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# Interview on the **CULTURAL REVOLUTION** with Chris Milton, a participant

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Chris Milton is an 18 year old American who spent three years in China.

Our interview with him cannot by any means be taken to represent a broad picture of the issues and struggles of the Chinese cultural revolution or of the entire spectrum of Red Guard and rebel movements.

It is a slice of his experience at his high school during the cultural revolution. The high school was in Peking, and adjoined Peking University where much of the struggle began, but it should be remembered that a variety of events were taking place, including struggles in the countryside that began much earlier, struggles within factories, and struggles within the Communist Party.

We were struck by the intricacy of even the small part of the cultural revolution Chris describes and some over-simplification no doubt occurs in seeking to familiarize an American audience with the events...

This is the way Chris saw it:

THE MOVEMENT: You were a student in a Chinese high school?

CHRIS MILTON: Yeh, ninth grade. First I studied Chinese for a year, then was in school from the fall of 1965 to the spring of 1966. Then the cultural revolution broke out. I spent two semesters working and studying in the cultural revolution, then I came back to the States. Most of the kids in my class were about 14.

MOVEMENT: The Red Guards said that the educational system was screwed up...

CHRIS: Very.

MOVEMENT: What were some of the criticisms and did people perceive them before the cultural revolution started?

CHRIS: Yeh, it was growing. We used to have a lot of rap sessions, sitting around after class. In the process these bullshit sessions sorta evolved into study groups where we were studying Mao's works and trying to apply them to our school situation. One of the things that hit us was the exams which were coming up for the 9th and 12th grade kids. The whole system of examinations, where you took them, how well you did on them determined whether you got into a bad high school or a **good** high school.

MOVEMENT: Revisionist?

CHRIS: They were most like American schools, the most bourgeois, the most hung up in petty academic things and the farthest removed from practical Chinese life. Another thing besides exams that bothered us was joining the Young Communists.

MOVEMENT: What was the procedure?

CHRIS: You had to be sponsored by another Young Communist who raised your name. I'm not sure who had veto power, I think the head of our political department, our philosophy teacher.

MOVEMENT: In other words, the students had no voice.

CHRIS: They did. When a name came up usually the class would agree. But there was one chick in our class who we vetoed.

MOVEMENT: What do you mean by good high school?

CHRIS: Academically good. Schools with prestige and good facilities and teachers. Through exams the working class and peasant kids were being weeded out of these so-called good schools. Its funny because these schools were the most revisionist schools.

We said she could not be a Young Communist.

MOVEMENT: Why not?

CHRIS: Too many hang-ups. We didn't feel she served the people at all. She was much too hung up in getting grades and we didn't think she was the most advanced person in the class. We vetoed her for about a month, but she got in anyway because the teacher wanted her in. She was sorta the teachers pet.

MOVEMENT: Has the procedure changed since then?

CHRIS: Oh yeh. I don't know if the Young Communists are back together again. The Red Guards sorta took over. Before the cultural revolution every night the Young Communists would take a few people aside. They'd have a criticism-self-criticism session which really wasn't. It was more like a masochistic trip on the part of the people who were trying to be admitted. This is really the first thing that started turning me off. I said, wait a minute. Because the people who were getting in didn't seem to me the most advanced people in the class by any means. They were usually the best students and the most dogmatic and they knew more theory insofar as having read more Mao, Marx or Engels.

But the rebels in the class, who I thought were applying Mao in a much more dialectical way and who were more interested in serving the people by trying to make the educational system better for the people--they almost never got in. There were a few guys in the Young Communists who were good heads, some beautiful people. But a lot of them

were bastards. Their work style was completely wrong. They didn't try to help the so-called screw ups; they just put them down.

## LABOR AND BUREAUCRATS

MOVEMENT: Were there other issues that bothered students at your school before the cultural revolution?

CHRIS: The question of physical labor. It was a tokenistic thing, like two weeks out of the year. They usually went to some commune at harvest time. The idea was to have contact with the laboring people. That didn't happen. Sometimes it was patronizing. Usually there were more students at the place than peasants, with all the students in one field. To find a peasant was a novelty. In the universities it was a little better, with six months out of every two years spent in the countryside.

But the education we got didn't even begin to relate to the rest of society, and most of the guys I knew got most of their education outside of school. It seemed like there was a polarization... the whole push of society was toward making the country more revolutionary while the educational system was going against that.

The schools were run by bureaucrats. We never got a say in it. And one of the things that got people moving was that the bureaucracy lied to us, especially in the last couple of months before the cultural revolution in our school. There was a struggle going on in the leadership of Chinese society and we weren't being informed of what was going on.



MOVEMENT: Give us an example.

CHRIS: We wanted to have public denunciations of some playwrights and newspaper editors who were being criticized for reactionary writings. The administration of the school didn't want us to get involved in that. They loaded us down with homework so we wouldn't be able to get involved.

MOVEMENT: How did the cultural revolution finally start at your school?

CHRIS: It all started with the eruption at Peking University. We're only a few hundred yards away. We used to go there all the time, but once the fire-works started, the bureaucrats at our school told us we couldn't go there. They sent a representative to go and check out the situation. The University was torn by faction fights over whether or not the head of the University was any good.

The representative, our vice principal, came back and gave this big report. The head of the philosophy department at Peking University was in the Party. She and a few other teachers and students put up this big character poster attacking the head of the University. He was the Party Secretary too. She lined him up with the reactionary playwrights and editors and attacked his policy on work in the countryside and showed how the educational system fit right into the scheme. He was trying to blunt people's minds and create a social basis for an eventual takeover.

But we didn't know what this poster said at all. The people who put it up got shoved around some. It was pretty hairy for a while. Interesting though—they never tore down the poster, even though everyone called it counter-revolutionary. People just put up other big character posters attacking her poster.

So our vice principal went there and did his investigation. He gave us a long report about how bad this woman was, saying her father was a capitalist and she was out to get class revenge.

MOVEMENT: What was the reaction? Did people believe the vice-principal?

CHRIS: Most of the kids did. We took his word for it. He was more respected than the principal. One of the better-liked bureaucrats. He dug sports and was a Korean War vet. He used to tell us battle stories. The principal never came out of her office to see us.

## BUREAUCRAT EXPOSED

MOVEMENT: How did you find out, he wasn't telling the truth?

CHRIS: About a week after his report, the national newspapers reprinted the big character poster word for word, with no editorial comment. It took us about an hour to snap. We figured this woman wasn't such a reactionary after all. We had been bullshitted to and we better go find out for ourselves.

In no time the whole school was empty and everyone went to the University. The bureaucracy tried to stop us by spreading rumors that the fact that the poster was published didn't mean anything, and that the PEOPLE'S DAILY wasn't the official organ of the Central Committee. We knew they were lying.

That was the first time we realized that there was any split between our own bureaucracy and the Central Committee. We had faith in the Central Committee, so our bureaucrats discredited themselves. Also, the vice-principal's report never said what the poster contained. When we read it, it made a lot of points that we agreed with.

MOVEMENT: What was the scene at Peking University?

CHRIS: Wild. Thousands of people and thousands upon thousands of big character posters. Ordinary people, not just students. There were rallies, people standing around just talking to each other, people reading the posters, putting them up, people selling popsicles. It's a big campus and every wall in the University was covered at least 3 or 4 times with posters; inside too. We'd just go around reading them. Some posters were put up by individuals, others by groups.

## THE RIGHT TO REBEL

MOVEMENT: What was the theme of these posters?

CHRIS: The main issue, the real issue, was the right to rebel—to rebel against the bureaucracy and their flunkies, the Young Communists.

MOVEMENT: What happened after you had your first contact with the struggle at the University?

CHRIS: We were convinced that the woman who had written the first poster was right, and that there was a conspiracy among the bureaucrats in the Chinese government to not serve the people. We came back to our school wondering about the connection between our bureaucrats and those.

About five of us cornered the vice-principal. We challenged his report. He became very arrogant and treated us like a bunch of young punks. The more

questions we asked him, the more he tried to evade. People started to gather. Within less than an hour we had 1000 people. Everyone was asking questions, yelling, calling him names. Then we began to get some answers. He tried to pass the buck to the principal. The questions started to broaden to historical things, the Young Communists, teachers who had been transferred, etc. We insisted that he get the principal.

Everyone started asking the principal the same questions. She tried to blame the vice-principal. Back and forth. They completely discredited each other. Then they got hip and the vice-principal made a "self-criticism". He said he was wrong on three counts: "One is my class stand; one is that I wasn't applying the principles of Chairman Mao's thought and number three... blah de blah blah". But he still insisted that his decisions weren't his alone. "We're communists and make collective decisions, I'm not alone, there's the Party Committee (about 5 or 6 people)."

So, Zap. We told him to shut up right there and go and get the rest of the Party Committee. Then the whole thing started again. They were all fighting each other. The impression we got was that these Party people were scared shitless. Some people in the audience who had been messed around made very emotional statements like, "What kind of feeling is this for a class brother?" etc.

MOVEMENT: Did any kind of action come out of this session?

CHRIS: Yeah. On the spot we decided that the main reason these party people were so off base was because they didn't follow Mao's thought; that they were divorced from the working people and divorced from the students they were supposed to be leading.

So we set up work details for them. The next morning each was ordered to report to some person in the crowd who we trusted to get work assignments ... cleaning bathrooms, sweeping the yard etc.

That night there were big character posters all over the place. We set up committees to investigate changes in the educational system and to get information on what was happening in other schools. This went on for about three days.

## THE WORK TEAMS

MOVEMENT: All this time you were on

your own?

CHRIS: Yes, but after three days, the Central Committee sent out work teams to lend official support to us. They'd say, "We support your militant actions. We think your revolutionary spirit is fine." Then for the next two days they'd go about telling us how we screwed up. "We were young and didn't have their 40 years of revolutionary experience". They tried to organize our spontaneous revolt. They took over the committees and put the Young Communists back in charge. They criticized us for throwing rocks at the vice-principal and for shutting down the teachers' cafeteria. (We figured faculty had no right to eat separately. If they were going to make decisions responsive to the people in the school, then they should know us and live with us.)

These work teams were the master coopters and changed the whole drift of the revolt. After a while things went back to normal.

MOVEMENT: If everyone accepted the work teams, how did the cultural revolution ever get off the ground?

## THE REBEL

CHRIS: Things started happening. For example, at Chinois University (25,000 students), after they went out after their bureaucrats, work teams were sent out. The head of the work team was Liu Shao Chi's wife. One student and four of his friends put up a big character poster attacking the work team the day they arrived. This student said the work team had no right to come in and lead the student movement. He cited Mao that if you don't investigate, you have no right to speak. He told the work team to get lost.

They turned the whole thrust of the cultural revolution against this guy. They said he was counter-revolutionary, trying to stir up trouble against the Party etc. They got his four friends to sign confessions that they had been duped by him.

He stood his ground. He wrote poster after poster. He went with them under his arm to the cafeteria with a thousand people following him shouting "Traitor" and "Capitalist Pig". But he kept on putting them up. He sent ultimatums to the work teams saying that some day the people would kick them out. He went on a hunger strike. He'd stand out there and debate with huge numbers of people.

Everyone was convinced he was an absolute fool. They pushed him around some, but he never got beaten up real bad.

**MOVEMENT:** What turned the tide in his favor.

**CHRIS:** At this time the Red Guards were being formed in all the other schools. The Red Guards were organized first against the work teams. Chou en lai and Chiang Ching (Mao's wife) and some others went to Peking University to discuss the role of the work teams. A lot of people went to this debate and sure enough the rebel at Chinois University was proved right. He became the main rebel. Beautiful cat, 19 years old. Stone Rebel.

## RED GUARDS

**MOVEMENT:** What was the role of the Red Guards?

**CHRIS:** At first, most of the Red Guards in my school were from cadre backgrounds. One of the big arguments towards the end of the cultural revolution was an evaluation of the first Red Guards. I think they played a good role since they rebelled against the work teams and made the point that it was the duty of proletarian revolutionaries to rebel. But the problem was that their class line was way off. Many of them were rebelling just because they were per-

sonally angry that the work teams put them down. They figured it was an insult since they were from revolutionary backgrounds.

**MOVEMENT:** How did the Red Guards relate to the rest of society?

**CHRIS:** The Red Guards began to look for allies because all of them were minorities in their own schools. So they began to make alliances with the rebels in the factories which had already sprung up. They also worked with the various red guard movements in the junior high schools.

**MOVEMENT:** What role did the top Party leadership play?

**CHRIS:** When Chou en lai came to Peking University, he proved by his own example that the work teams were wrong. For 4 or 5 days he talked and debated with everyone. He didn't just come in and say "you're wrong" like the work teams did. Everything was discussed on an equal level. He reiterated the right to rebel and that if something is wrong its the duty of the people to point it out. People learned that criticism and self-criticism sessions shouldn't be ego trips --if they were wrong they should just try to change. After this, the Red Guards grew a lot.

## SOME MISTAKES

**MOVEMENT:** Once the Red Guards grew



how did they operate?

CHRIS: The work teams were removed and the Red Guards set up Revolutionary Committees which became the administrative bodies of the schools. They ran the schools.

They made some mistakes. They divided the masses into left, right and center very mechanically, according to class background. Almost everyone at my school was considered right because they came from exploiter backgrounds. They became the objects of "big struggle meetings". The revolutionary committees became quite fascist. They wouldn't listen to anyone who had an exploiter background.

In fact, they became like another work team. They wouldn't allow people to become active and learn from their own mistakes. So there was a split, between those who only considered backgrounds and those who wanted to consider more. About this time, everyone decided that it was time to promote revolutionary action. So they took to the streets. For about two weeks they went around smashing what they considered to be capitalist hangovers. They messed up the economy.

MOVEMENT: What do you mean?

CHRIS: Like they would go into a store and see a glass that didn't have a revolutionary slogan or design. They would decide that it was a bourgeois glass and take it off the market or break it. They did this in all the stores.

Then people began writing big character posters on the main business street saying, "We dig the revolution, but you guys are wrong. We support you, but you gotta stop busting things up". This kind of violence stopped after a couple of weeks, but for the next six months the Western press talked about violence in Peking. There were a few people beaten. The Red Guards were trying to change a life style of a lot of punks in Peking. The dudes with the conks, tight pants, you know, there were some. They had little hustles. Of course, nothing on the scale of this country. These hustlers were like enemies of the Red Guards, apathetic towards the revolution.

## THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

MOVEMENT: Why did the Central Committee allow these things to go on uncontrolled?

CHRIS: They were prepared to trust the masses, even though they made mistakes. If you got millions of people moving you know damn well that somebody is gonna

fuck up sometime. The issue was to try to politicize people through their own experience. Allow people to experiment. This was especially important for the youth. So they messed up the economy to some extent...But in two weeks the vast majority of the Red Guards learned more about socialist economy than they would have in 20 years in the classroom. That experience was more important than the dislocation in the economy which got put back together again relatively easily anyway.

The main issue was that the youth could directly experiment with the revolution--it wasn't just something they were reading about in books or listening to old men talk about the Long March. Revolution can't be programmed into people, it's gotta be validly proven by their own experience.

MOVEMENT: What happened with all the Red Guards who came from outside Peking?

CHRIS: Just as the people from my high school went to Peking University to find out what was happening, people in other cities had that same yearning to come to Peking. They had heard about all these groovy people out in the streets, making revolution, following Chairman Mao, you got a right to rebel.

So they came. Our school had 1800 regular students. All of a sudden, there were 7000 more from Tientsin, living all over the place. We figured we could spread the revolution by going outside of Peking. The Central Committee decided that it was a good idea for us to travel. They figured that the educational system can only be changed by the students themselves. And that students can't make the educational system serve the people unless they know who they're serving. The Central Committee never gave any orders. Most of the time they wrote editorials which, in effect, supported some action that some part of the masses had already done. The Central Committee summed up some experience, concentrated it and gave it back to the masses. This was the type of leadership that the revolutionary wing of the Central Committee gave.

## MASS MOVEMENT

MOVEMENT: Didn't all this travel disrupt things?

CHRIS: The original idea was to keep some students in Peking to keep up the struggle there and send other groups out to exchange experience. But every-

body wanted to go and everybody left. I stayed a little longer and helped set up depots for people, supplying blankets and food for everyone coming in. The population of Peking is 5 million. 3 and 1/2 million more came. There was absolute chaos, but nobody starved. There were places for everyone to sleep, if not in a school, then in someone's home. People stayed for two or three months.

## STUDENTS AND WORKERS

**MOVEMENT:** What was the relationship between students and workers?

**CHRIS:** Red Guards would go into some factory. Many times they didn't do it so hot. They'd act like outside work teams. They'd go in and with little investigation just say, "Aha, here's a bureaucrat". They created a lot of disturbances and some workers got pretty pissed off. But this wasn't necessarily typical--it all depended on the political level of the students involved.

**MOVEMENT:** Did you personally take one of these trips?

**CHRIS:** Yeah, I was gone for three months. Part of the time we went to a coal mine. We didn't just barge in and attack people. We just talked to people and after a while we began to make contact with the rebels in the mine. They would come to our dormitory and ask us how we did it in Peking and explain their own problems. They expected us to stir up some shit. We would get off work and there'd be 100 or 200 workers outside our dorm. We were the first student group that the workers respected because we didn't just start telling them what to do. We went there and asked if we could work. Gradually they opened up to us. This work style was invaluable.

There were some groups of students who did a better job than others. Some were arrogant, others would go out just for a good time and there were some who went out to do a specific task.

## THE LONG MARCH

**MOVEMENT:** What kinds of tasks did they have in mind?

**CHRIS:** We went out because we figured we couldn't revolutionize the educational system because we didn't know a god-damned thing about working people. We'd been cooped up in a classroom for years; how could we know anything?

So we decided to walk and emulate the Red Army and learn what it was to suffer. At the time we decided to walk,

most people were taking the train. We went out with the idea of having a rec-tification campaign among ourselves and develop a collective that could work functionally together when we got back to school.

We made a lot of mistakes. Here we were trying to learn from the working people and we spent 9 or 10 hours a day among ourselves. When we got to a village, we'd be so tired. Even though we might sleep and eat with peasants, we had no time to find out anything about them. After a month we split into 5 different groups and went in 5 different directions. We had no Party or adult supervision.

## PARALLELS

**MOVEMENT:** Do you see much similarity between this youth movement in China and youth movement in other countries?

**CHRIS:** Sure, there's some. Everyone struggles against what they think is unjust. But there's got to be a class analysis. People rebel for different reasons. I'm not sure where to draw the line. In Czechoslovakia, for example, I'm sure some people are rebelling in the right direction. But it seems that others are rebelling to try to get back to what the U.S. has, which is just what we're trying to get away from.

**MOVEMENT:** How has your experience as a Red Guard affected your action in the U.S. movement?

**CHRIS:** It has made me quite optimistic. The Chinese are no supermen. If they can build socialism, we can too. Also, I think I'm more tolerant of people after seeing the rapid changes people went thru during the cultural revolution. You can't say someone is better than another because he became a revolutionary first. And you can't say some revolutionary is better than someone who isn't revolutionary. People change. I learned just how fast that can happen.

**MOVEMENT:** What's your feeling when people talk about a "cultural revolution" happening in the U.S.?

**CHRIS:** My reaction is, that's groovy. I'm not going to put them down or anything. I might point out a few contradictions. It has no political level for one thing. It's not aimed at power. It's an individual thing which doesn't relate to what other people who are oppressed are doing. Talk about liberation on an individual basis ("smoke some dope, get a little nign and I'm liberated")--That's bullshit. ◆

