

*Qian Gang, aged 14, in Tiananmen Square, 1967  
Credit: Courtesy of Qian Gang*



# JOURNEY OF A RED HEART

A Party rallying cry defines a generation's coming of age, writes **Qian Gang**

'What is a red heart?' I suppose you must be wondering. A suit in a deck of playing cards? A kind of radish or duck egg you might expect to find at the Chinese grocery? Ah, so you have never heard that rousing phrase shouted on the floor of the Chinese stock exchange: 'One red heart! Two kinds of preparedness!'

That slogan, now used to brace traders for the ups and downs of the financial markets, was bellowed out in the 1960s and 1970s to mobilise the educated youth and urge them into the countryside. We had other slogans in those days too:

A red heart is ever loyal to the Party.  
We offer our red hearts to Chairman Mao.

And we sang with heartfelt emotion:

One hundred million red hearts beating fiercely!  
One hundred million faces beaming at the great red sun!

Where are those red slogans now?

Let revolution break out in the depths of your soul!  
Struggle fiercely against flashes of bourgeois thought!  
All the world is red!

In 1992, long after these phrases had dissipated on the wind, I groped my way back with the help of my PC 286. In 2001, after I was discharged as managing editor of *Southern Weekend* newspaper, I found myself seated before a computer terminal at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, poring through old issues of *People's Daily* and *Liberation Daily* on CD-ROM.

I was on a quest for those red slogans. I watched them emerge at points in history. Sometimes they would burst into enormous ideological Godzillas. Then they would exhaust themselves, grow sick, get the cold shoulder or become abandoned. Inevitably, sometimes in a single night, they would die prematurely and vanish altogether. They could also take on new and surprising forms. Sometimes they would disappear for a time, only to return as wandering souls and take you by surprise.

Gustave le Bon wrote in his classic *The Crowd*, 'It is illusions and words that have influenced the mind of the crowd, and especially words – words which are as powerful as they are chimerical.' 'Red heart' was just such a

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word, a totem, with a powerful and mysterious influence on the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

During the Cultural Revolution, the *Liberation Army Daily*, *People's Daily* and the magazine *Red Flag* were known collectively as the 'two newspapers and one magazine'. These were Mao Zedong's most important mechanisms for rallying the country. It was also at the *Liberation Army Daily* that I eventually got my start as a reporter.

When I searched for 'red heart' in the pages of *People's Daily*, which was launched in 1946, I found just one reference before 1957. They were the words of the poet Ke Zhongping, written in 1949: 'The heart of the people and the earth is a red heart,' he wrote. 'We can take this red heart and unite all the people of the world.' In the *Liberation Army Daily*, which was launched in 1955, 'red heart' did not appear as a political term until 1957. In the Chinese military, the 'red heart' was nothing more than the bullseye of the practice target. The birth of 'red heart' as a political symbol in China did not happen until 1958.

On 6 April 1958, a report in the *Liberation Army Daily* said 14 intellectuals at Military Hospital 153 had publicly offered up their hearts to the Communist Party. They marched through the halls of the hospital holding up a red flag and a great big red heart that said: 'We give our hearts over to the Party! We will do our utmost to be professionals loyal to the Party!' On 19 April, leaders of the Democracy Party and other intellectuals in the northwestern city of Urumqi held a rally for 'personal socialist reform'. The idea was to offer their hearts to the Party and the people, reform their capitalist political ideas, and pledge their lives eternally to socialism. After the rally, they marched through the streets loudly beating drums. When the group reached the doors of the Party committee of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, they presented the region's Party secretary with a red heart fashioned out of newspaper and red cloth.

This is the origin of 'red heart' as we glimpse it in newspapers of the time. As the Anti-Rightist Movement gathered momentum, the 'red heart' stood as a kind of talisman against the 'black hearts' of capitalism – 'blackhearted merchants', 'blackhearted traitors'.

In dazzling confusion, the great drama unfolded, from the Hundred Flowers Movement and its call for the 'contending of viewpoints', to the branding as 'rightists' of half a million people who dared speak the truth, to the deaths of tens of millions in the ensuing violence.

In the beginning, 'red heart' simply meant obedience. Later it came to symbolise complete 'devotion' to Mao Zedong and the Communist Party.

In 1958, as the people's communes were established and China plunged into Mao's economic programme, dubbed the Great Leap Forward, the air resounded with the beating of gongs and smoke rolled into the sky from the backyard steel furnaces. Communist training was carried out in the army ranks, and 'red heart' once again pulsed through the slogans:

In the breasts of the soldiers of the revolution, red hearts burn,  
With them the Communist Party's stand is most resolute and firm.

As the back of the nation bent under Mao Zedong's economic vision, 'red heart' signalled unconditional dedication to the Great Leap Forward and the people's communes. 'Red heart' meant the denial and destruction of the self. The words appeared more frequently in the propaganda papers of the 1960s, accompanied by verbs like 'dedicate' and 'devote'.

We were told as children that as our country faced a serious famine (a 'natural disaster') we also faced an urgent threat internationally from imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries. Cuba was our trusted friend, daring to stand up to the United States. The people of Cuba had red hearts too. I still remember how a chorus of leading Beijing actors, including Ying Ruo Cheng and Yu Shizhi, sang:

Fidel Castro has issued an order,  
Strike back at our foes with fire and steel!  
Seven million red hearts of single mind,  
Seven million rifles bring the imperialist mercenaries to heel!

A 'red heart' must be deserved, the newspapers admonished us. There were many ways to cultivate a 'red heart', but most important of all was to earnestly study Maoism. One newspaper story told of how a student had enlisted in the army right after college graduation, but after joining up began to feel that his talents were wasted. His mind was turned through diligent study of the words of Chairman Mao. He found he had been led astray by 'bourgeois ideas and the influence of his family and the old society'. The soldier wrote a personal reflection called *Change of Heart*. 'After joining the army, I changed my heart. I substituted my selfish heart for a red heart. And that heart was given to me by the venerable Chairman Mao.'

In the opening years of the 1960s, the most popular slogans in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were things like, 'Hold high the great banner of Maoism!' In 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the PLA dissolved

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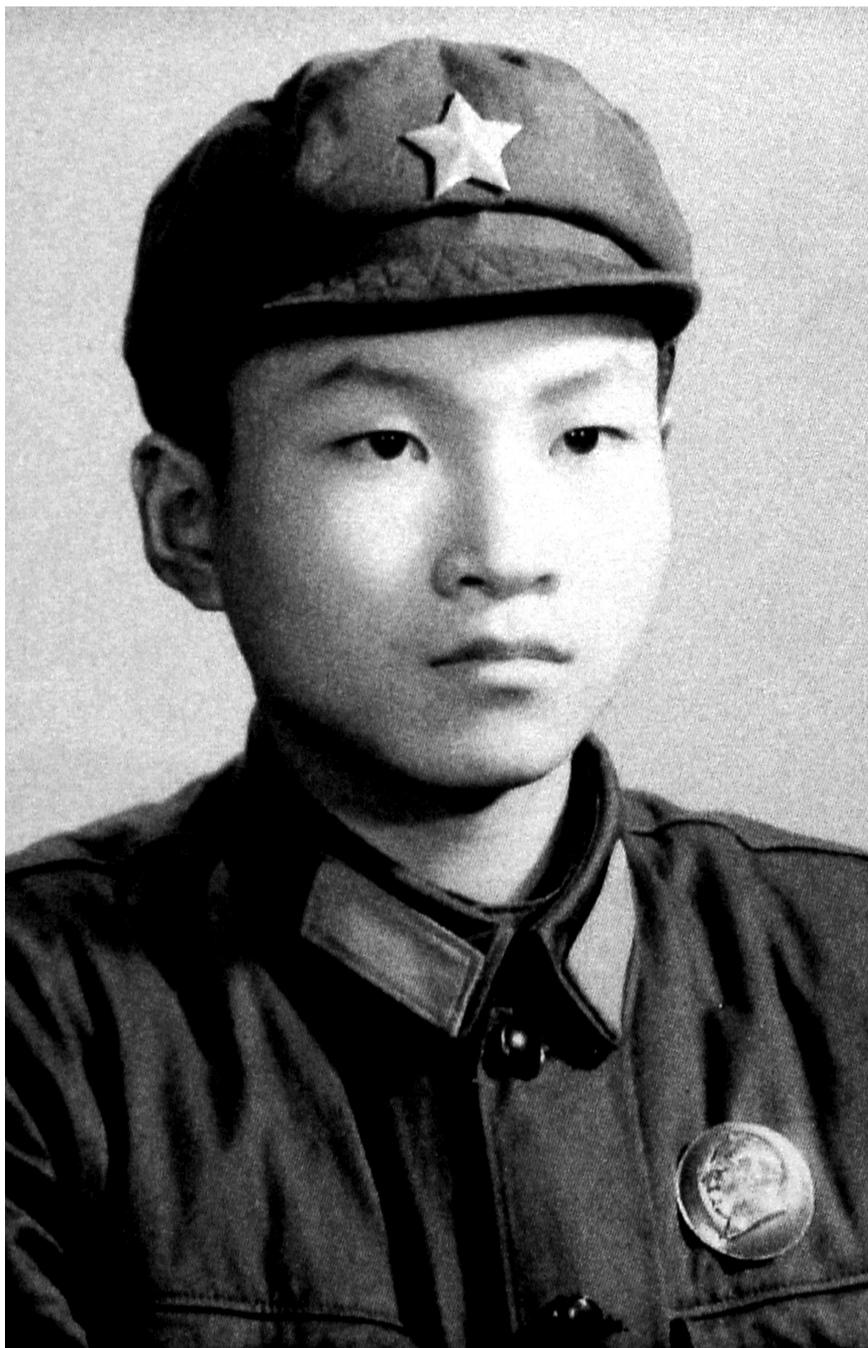
its formal ranking system. Everyone, generals and foot soldiers alike, wore red collars and caps with simple red insignias. A popular army song at the time went like this:

Red collars and red insignias,  
Red soldiers with red ideas.  
The army ranks are a sea of red,  
Each red heart given over to the Party.  
The banner of Maoism is held high,  
And red light sparkles far and nigh.

I was fond of that song in my youth. There were so many ‘reds’ it brightened you up just to hear it! It was just as that song was reaching the peak of its popularity that China was thrust into that sea of most unfathomable red, the Cultural Revolution.

In 1965, a total of 103 articles in the *Liberation Army Daily* used the words ‘red heart’. The next year, as Mao Zedong went out to inspect the Red Guards, that number rose to 227. During the Cultural Revolution, red slogans flared up in many different shapes and forms. ‘Red heart’ continued its appearance in the *Liberation Army Daily* throughout 1967, appearing in 241 articles. In 1968, that number doubled to 495. ‘Red heart’ transfixed the stupefied masses like a magical incantation against ‘black hearts’ – such as the arrested former premier Liu Shaoqi – and other infernal spirits who ‘walked the path of capitalism’.

I joined the People’s Liberation Army in 1969. I was just 16 years old. I told the recruiters I had graduated from middle school, but in fact had finished just one of the three years and ‘stopped studying to join the revolution’. Writing was my hobby, and in my pack I carried a copy of *The Revolutionary Committee is Good*, a volume comprising Mao’s official editorials congratulating the provinces on the formation of revolutionary committees, and copies of telegrams sent in praise of the Chairman. I was mesmerised by the magic of red words. I had such admiration for those revolutionary editorials and their exhilarating titles, like ‘The early sun of the northeast’ or ‘70 million Sichuanese are surging forward’. On New Year’s Day 1970, there was a line in the official editorial, ‘Welcoming the great 1970s’, that I could still blurt out years later: ‘On the stormy path of the old world, volcanoes erupt one after another, and the ashes of the old world rain down. There is no longer a safe haven for imperialism.’



*Qian Gang in 1969, after he joined the People's Liberation Army, aged 16  
Courtesy of Qian Gang*

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It was just a few days after that editorial that I witnessed first-hand the mutilation of a comrade.

It was a raw afternoon. We were marching single file to the seaside in Baoshan County on Hainan Island. Years later the place would become the modern city of Baogang, but at the time there was just an empty airfield left behind by the Kuomintang forces. That was where we carried out our hand-grenade exercises.

I was serving as an army clerk. My job that day was to stand next to the deputy company commander and record the results of each soldier's practice round. Every time the frosty wind whipped up, I shivered and swiped my hand across my nose. When he saw how miserable I was, the deputy company commander pointed to an old munitions bunker a little distance away. 'Little Qian! Go over there and get out of the wind!'

The deputy company commander was standing next to the soldiers as they hurled their grenades. He wanted a clear view of them and the practice range. I had just jumped into the old munitions bunker when the next soldier stepped up. I didn't entirely see what happened next, but there were sudden shrieks of alarm followed by an explosion close by. Then I saw two men catapulted into the air and come down as heavily as rods of iron. My mind went completely blank for a moment, and only then did I realise what had happened. I screamed and bounded out of the bunker toward the deputy company commander.

The whole sequence of events had to be stitched together from the soldier's account and an investigation of the scene. But the soldier in question was a livestock farmer. He spent most of his days raising pigs and rarely drilled with our company. Flustered, he had pulled the pin and dropped the grenade at his feet. The deputy company commander leapt in to retrieve the grenade. Just as he was throwing it, the grenade detonated over his head.

That was the first moment of pure terror I ever experienced. I saw the bright red blood, and the naked flesh of the brain. The pistol smeared with blood, its leather holster shredded. The uniform honeycombed with shrapnel. The screams were terrible. I was caught up in the chaos as we fought to save our comrade. The pig farmer sustained only minor injuries. The deputy company commander was struck directly in the head by three pieces of shrapnel, and though they managed to save him, he was disfigured for life.

On the night of the incident, a deep depression pervaded the company. They cooked a large pot of rice for the company, but no one had the heart to touch it. Suddenly, I heard the sound of motorcycles approaching. Division

headquarters had sent over an army reporter to get the details of the accident from me and other comrades.

Our barracks were located in a village on the seaside. There was no electricity. 'Just tell me what you saw,' said the army reporter under the grimy light of the oil lamp. 'One is one, and two is two.'

Several days later, an awful training accident had been transformed into a story of heroism. Without any thought to his own wellbeing, the deputy company commander had rushed to the aid of another. But this was no ordinary story of love for one's fellow soldiers. At the Ninth Party Congress the year before, Mao Zedong had said the words: 'We will not fear hardship, nor will we fear death!' The actions of our deputy company commander were treated as a model case of Mao's 'Two Fearlessnesses'.

A lengthy dispatch from the army reporter appeared in our local PLA newspaper. 'One is one, and two is two,' he had said. But his version of our deputy company commander was unrecognisable to me. He was a model soldier with a strong proletarian consciousness. He went to great pains studying the writings of Chairman Mao. In fact, what most distinguished this comrade, who had joined our company from Jiangsu Province in 1962, was his great aptitude for all things military. He had already served as a commanding officer at a higher level. His uniform was always spotless. He polished his boots until they glistened. At company meetings he was often accused of acting 'high and mighty' and having a 'petit-bourgeois frame of mind'. Once he had even violated the military code and started up a relationship with a girl from Shanghai. His subsequent formal request for an exemption was rejected by his superiors. I watched with my own eyes as he indignantly shoved their official response into his drawer.

The army reporter's article also treated the deputy company commander's actions as an occasion for criticism of former political leader Liu Shaoqi. Hand grenades detonate just three seconds after the pin is pulled, he wrote. In that brief space, the deputy commander had thought only of charging ahead and dealing a decisive blow to the 'self-obsessed . . . life philosophy' of that thieving Liu Shaoqi.

I felt such admiration when I read that report! So this was how it had to be written. All at once I understood.

After the incident, I was transferred to division headquarters and tasked with making the rounds to various army companies and making a report of what had happened. I was to be billed as the eyewitness to a heroic feat. 'How should I report the incident?' I asked my superior. 'Exactly as it is in the

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newspaper report!' he said. The theme of my report was, 'Three seconds matter not! What matters is to charge ahead!'

After this I was promoted to a higher post in the political section of the Shanghai garrison command. That set me on the road to becoming a writer. It was there that I penned my very first piece of writing.

It was a folk play praising the heroic deeds of the deputy company commander. Not only did I mimic the electrifying language of the army newspaper report. I aggrandised the factual person and the factual event until they were positively sublime. 'Under the resplendent morning sun,' I wrote, glossing over the factual inclemency of that day, 'the deputy company commander led us to the seaside.' In my version, standing at the head of our company, he spurred us on to revolutionary struggle by reciting the words of Mao Zedong (rather than simply preparing us for routine grenade practice). In a booming voice, he asked the soldiers: 'What is our target?' In grenade exercises, targets were entirely unnecessary. But in my play the soldiers shouted in unison, full of hatred:

'The target is American imperialism, the imperialism of the Soviet society, and the reactionaries of the Kuomintang!'

'Good,' said the deputy company commander, 'now go get 'em!'

All of this was invented of course. But I wanted to get it right, to fish out the inner heart and soul of the deputy commander. I gave my first work the title, 'A red heart forever faces the sun'.

That's right. This is the story of my 'red heart'. Only by understanding the history, the genesis and destruction of 'red heart' and other red political slogans can you come to understand that when I and others of my generation started off as writers, those words that were later the target of ridicule came to us effortlessly and naturally. This was also my first lesson in literature and journalism. As fate would have it, no sooner had I set foot in this profession than I had this core lesson about 'truth and lies'. But it would be many years before I set off in a different direction, struggling ahead and paying the price for it.

In fact, it was in 1970, just as 'red heart' was reaching the height of its glory, that my own heart began to change colour. In 1970, I hoped to become a party member, but my request was not approved because my parents had been branded as 'problem people'. In 1971, after General Lin Biao's failed coup attempt and subsequent death in a plane crash, my holy image of Mao began to crumble.

The Chinese historian Zhu Xueqin has written that the so-called '571 Project' papers (which attacked the Cultural Revolution), released after

the death of Lin Biao and the unmasking of his coup attempt against Mao, awakened many of those educated youths who had accompanied him into the countryside. The papers added to the deep doubts wrought by the ugly facts of the great starvation and continuing hardships. The idealism Zhu Xueqin and others had borne with them from the cities was entirely destroyed.

In *Southern People* magazine, Professor Zhu Xueqin recently told his own story of the 'red heart'. In the village he had been assigned to, there was a female brigade captain who was known for her 'selfless and sacrificing attitude'. A newspaper reporter came to interview the lonely old woman, gathering many moving stories about her life (in Zhu's recollection, all of these stories were true, unlike my version of the deputy company commander). But the reporter was faced with a difficult problem. Owing to China's feudal tradition of not naming women except by reference to their husbands, this brigade captain was nameless. So the reporter gave the old woman a name: 'Red Heart Li'.

## After Lin Biao's failed coup attempt my holy image of Mao began to crumble

But then came a shocking discovery. Someone uncovered the secret to Red Heart Li's superior character. Late one night, an educated youth living near the woman's place heard a soft but incessant whisper. When they got up quietly and crept over to Red Heart Li's house they saw her crossing her chest and muttering a prayer. So this Red Heart Li, who so loved helping others, was a Christian after all!

After the Lin Biao incident, red slogans cooled down. The use of 'red heart' in the *Liberation Army Daily* dropped back to the level it had had in 1965. As new political slogans took the stage, 'red heart' clung on, but it played a diminishing role in subsequent political movements. After Lin Biao was undone, having a 'red heart' meant staunchly 'criticising Lin Biao and criticising Confucius', a campaign orchestrated in 1973 by Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing, as an indirect attack on Premier Zhou Enlai. From a brief time after Deng Xiaoping was purged by the Gang of Four in 1976, a 'red heart'

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meant 'criticising Deng and countering the right-wing deviationist trend of reversing correct policies'. Then, all at once, 'exposing and criticising the Gang of Four' became the object of 'red heart' symbolism. When Mao Zedong died in September 1976, large headlines in the newspapers declared: 'Red hearts turn to face China's chairman!'

This phrase 'red heart' should be a specimen handed down to human history. It is a second face of the iron hand of power, lofty and beautiful. For years and years, it passed among millions, an incantation with bewitching power. The 'red' of 'red heart' is an adjective and a verb. It is the verb of strongmen. It is a force that impels political movements. In the name of 'red heart' people can sacrifice everything – their interests, their lives, their goodness and honesty. The 'change of heart' is the tyrant's secret weapon.

The fading of the slogan 'red heart' is down to years of economic development in China. It was after the onset of economic reforms that 'red heart' really cooled off. Deng Xiaoping rejected the slogan, 'Let revolution break out in the depths of your soul!' The Chinese are searching today for their own hearts, and this is the most important result of Deng's pragmatism, no less important than the throwing off of hunger. Power continues to intrude into the inner worlds of the Chinese people, but no longer is it uncontrollable. True freedom of thought lingers in the distance, but an independent personal spiritual realm is taking shape.

Political mobilisation and instilled ideology have an enduring power in China. While ideologies are no longer all the rage, their utility as quick acting agents of unity has an irresistible appeal for China's rulers. 'Red heart' has not entirely disappeared, and other terms have emerged to take its place – words like 'global view' and 'philosophy of life'. But 'red heart' and whole systems of political language have inexorably shifted in meaning.

There was a German film a few years ago called *Good Bye Lenin!* I'd like to say to this fossil of China's past: 'Goodbye, "red heart".' □

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DOI: 10.1080/03064220802084195

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