuzhou region, it is essential to trace back to its collectivisation movement, which had deep and long-term effects. The Liuzhou government had a very strong capacity in mobilising its people through social engineering in a short period. This movement like other places helped local society to achieve certain economic gains, which enabled the leadership to build a close relationship with higher legislations; however, it also created grievance due to waste of materials and irresponsible social engineering. The Liuzhou chronography<sup>7</sup> provides some evidence that the collectivisation movement in Liuzhou started in 1952, when many production groups were artificially gathered on a small scale. By 1954, 411 preliminary communes had been established, encompassing 30.32% of all rural households. Though the early collectivisation was very successful this policy artificially combined mixed village communities (like Hakka) and Han communities. In 1957, the collectivisation and communisation finished in the Liuzhou region, in which the government board organised 97.5% of total rural household to form communes.

In the Great Leap Forward, in response to nationwide industrialisation, Liuzhou established many rural factories. However, these factories lacked the necessary technology and materials to produce standardised industrial goods. The government was eager to demonstrate their political loyalty to the CCP leadership by meeting industrial quotas. As a result, in 1958, the reported production figures were 45,000 tons of iron, 7,491 tons of steel, and 3.32 million tons of coal.

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<sup>7</sup> Liuzhou government compiled a relatively comprehensive chronography, analysing the history of the region and its economic development. This document responded to a wave of chronography making in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

However, later investigation by the Liuzhou government revealed the actual production was 10,600 tons of iron and 631,300 tons of coal (Liuzhou Regional Government 2000, 750). Food production decreased dramatically due to this industrialisation. Meanwhile the government exploited local civilians by coercively forcing them to provide agricultural goods for taxation, leading to famine and the deaths of at least 96,000 people between 1959-1961. Social grievances in Liuzhou deepened during the mass mobilisation era, as the local government falsely adopted national economic reforms to boost the promotion of leadership.

Following that the Cultural Revolution started in Liuzhou on May 30th, 1966, when Wang Qiheng, the secretary of the Liuzhou administration (*di wei*) and Hakka community, presented a report titled "On the Issue of Carrying Out the Cultural Revolution" to its superior legislative body, led by Wei Guoqing. This marked the start of social cleavage and grievance in Liuzhou due to this mass mobilisation movement. Wei Guoqing was very successful in carrying out his ideological alignment with Mao from two dimensions. Firstly, Wei Guoqing held a very close personal relationship with the CCP leadership. He was a leader of the local Hakka community during the early movement and participated in the Vietnam War of Independence against France, assisting the Vietnamese Communist Party in occupying northern Vietnam. This involvement elevated him as an important local leader and communist activist (Walder 2022; 2023). Secondly, Guangxi Province did not suffer from significant social cleavage before the Cultural Revolution and Wei Guoqing proactively achieved Mao's economic requirement in early movements. In other words, the large social cleavages in Guangxi Province were a result of the Cultural Revolution and factional struggles. In the rally, Bao Xiaonong, the leader of the revolutionary working group, gave a speech following Wei Guoqing's address for the province. He highlighted the importance of



adhering to Mao's teachings and leadership in the Cultural Revolution, emphasising the guidance found in the "Little Red Book".

Similar to the rest of China, the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi and Liuzhou was led by two factions that organised mass civilian mobilisations for political stakes. In Liuzhou, the social structure and a sense of integrated, unified, mixed-cultural community played a strong role in motivating rural mobilisation. This social cohesion gave subgroup (Hakka) considerable authority in local politics both in mixed and its clan communities (Walder 2023; Yang 2011). Student Red Guards responded to the movement by posting Big Character Posters and assisting the Liuzhou regional government in demolishing historical heritage sites to establish "new thinking" (*xin si xiang*) (Song, 1987). In May 1967, Lianzhi and the 4.22<sup>8</sup> Rebel Army (*Zao fan da jun*) formed the two major factions in the Guangxi and Liuzhou regions. These factions engaged in a series of violent struggles using cold arms. Ironically, despite its name, the rebel faction was Lianzhi, while the conservative faction was 4.22. This naming convention should not cause confusion regarding the nature of each faction. Due to the geopolitical importance of Guangxi, especially Liuzhou, and the massive violent struggles in the Liuzhou region, the two factions went to Beijing for negotiations with the party leadership. This was seen as an opportunity for both factions to denounce each other ideologically (Office of the Party Consolidation Leading Group of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 1988). Conventionally, the PLA was ordered to remain neutral in the violent struggle, which provided a relatively open environment for local violent struggles and enabled opportunities for 4.22 to attack PLA infrastructures and steal firearms. The violent struggle escalated and negatively affected the railway system in Liuzhou, a vital location for bridging the Chinese railway system (Walder 2023).

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<sup>8</sup> Also known as April 22

During the Cultural Revolution in Liuzhou, local communities were restructured by political ideology during this period, leading to the formation of ideological communities that mixed cultural backgrounds by sharing similar political beliefs. During 1968-1969, the PLA and the CCP central government maintained high tolerance toward the local violent struggle until the 4.22 faction's illicit occupation of a train carrying military aid to Vietnam prompted the PLA to violently repress 4.22 followers. The PLA cooperated with Lianzhi and CCP-backed Wei Guoqing, who was allowed to exercise brutal control locally (Office of the Party Consolidation Leading Group of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 1988; Walder 2023). As a result, many local officers and members of 4.22 were imprisoned and faced prolonged disgrace, though their reputations were later rehabilitated in subsequent trials and reassessments. Wei Guoqing and his Lianzhi faction conducted mass killings during the Cultural Revolution, disregarding ethnicity. The large death of Guangxi and Liuzhou region was not directly related to the merge of rural communities. Walder (2023) statistically found that most violence and killings during the Cultural Revolution occurred in rural areas where the Hakka minority comprised 7-30% of the local population. Neither Han nor Hakka were significantly targeted in these communities; instead, ideological differences and perceived disloyalty were the main factors for killings during military repression (Walder and Yang 2003). Additionally, the widespread Hakka practice of cannibalism in Liuzhou and Guangxi, rooted in clan culture, indicated a common ritual behaviour. This ritual behaviour represented local community integration during mass top-down movements, enabling rural communities to merge across ethnic lines, blur the boundaries of clan diversity, and enhance the capacity of local communities to achieve local autonomy through violence. During the process ideology, again, played an essential role to distinguish “us” and “them”.

### *Ideological Struggle*

In contrast to Feng County, ideological alignment appears more crucial in Liuzhou, not only to CCP leadership but also within the local community. The social norms and ideological pressure forced local civilians to comply with local factions. The Cultural Revolution was intensely ideological in Guangxi and Liuzhou for two main reasons. Firstly, the factional leaders were closely connected with CCP leadership. Particularly the leadership of Lianzhi, who were personal friends of CCP leaders and the Vietnamese Communist Party. Secondly, the Liuzhou region was strategically significant, serving as the centre of Guangxi and connecting multiple key areas, including minority reserve territories, industrial and military facilities, and the railway interchange linking Vietnam and China.

Following January Storm, in Liuzhou, ideological denunciation started by students. Students were proactive in the ideological movement supporting Wei Guoqing and his factions. In January 1967, due to the power seizure movement in Liuzhou City and the Cultural Revolution, educational organisations paused their activities. Students from Liuzhou, Nanning, and Guilin organised Red Guard petition groups to visit Beijing, requesting that Wei Guoqing delegitimise the 4.22 faction (Office of the Party Consolidation Leading Group of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 1988). Meanwhile, these students and Lianzhi members in the Liuzhou region were organised together to respond to Mao's "anti-four old" (*chu si jiu*) movement, which they demolished historical heritages of both Hakka and Han and burned local historical archives (Ibid).

Between June 4th and October 1st, 1967, Lianzhi and 4.22 organised multiple ideological confrontations in Liuzhou city, mobilising rural civilians to participate in rallies that publicly denounced the ideological mistakes of their opponents, labelling each other as "counterrevolutionaries," revisionists, and class enemies (Liuzhou Regional Government 2000).

These ideological confrontations often ended in violent struggles, which further escalated in October when a PLA officer in the Liuzhou Military Sub-district recognised Wei Guoqing as the head of the Guangxi Revolutionary Committee, supporting him in overcoming his opponents in the study camp in Beijing (Ibid). The 4.22 requested Wei Guoqing to drop from his position, accusing him of being wrongfully repressing 4.22, attacking headquarters of 4.22 in the Liuzhou city and Nanning city. To denounce Wei Guoqing, university students posted the "419 Declaration," which was advocated by high school Red Guards in the Liuzhou region. The declaration claimed:

Since late March, many government officials have posted big-character posters in accordance with our great leader Chairman Mao's policy on cadres who have made mistakes, hoping that Comrade Wei Guoqing will stand up, thoroughly check his mistakes, and correct them.... repel this [class enemy] counter-revolutionary counter-current of capitalist restoration and fight side by side with them to carry out the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the end! (Archive Administration of Nan'ning 1988, Vol 12).<sup>9</sup>

This declaration denounced Wei Guoqing and legitimised the ideological leftness of 4.22, which claimed their lawfulness was entitled by their ideological closeness with Chairman Mao.

In Liuzhou, high school students and workers, especially railway workers, responded to the "419 Declaration" by accusing Lianzhi in the region, which had previously detained a propaganda "bureau" of 4.22 in Liuzhou. In response, 4.22 organised militant members to bomb

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<sup>9</sup> See Song Yongyi 宋永毅. "Guangxi Wenge Jimidangan 廣西文革機密檔案資料"[ Secret archives about the cultural revolution in Guangxi, classified documents] Note: this sources has been conducted by Song Yongyi as a national appointed scholar in investigating the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi in the late 1980s for internal investigations. The accuracy of documents might contain false information but this set of archives are being recognised in the discipline as a primary archival source for information that have been hidden by the government.

the Lianzhi office in Liuzhou. This declaration affected the entire province, especially in Nanning, where numerous violent struggles erupted over the delegitimisation of Wei Guoqing, with calls for the CCP leadership to reselect the leadership of the militarisation group and Lianzhi for its anti-Maoism violent struggles, both led by Wei Guoqing (Ibid).

### *Violent Struggle & Railway*

Violent struggles became more severe since the middle of 1967 and became civil war in 1968. Both factions illegally obtained large number of light weapons from local weapon house and military supplier trains to Vietnam. Both factions developed higher military capacity and split the occupation zone along the Liu River. Lianzhi even obtained some cannons, which helped them create a military advantage over 4.22. The major violent struggle in the Liuzhou region started on November 29, 1967, in Liuzhou city and soon spread throughout the region, leading to over 36 casualties (Liuzhou Regional Government 2000). In May 1968, Lianzhi organised its followers to prepare for a major combat with 4.22, aiming to thwart 4.22's attempt to take over its territory.

In Liuzhou, many violent struggles and militia activities centred around the railway system, which is strategically vital to Chinese national security. During the Cultural Revolution, the CCP leadership sought to align Vietnam with China as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated. To "buy" support from Vietnam and combat the US, China promised to provide military aid via railway, passing through the main transportation hub in Guangxi—Liuzhou (Walder 2023). Domestically, Liuzhou connected Guilin and Nanning, which suffered severe violent struggles during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the railway system in Liuzhou became a critical strategic asset for local factions and the central government. Both factions aimed to recruit railway workers in Liuzhou, with most of these recruitments built through personal connections and ideological influences. Many railway workers participated in 4.22, and many were affected by the violent

struggles. Lianzhi targeted the propaganda team of 4.22 by setting ambushes to restrict their capacity to express their localised ideology of Maoism (Huang 2021).<sup>10</sup> 4.22 and railway workers participated in the Cultural Revolution and violent struggles by robbing military aid meant for Vietnam and damaging railways to disrupt transportation, leading to a division among railway workers and officers into two factions during the violent struggle (Ibid). 4.22 was recognised as a legitimate revolutionary organisation in Liuzhou in 1967, as claimed by Zhou Enlai. However, their legitimacy was undermined by their violent struggles, especially their actions of robbing military weapons for Vietnam (Walder 2023). Moreover, according to the oral history from Wang Fanxiu, the leader of 4.22 in the Liuzhou region: on February 8th, 1968, members of 4.22 wrote "Today's Gothaer Program," criticising the CCP's Education Camp in Beijing, which redirected the revolutionary events towards a revisionist right-wing movement (Huang 2021).<sup>11</sup> The CCP leadership highly suspected the motivations of 4.22, believing it to be very harmful to national security for two reasons: first, among the many instances of military resource theft, 4.22 targeted a critical train carrying weapons to Vietnam, seizing 11,800 cases of light weapons and over 1.7 million bullets; second, the CCP leadership suspected that 4.22 was cooperating with the long-standing anti-communist group in Guangxi, the "Anti-Communist National Salvation Corps" (*fan gong jiu guo tuan*) (ibid).

Due to fear of punishment and Lianzhi's attacks, 4.22 organised more massive robbery movements targeting military aid meant for Vietnam, which increased their military capacity and helped prevent attacks from Lianzhi. However, they did not take any heavy weapons, believing they were still capable of delivering their nationalist revolutionary mission to Chairman Mao. Later,

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<sup>10</sup> Yang Jianping, "My way of Cultural Revolution"

<sup>11</sup> Wang Fanxiu "The whole story of the "5.21" incident and my experience of the Cultural Revolution"

Chairman Mao issued the "7.3 Announcement," which declared the activities of 4.22 as counter-revolutionary events, marking the beginning of violent repression and its aftermath.

### *Repression and Cultural Forces*

The "7.3 Announcement" marked the beginning of CCP-sponsored repression in Liuzhou and Guangxi Province, as 4.22 challenged the core national security plan of the CCP during the Cultural Revolution and failed to demonstrate its ideological alignment with the CCP leadership. Communes and sub-factions of 4.22 were under investigation, and although violent struggles continued in rural areas, Lianzhi gained a dominant advantage with the help of local PLA forces. I argue that during this period, brutal repression and "massive killings" were highly correlated to local culture. Civilians and local political leaders could easily mobilise large groups of people to beat, torture, and even cannibalise their collective enemies due to historical conflicts, which were closely related to local clan cultures. Petitioning letter to CCP leaderships from Bo Dehuai, a 4.22 carder, concluded the massive violence:

I am very puzzled and extremely furious about the large-scale horrific bloody suppression and ruthless persecution that has occurred in various places in Guangxi since 1968, mainly targeting the cadres and masses of the Guangxi 4.22 faction. Large-scale exterminations have occurred in many places, arrested, killed, raped, and even killed people to eat their hearts, livers, and flesh at will. The Liutie area also persecuted people of one faction, set up jails everywhere, arrested, criticised, and beat many cadres of the 4.22 faction privately. They were taken to a detention centre for no reason (Huang 2021).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bo Dehuai, "My Letter and Experiencing of Surrendering Weapons in Cultural Revolution"

In rural areas of Liuzhou and Guangxi, cannibalism was common and accepted by Hakka subgroup, who had a cultural tradition of cannibalism, and Han Chinese, who participated in this practice due to social pressures and as a way to align with community beliefs. Zheng and a group of anonymous writers conducted a field research publishing in 1996 under CCP's supervision to research cannibalism in Guangxi. Their field work engaged with local archives and people who participated in cannibalism. His research in Wuxuan County found over 21 instances of cannibalism, which were driven by repression against the "class enemies" of 4.22. During the Cultural Revolution, some local political leaders used the pretext of "class enemies" to lynch local opponents through massive killings and promoting cannibalism. In some communes, this widespread cannibalism indicated a strong correlation to lineage conflicts and ideological loyalty towards local political leaderships. The phenomenon of cannibalism during the Cultural Revolution can be explained by two hypothetical reasons, despite the absence of extreme food shortages as noted in Zheng's report where civilians boiled pork and victims together. Firstly, rural civilians may have seen this as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to local leaders, which helped them to avoid becoming targets themselves. Eating "class enemies" was a way to show firm opposition against enemies, drawing on the Hakka cultural norm of cannibalism as a ritual. Secondly, it might have been a manifestation of collective madness under the intense political cult environment, driven by the psychological influence and pressure exerted by a few culpable local leaders.

Despite this, rural civilians were mobilised to commit collective crimes driven by Hakka cultural practices, targeting those they considered class or local enemies. An interview from Zheng (1996) revealed that the eating and killing were motivated by longstanding lineage hatreds predating the founding of the People's Republic of China. One perpetrator claimed entitlement to



cannibalism, asserting it was for the cause of Communist China and Maoism, which covered his hatred to the son of a local landowner who refused to lend food in a famine before 1949. Although the CCP leadership strongly condemned the mass killings and cannibalism in Guangxi, leading to a series of trials in the 1980s, the atrocities reflected deep-seated local conflicts and the manipulation of cultural practices for political purposes. As a result, many minority leaders were promoted, and Hakka culture grew stronger not only in Hakka-reserved lands but also in mixed areas, reducing the earlier segregation between immigrant Han clans and Hakka clans.

## **Discussion**

My research aims to explain the mechanism by which rural civilians overcome mobilisational restrictions while developing ideological weapons under an authoritarian government. Rural civilians aimed to mobilise for grievance both materially and culturally. The intensified social grievance and cleavage motivate rural civilians to overcome restriction, which pit local interests over national interests and further harm centralisation. I aim to bridge the gap in mobilisation studies by focusing on Chinese rural mobilisation, an area that has seen limited attention. Conventional studies have already highlighted the different political patterns before and after Mao's era. My research heavily engages with a case from Mao's era, which differs from rural mobilisation during the radical reforms under Deng's era. Following a new line of study, I believe that modern China, particularly during Xi's era, the rural mobilisations that show a backlash against liberal model, in which “charismatic” leader or personnel model has been reconstructed (Golden 2015; Guo 2019; Zhao 2016).

Feng County and Liuzhou Region represent two mobilisations with distinct local demands. In Feng County, economic grievance was the most common driver of mobilisation. In contrast, the cultural identity drove mobilisation in Guangxi, particularly in Liuzhou addressing historical clan

politics and grievances across ethnic and cultural communities. Civilians in both cases had to overcome structural restrictions on mobilisation and faced strong repression when national interests were challenged. The repression in Feng County was due to the losses of local factions in demonstrating its ideological alignment with CCP leaderships. In contrast, repression in Guangxi was particularly brutal because the local movements threatened the CCP's security during the Vietnam War, while the crisis of Sino-Soviet relations

A fair question to ask about the two case studies is whether they are outliers during the period. China has a strong government with high state capacity in managing its country. Social mobilisation restrictions are unified with slightly different treatment at the local level due to diverse personal ties and local government. To answer the question of how rural civilians overcame restrictions, I found similar models among many localities across the region, except in Tibet and Xinjiang, which were treated differently due to their historical political conflict with the central government. Most rural mobilisations were driven by material grievances, which makes Feng County a representative case. In contrast, Liuzhou represents locations that were geopolitically important for national security. The motivation of community and cultural grievances was common within the province; however, I did not find similar cases in the northern border regions with the Soviet Union over conflicting areas due to low population density and cultural differences.

I suggest furthering this research to bridge the gap of social mobilisation studies from Mao's era to contemporary Chinese politics. This will enhance research on Chinese politics and policy by providing a deep understanding of localised grievances and culture within the broader framework of Chinese bureaucratic politics. Recent scholarships (Shambaugh 2024; Xu et al. 2024) suggest that the Cultural Revolution ended the chaotic era. The study of Chinese politics, as an essential part of comparative politics, has come full circle (Shambaugh 2024). Under Xi's Marxist-

Leninist era, scholars are returning to early studies on China, interpreting politics with limited information and facing dramatic changes in social mobilisation theories, rendering many earlier models from the liberation period less applicable.

Also, scholars studying historical repression and social movements might find my research interesting for its description of political ideology polarisation in the evolution of Chinese politics. My findings from comparative case studies highlight the importance of ideological alignment with CCP leadership. Local political leaders who align ideologically with the CCP can facilitate collective actions with high mobilisation under top-down mass movements, allowing civilians to mobilise without facing severe repression. These findings align with research on contentious politics in China and recent scholarly findings in suggesting strategically avoiding collective mobilisation in archiving policy goals (Fu 2017; Oi 1991). Also, with advancements in technology, especially increasing media tools like TikTok, Weibo, Xiaohongshu (The Red), and Bilibili, all generations, particularly the younger ones, are heavily engaging with various forms of content today. Propaganda and ideological advancement have become easier, while grievances are louder than ever, especially during Covid and the recent local debt issues, which have heavily affected labour mobilisations and welfare redistribution.

The Cultural Revolution serves as a pivotal juncture with long-term effects on Chinese politics, contentious politics, and mobilisation studies. Recent scholarship suggests that the massive repression and ideological implications during this period have had lasting coercive effects, reducing contentious movements in China. However, these effects seem to diminish as the population ages, with many young adults lacking a deep understanding of this history (Wang 2021). The movements in major cities during the Zero-Covid policies and their subsequent repression demonstrate that contentious mobilisations can occur when social restrictions are overcome. This

suggests that even in tightly controlled environments, grievances can lead to significant public dissent by using social medias to organise mobilisations (Wallance 2021; Yang 2023). In rural China, the local debt issue and labour mobilisation suggest an interesting correlation between civilians and local political leaders forming political interest groups. Local leaders often use labour movements to compete with superior leaders, who are usually appointed and not from the local area (Mattingly 2022; Huang 2020; Lü and Liu 2019; Li and Manion 2019; Tsai and Xu 2018). With a broader perspective, this line of research on social mobilisation from a Marxist-Leninist ideology aligns with recent studies analysing Chinese civilians' perceptions. These studies examine how civilians bundle their views toward national policies and their implications for national politics (Lee 2014). The research on Chinese politics and social movements will evolve with changes in fiscal reform, leadership, local development, and the growth of social media. My study addresses the gap in rural mobilisation between the earlier Mao's Marxist-Leninist era and today under Xi's administration. It offers insights into current social mobilisation by analysing earlier movements, highlighting the critical role of ideology, governmental threat perceptions, and rural interests.

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## Appendix 1: Road Map for How Civilians Overcame Restrictions

