Recovering the “Blank Period”: The Political Subtext Behind the Viral “Huang Xuan Fever”

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Recently, a “Huang Xuan Fever” has swept through the Chinese internet. Many video bloggers have edited clips of movies and TV dramas featuring Chinese actor Huang Xuan, often pairing them with Chinese “Gu-feng” (traditional style) DJ music. This has triggered a massive response. These videos generate astounding engagement numbers, with countless viewers leaving messages, comments, and engaging in debates below them. However, none of this is driven by the popularity of Huang Xuan the actor himself; rather, it stems from a deeper political significance.

In fact, this political significance is quite shocking. It is, in reality, a “reassessment” and a grand discussion regarding China’s Cultural Revolution of the last century—all taking place under the intense pressure of the contemporary Chinese government’s strict internet censorship. Huang Xuan, the actor, plays a pivotal role in this mass-initiated “Grand Discussion,” and it can all be traced back to two of his earlier works: Blue Sky Bones and Youth.

In both works, the characters Huang Xuan plays live in China during the Cultural Revolution, and both suffer devastation and slander amidst the movements of the era. For example, in the film *Youth*, Huang Xuan plays a dancer in a military art troupe. He is humble, kind, and always willing to help others. Yet, he is ostracized by his colleagues (most of whom are children of high-ranking cadres) because of his working-class background. Shortly after, due to a misunderstanding, he is violently interrogated and falsely accused of “hooliganism.” Eventually, he is forced to go to the Sino-Vietnamese border. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, he loses his right arm in the Sino-Vietnamese War, cementing his role as a tragic figure.

Up to this point, one might think this is just another commercial film touching upon 20th-century Chinese history with no significant political meaning, or perhaps a typical work of “Scar Literature” (a term referring to right-wing works describing how ordinary people suffered during the Cultural Revolution only to find new life after the Reform and Opening-up). However, two critical factors gave birth to the current “Huang Xuan Fever” and transformed it into a leftist mass movement.

The first factor is Huang Xuan’s physical appearance. As Huang Xuan took on more roles in historical period dramas, and given that most of his scripts involved slander,

interrogation, and tragic endings, politically sensitive viewers began to notice a striking similarity. Even some lines of dialogue seemed to contain hidden allusions. It appeared intentional on the part of the directors and screenwriters, but why did they all choose Huang Xuan? At this point, a name was mentioned—a figure who looks like Huang Xuan and played a massive role in that earth-shattering great revolution of the last century:

That figure is Wang Hongwen—a key participant in the "January Storm" power seizure in Shanghai, leader of the Shanghai Workers' General Headquarters, member of the "Gang of Four," elected Vice Chairman of the CCP in 1973, and once considered by the outside world to be Mao Zedong's successor. He was a staunch proletarian rebel who was ultimately branded with the hats of "subverting state power," "anti-party," "counter-revolutionary," and "enemy of the people."

Allow me to digress briefly to introduce his background: Wang Hongwen was born in Northeast China as a peasant. He later joined the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea (Korean War) as a volunteer soldier. After his discharge, he went to Shanghai to become a worker. It can be said that he embodied the triple identity of worker, peasant, and soldier. During the Cultural Revolution, he actively responded to Chairman Mao's call. As a primary representative of the Shanghai rebel faction, he seized power from the municipal government controlled by "capitalist roaders" and established the Shanghai Commune (modeled after the Paris Commune), which later evolved into the Federation of Trade Unions. During this process, he handled internal contradictions among the people well, united members of the conservative faction ("royalists"), and eventually absorbed them into the rebel ranks—unlike in many other places in China, where the situation devolved into armed conflict and vicious factionalism.

Although Wang Hongwen was only in his thirties at the time and lacked experience and preparation, his history and abilities caught Mao Zedong's attention. His firm rebel stance, his practice of directing the struggle against capitalist roaders within the Party, and his status as a Communist Party member led Mao to decide to appoint him as the future successor to the regime and revolution of the People's Republic of China.

However, things went contrary to wishes. In October 1976, just one month after Mao Zedong's death, Wang Hongwen, the Gang of Four (which included Mao's wife, Jiang Qing), and other major rebel members were all arrested via a secret coup launched by right-wing elements led by Deng Xiaoping, who had been biding their time for years.

In the “Huairentang Incident," Wang Hongwen was lured to a meeting in Zhongnanhai, Beijing, under the pretense of editing a new volume of the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. Upon arrival, he was forcibly arrested using violent means by Ye Jianying (a Marshal of China at the time), Hua Guofeng (the interim Chairman), and others lying in ambush. After enduring a series of interrogations, beatings, and torture, he was forced to confess to the crime of “counter-revolutionary subversion of state power” and sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1992, he died of liver cancer in prison (some claim he fell ill because interrogators deprived him of sleep during torture).

Similar looks, similar experiences, and a similar historical background—this realization caused a stir among China’s leftists and a small segment of the public. People began using Huang Xuan as a prompt to explore the history of China from 1956 to 1980—a history deliberately forgotten by Chinese society and highly monitored by the state apparatus. This leads to the second factor: China’s public opinion control policy.

I must explain that regarding the history of the PRC, the official narrative actively discusses—and finds no political sensitivity in—the periods before 1956 (the New Democratic Revolution and prior) and after 1990. History outside these periods is rarely mentioned in official narratives and textbooks, especially regarding political figures. Events like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are often given only a single page in textbooks, always summarized with a generalization: “That was a period of arduous exploration, especially during the ‘Ten Years of Turmoil’ wrongly launched by the leader and conspired by the Gang of Four clique, where the people’s lives suffered great disasters.”

Therefore, under strict censorship, in order to introduce the masses to this specific “blank historical period” and expose the true face of China’s revisionist government, some people chose to promote these ideas via independent media using political metaphors. Huang Xuan, and the films and dramas he stars in, naturally became the perfect vehicle.

“This is a coup! A naked sneak attack!”
“If you want to be capitulationists, just say so, but I will not bow to capital!”
“Then recite a poem by Chairman Mao for us—‘Today I hold the long cord in my hand; when shall I bind the Grey Dragon!’”

Seemingly intentionally or unintentionally, some Chinese directors and editors appear to have noticed the clues and are happy to put Huang Xuan—or the imagery he

symbolizes—on the screen in some form, turning it into dialogue or plot points. In these works, Huang Xuan has played a peasant, a worker, and a soldier in the Korean War; he has also played Mao Anying—Mao Zedong's son, who happened to be a martyr who sacrificed his life in the Korean War. In *Youth*, when the character he plays is framed and leaves the art troupe for the Sino-Vietnamese border, he looks back one last time. It is unclear whether he is looking at the female lead saluting him, or at the giant portrait locked behind the iron gate nearby (prior to this, the film used a long take to show the process of a giant black cloth covering the portrait, signifying the background of Mao Zedong's death).

Whether the creators of these works intended it or not, their works have long escaped their control. After deconstruction, reinterpretation, and reconstruction by the masses, they have become perfect tools for political allegory, pointing directly to the Cultural Revolution. They attempt to indirectly and covertly reveal that the current holders of power in the Chinese government obtained their positions "illegitimately" and hope to "rehabilitate" the rebels and the Gang of Four. This trend began to sprout in 2019, and catalyzed by the long-term economic malaise and intensifying class contradictions following the pandemic, it finally bloomed in the second half of this year (2025).

Recently, a series of Huang Xuan-themed works re-created by the masses based on the aforementioned subjects have taken the Chinese internet by storm. In the most popular series, each video has nearly 10 million views, with a peak of over 200,000 concurrent viewers and over 100,000 comments—not counting derivative works, imitations, and data from other platforms (Also, the actual data might even be higher, potentially due to platform traffic restrictions). In the comment sections of these videos, it is easy to find comments like:

"I never knew this history; now my worldview has been overturned, I feel dizzy."
"They were truly wronged. When can we make these truths public?"
"Long live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution! (Usually abbreviated in Pinyin to avoid censorship, e.g., wcjjwhdgmws!)"
...and so on.

It is evident that the "Huang Xuan Fever" is increasingly becoming a genuine mass movement and playing a massive propaganda role—many comments express interest in this blank period of Chinese history, with some even changing their political stance. Of course, there are also defenders of the current order and staunch supporters of Reform

and Opening-up. Among them, some who still hold illusions about the Chinese government commented:

“Since these videos haven’t been deleted, it shows that the Central Government isn’t a monolith. There are people who want to change the status quo. As long as we support them, we can definitely transition back to the old mode of production peacefully and strike down capitalists and corrupt bureaucrats.”

Ironically, just a few hours before writing this draft, the aforementioned Huang Xuan videos with tens of millions of views were taken down, shattering the arguments in the comments above.

Finally, allow me to share my views:
The “Huang Xuan Fever” undoubtedly reveals that under intensifying social contradictions, the broad masses—unable to find a way out—are re-excavating China’s great revolutionary history. Amidst increasingly suffocating exploitation and oppression, the masses are forced to rethink the question: “How did we get here?” While this event has raised the political consciousness of the masses, the removal of the videos served as a naked exposure of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. It taught the masses a valuable lesson, striking a blow against reformist thoughts and helping them realize the correctness of “discarding illusions and preparing for struggle.”

It is a noteworthy and gratifying change that more and more people are becoming interested in the history and figures of China’s “blank period.” However, we must remain vigilant and realize that we cannot rely on the masses to spontaneously recognize the necessity and importance of political struggle—the role of the vanguard remains indispensable. When mass movements are on the rise, political inculcation is needed to guide the movement in the right direction.

At the same time, how to correctly treat such spontaneous mass movements is crucial. If one merely questions or opposes their spontaneity, or even dampens their enthusiasm, one commits the error of “tailism”—falling behind the masses without realizing it.

(A final supplement regarding the fates of the other members of the Gang of Four:

1. Of the remaining three members, **Yao Wenyuan** was the first released after 15 years in prison. His article Notes on the New Historical Drama ‘Hai Rui *Dismissed*

from Office,' which targeted the capitalist roaders and the ideology of bourgeois right within the Party, became the fuse that ignited the Cultural Revolution.

2. **Zhang Chunqiao** was the "pen" of the Cultural Revolution movement and wrote many highly valuable articles. He once risked political death to meet with Shanghai rebel masses seeking to petition in Beijing in the rain while suffering from a fever, which is how he met Wang Hongwen. During the final public trial, he remained silent, showing contempt for the slander of the rightists. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and eventually died of pancreatic cancer.

3. **Jiang Qing**, as Mao Zedong's wife, stayed by his side for over thirty years. Originally a theater actress, she had a somewhat impulsive personality. As one of the chief directors of the Cultural Revolution, she might not have been the best candidate, but she proactively became the primary assistant to Mao in his later years when he had no one to rely on, shouldering the heavy burden of continuous revolution. After the public trial, she was accused of being a "witch" and the primary sinner who instigated the "senile" Mao Zedong to "wrongly" launch the Cultural Revolution, causing a "humanitarian tragedy." Sentenced to life imprisonment, she repeatedly applied for permission to leave prison to pay respects to Mao's remains in Tiananmen Square on his birthday or death anniversary, but was refused every time. Ultimately, she committed suicide by hanging in prison due to "mental derangement."

4. The members of the Gang of Four made some errors of sectarianism/factionalism. This was due partly to their personalities and partly to their lack of political maturity. However, they were all loyal proletarian fighters who shouldered the unprecedented burden of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution when Mao Zedong had "no generals available" in his later years.)