Chapter 27
Independent Asia:

The Cultural Revolution in China

During China's Cultural Revolution, conflict between Mao Zedong and his successors spread beyond the political realm and became an assault on intellectuals throughout Chinese society. In the excerpt below, a student who was a survivor of the Cultural Revolution describes the hardships he endured during the years of chaos. As you read the excerpt, consider the importance placed on family connections.

My total flaw was my bad family background. I started to feel it when I was in high school. It was around '64 and '65. I was a senior. I was a hard-working student, politically progressive and close to the Party organization. I didn't know what it was about me that repelled those with good family backgrounds. They all tried to avoid me. Not like mice running away at the sight of cats, but like people fleeing from plague. They even looked down on me. I didn't know what was happening. Naturally I became closer to those few students with similar family background problems...

My family was living in a quite decent apartment. Suddenly, for no reason, the local government ordered us to move out... After that, some sort of high-ranking official moved in... It showed the political status of my family.

When the Cultural Revolution began, everything fell into place. My family was one of the first in the city to be ransacked.

I later found out that it was my mother's ignorance that started the ransacking. Both my grandfather and father were working in banks. They were well-known capitalists. At that time all the funds capitalists had in the banks were frozen. You couldn't withdraw anything.... My mother didn't know about that. She went to get some money out. The bank clerks immediately called the Red Guards. They showed up in no time at my home and started to search and ransack our apartment.

... My mother was being denounced outside the house. Lots of noisy people packing the place. Things were being smashed and burnt. Smoke was still in the air. I was only seventeen that year and had never seen anything like that. I didn't dare go any closer...

The next day, I went to see the Red Guards responsible for ransacking my family. I figured I'd take anything from them: insults, criticism, and everything else. I was going to beg them to allow me to go home to have a look... One Red Guard was decent. He took me home. I glanced over the rooms from the corridor. Red Guards were standing everywhere, searching for things. No sign of my family. Lots of things were in shreds, smashed and torn... Those cherished things were lying on the floor everywhere but now they were no longer important to me. The only thing left to me was the desire to survive. I forgot about everything, even my hunger. I asked the Red Guards to let my brother go with me. Leaving my family was something the Red Guards didn't object to. I was going to break with my family. It was revolutionary action. And also my brother was still quite young and a cripple. So they agreed to let us go...

In 1968, when the Going to the Countryside Movement started, I volunteered to go... I went to Inner Mongolia... a desolate place. But suddenly I felt I'd thrown away the burden of my family background at last. However, my team leader told the locals about my situation... He even reported me to the brigade Party branch people... I just worked hard. That was the only way out for me...

... After three years there, they got me to teach in the local school. At this time, people among us...
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started to be chosen to go back to the cities. I knew my place. . . . In the first two batches, all the people from good family backgrounds went. Only girls and people with some disabilities were left behind. . . . Unexpectedly I had my lucky break. I was assigned to work for a railroad administration in a large city.

. . . Now my situation was much better. My job was backbreaking but no one knew about my family. . . .

One day, though, we were going to dig air raid shelters. First we lined up on the platform. Then the chief said those with bad family backgrounds are going to carry the rocks from the hills and the others do the digging. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. . . . I was the first to be called. . . .

About that time I got to know two girls. One was a little extroverted [outgoing] and the other was the opposite. . . .

The first girl was real talkative and intelligent. . . . I got along with her just great. She came from the same city as me. I was totally amazed when she told me she lived in the same apartment my family had been kicked out of. Her parents were the high-ranking officials. . . .

After we got married, things started to change for me. . . . In my work unit, people began to treat me like somebody. . . . My position changed immediately. . . .

I took advantage of my wife's family connections and I managed to go to college and join the Party. Everybody seemed to have forgotten about my family problem. . . .

I think I've reached a dead end in what I'm doing. The best years of my life were wasted during the Cultural Revolution. . . . Now, I don't want to use my wife's family's influence. . . . At the beginning I benefited from her family but now it doesn't mean much. I'm not inherently Red, no Red roots. . . . On the surface, this family of mine looks all right, but once someone gets to know my history, they'll start thinking twice about it.


1. How did the Cultural Revolution affect the student's family?

2. Why did the Red Guards support the student in his decision to break with his family?

3. How did marriage affect the student's career?