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Game, Glory and Violence

Children in the Sparrow-killing Movement (1956-1960)

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Department of History, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

WU Tao

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Abstract: The official political propaganda and the active participation of children themselves jointly constructed the special image of children in the Sparrow-killing Movement. For children, the Sparrow-killing Movement had two different characteristics. It was both a political movement and a game. The heroic image of children created by the government affixed the political purity of children and turned violence into a symbol of justice and glory.

Key words: the Sparrow-killing Movement, the Four Pests Campaign, children, propaganda

The Sparrow-killing Movement was not only a campaign of human trying to change nature, but also a political activity full of propaganda. In terms of time, it began before the Great Leap Forward movement and had a close relationship with the latter. Researchers often see it as the result of the top political leader's authoritarianism passing through a tightly knit party structure. It was an individual's idea which formed local and national policies, overcame opposition and eventually became a public awareness and natural disaster. But was there really a one-way flow of power in this nationwide political movement? Was it true that the intellectuals, students, housewives and other groups who participate in it only obey passively under the power?

Liu Yi, who has studied ornithologists in detail, has also discussed the stigmatization of sparrows and the ritualization of the Four Pests campaign. In her opinion, sparrow had gradually become the enemy in the social category from a scientific category. This transformation was closely related to a series of political movements led by the senior leaders of the CPC, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign¹. The infiltration of state power turned the agricultural movement into a political ritual, and the goal of eliminating pests changed from protecting food to training the people. The collective killing of four pests cultivates and trains the revolutionary behavior mode of the public, and also makes the public become available political resources and tools in the movement². Liu's analysis is carried out from the perspective of the initiator, who assumes that all government decrees were effectively implemented and

1. Liu Yi, " Cong 'ma que' dao 'hai ren niao' : wu shi nian dai zhong hou qi mie que yun dong de hua yu luo ji " (" From 'Sparrows' to 'Pests' : on the Discourse Molding of Eradicating Sparrows Movement in the Middle and Late Period of 1950s"), *CPC History Studies*, 2015 Vol.1, p.108.

2. Liu Yi, " 'Da yue jin' dong yuan de yi shi hua: yi mie que yun dong wei Zhong xin de kao cha " ("The Ritual Process of the Mobilization during the Great Leap Forward: a Focus on the Sparrow Campaign"), *Shi Lin*, 2017 Vol.1, pp.193-194.

that the public had totally become the political tool to be used in consistent and coercive activities.

In *Mao's War Against Nature* (2001), Judith Shapiro tried to place the pest control activities in the broader history of China's ecological environment. The near-extinction hunt for sparrows triggered a severe insect plague and exacerbated the famine three years later. Shapiro argues that the disaster began with the abandonment of the notion of ecological balance. The shift in thinking was almost entirely based on Mao's own actions, which resembled military action³. We do not want to question the leadership and influence of Mao or the centralized government in this movement. Just as Shapiro said in the article, many ordinary people who witnessed the movement expressed their opposition and reflection after the event.⁴ There were different voices among the public. Zhang Zhaoguo, Liao Yifa and Liu Yi all studied the intellectuals in the campaign against the four pests. At that time, the voice against killing sparrows was mainly from ornithologists, and the scientific support for killing sparrows was exactly from them. Although the voice against killing finches was subjected to varying degrees of elastic pressure, it played a certain role in the correction of the sparrows killing movement⁵. The interaction between politics and scientific research was subtle and multi-faceted. Politics needs the theoretical support of scientific research, while scientists need the tacit understanding with politicians to ensure the progress of research. This relationship was not a simple compromise, but a

3. Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, London: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.90-91.

4. Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, pp.92-93.

5. Zhang Zhaoguo, Liao Yifa, "You zou zai zheng zhi yu xian shi zhi jian: jian guo chu qi 'chu si hai' yun dong Zhong zhi shi fen zi qun ti lun xi" ("Intellectuals During 'Eliminating Four Pests' Campaign in the Early Years of New China"), *Hu Nan Di Er Shi Fan Xue Bao*, 2014 Vol.41, pp.35-36.

point of collusion between different interests⁶. Unfortunately, these multi-faceted analyses of the intellectual community are not put on other ordinary people, such as children.

This article will attempt to adjust this judgment. It is undeniable that the state's top organs and leaders were important forces in promoting the campaign against the four pests. However, in the process of this movement, especially the Sparrow-killing movement, people's own personal experience and experience influenced the state of the movement. Children played an important role in this movement, and a large number of news, posters and books featured children as the main characters in the scenes of eliminating the sparrows. Even, the young hero images of eliminating sparrows were constructed and became the symbol. This kind of symbol was not completely endowed by political ideology, but the result of social culture and individual choice. This paper will focus on the shaping process of children's images in the Sparrow-killing movement and try to analyze the political and cultural significance behind these images. When the political movement moved to the micro level, it became entangled with personal emotions in different ways. Games, violence and glory were all ways of showing.

Slingshots: toys or tools

Liu Yi believes that children, the elderly, women and other weak labor force are the main activities of the sparrow eradication activities. She cited newspaper reports

6. Liu Yi, "Xin Zhong guo gong gong zheng ce zhong de 'ke xue' shi jian" ("The Practice of "Science" in the Public Policy of New China: A Study Focusing on the Research on Sparrows"), *CPC History Studies*, 2018 Vol.2, p.62.

about the blinds and the elders killing sparrows as an example. On the one hand, it is because the amount of labor required to eliminate pests was relatively small so that they can make full use of these vulnerable groups. On the other hand, the government wanted to sort out the idea that whatever capacity it has, it can contribute to national development⁷. Liu Yi's conclusion is enlightening to some extent, but it is obviously not convincing to identify the main practice of eliminating pests as the weak-labor force. This ignores the important role that children played.

Indeed, the media reported on the participation of groups such as the disabled, the elderly, children and women in the campaign against the four pests, and even described people of different religions and professions⁸. This showed the universality of the participation of different social classes. But the image of children was special. In a 1958 report on the elimination of the four pests In all provinces, the three provinces mentioned in the report, Heilongjiang, Zhejiang and Gansu all named children as important forces to eliminate the sparrows⁹. Even before the Sparrow-killing Movement was officially launched, some areas had already begun using children to drive away birds and protect food. In August 1955, the central committee of the youth league issued an official instruction that rural children should be organized to form bird-watching groups, and those who performed well could even be rewarded at the provincial or county level¹⁰. This suggests that children were major

7. Liu Yi, “ ‘Da yue jin’ dong yuan de yi shi hua: yi mie que yun dong wei Zhong xin de kao cha”, pp.191-192.

8. Peng Nian, “ Sou du ge si hai li fa ji ji mie que” (“ Temples in the capital actively kill birds”), *Chinese Muslim*, 1958 Vol.5, p15; “ Nong cun li xin feng shang” (“New fashions in the new countryside”), *People's Daily*, January 2, 1958, p.2.

9. “ Ge sheng chu si hai zhan bao” (“War report on the elimination of four evils in each province”), *People's Daily*, January 2, 1958, p.2.

10. “Qing Nian Tuan Zhong Yang Fa Bu Zhi Shi Yao Qiu Nong Cun Qing Shao Nian Kai Zhan Jian Shao Liang Mian Sun Hao De Yun Dong” (“The central committee of the youth league issued a directive calling on rural teenagers to carry out a campaign to reduce the loss of grain and cotton”), *People's Daily*, August 24, 1955,

participants in bird-targeted activities before the killing of sparrows became a national movement.

In fact, after the Sparrow-killing Movement began, its emphasis on children can be seen from its rewards for children. In a 1958 campaign report in Hunan province, a total of six people were honored for their outstanding performance in the Sparrow-killing Movement¹¹. When we observed the number of sparrows destroyed by them, the number of sparrows destroyed by three children was 14, 6 and 88 respectively, while the number of sparrows destroyed by three adults was 47, 80 and 108 respectively. Since they are all recognized at the provincial level, we assume that they represented the most active sparrow-hunters in each region, with children accounting for half of them. Assuming that they do not represent the highest level of sparrow culling - three adults were significantly more efficient than children - it suggests a special incentive for children to participate. This particular predilection for children was evident in the propaganda posters in the Sparrow-killing Movement. Posters repeat the image of a child in a red scarf (hong ling jin) , usually a boy, with a slingshot in his hand, intently aiming at a sparrow. His face was abhorred, and the bodies of the sparrows he had killed were usually beside him. This image almost became a representative symbol of the movement.

And what we need to focus on is not just the children, but the slingshots in the hands of the children. For the movement's organizers, the slingshots were sparrow-hunting tools. Although they were much less powerful than nets and poisons, the slingshots included in almost all sparrow hunting manuals. The advantages of a

p.2.

11. *Hu Nan Sheng Chu Si Hai Jiang Wei Shen Yun Dong ZI Liao Hui Bian (The Data Compilation Of Four Pests Campaign And Hygiene Campaign In Hunan)*, Changsha: Hunan Patriotic Health Campaign committee office, 1958, p.129.

slingshot were its low cost and simple manufacturing method. Both poisons and shotguns are too expensive for rural farmers. Another advantage of the slingshot is its broad cultural base. A handbook published in 1956 stated quite bluntly that slingshot sparrows were the oldest and most widely used tools, and were most popular with children¹². Slingshots were important mediums for connecting children with the killing. For children, the slingshot was not only a tool, but also a toy. Slingshot hunting of sparrows and other birds was not a new activity. It's a traditional children's game. In many personal recollections, we can find that the slingshot was of great significance to this group of children who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. Slingshot was regarded as a special skill of children, and often represents the lively and naughty children¹³. The desire for slingshots was so strong that children would even pick up abandoned iron wire and rubber bands from construction sites and make their own slingshots¹⁴. One man who left his hometown in the 1950s recalled his childhood memories of a group of children making slingshots around a fire¹⁵. The experience of making and using slingshots together has become a fond memory of many people's childhood.

When these bird-catching games became a large-scale, organized movement, the slingshot got two sides. It was both a toy and a tool for carrying out instructions. The two sides of the slingshot actually reflected the two sides of the sparrow slaughter. The way these slingshot-toting children see the movement was complex. To some

12. Liaoning provincial health and epidemic prevention station (ed.), *Xiao Mie Ma Que (To Eliminate The Sparrows)*, Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1956, p.20.

13. Hu Ning, “ Hui Zhou Fu Ya Ji Yi ” (“ Memories Of Huizhou Government ”), *People's Daily*, May 9, 2011, p.24.

14. Liang Heng, “ He Chu Shi Xiang Chou ” (“ Where Is My Hometown ”), *People's Daily*, March 29, 2017, p.24.

15. Liao Ben, “ Nan Wang De Tong Nian You Xi ” (“ Unforgettable Childhood Games ”) *People's Daily*, January 27, 2018, p.5.

extent, their enthusiasm in the movement was because they regarded it as a game. Tao Yuanjun discusses this issue to a certain extent. He finds that some children would take part in the Sparrow-killing Movement as an excuse to skip classes, but the teachers were afraid to make much criticism¹⁶. Those who actively participated in the killing of birds would also take full advantage of these opportunities, playing in addition to killing birds. Slingshots were great for killing birds, but they can also be used for other interesting hunting activities. Some students in Shanghai targeted photos from tombstones as they went to the Hongqiao cemetery to catch sparrows¹⁷. In addition to killing thousands of sparrows, two goats and 14 different kinds of wild animals were also killed in a collective activity involving young people and children in Hunan province¹⁸. Besides sparrows, these killings were also regarded as a brilliant achievement, which was praised and commended. Sometimes the slingshots were even aimed at the children themselves. In 1958, when the Sparrow-killing Movement was in full swing, news broke in Shanghai that many students had accidentally injured their companions by shooting birds with a slingshot¹⁹. People's Daily published a special article to remind parents to restrain their children from playing with slingshots to avoid accidents²⁰.

From these examples, we can see that what children gained in the Sparrow-killing Movement was not only the responsibility corresponding to the national call, but also the special right to participate in the game. Shooting sparrows was a special

16. Tao Yuanjun, *In the Name of Public Health: A Political Essence Centered on Exterminating the Four Pests Campaign in Shanghai (1956-1960)*, Dissertation of Master Degree of Donghua University, 2014, p.79.

17. Tao Yuanjun, *In the Name of Public Health*, p.79.

18. *Hu Nan Sheng Chu Si Hai Jiang Wei Shen Yun Dong ZI Liao Hui Bian (The Data Compilation Of Four Pests Campaign And Hygiene Campaign In Hunan)*, p.129.

19. Tao Yuanjun, *In the Name of Public Health*, p.79.

20. “ Chun Jie Zhu Yi Yan Wai Shang ” (“Pay Attention to Eye Trauma In Spring Festival”), *People's Daily*, February 16, 1958, p.8.

reward, compared to studying in classroom and farming in field. Moreover, such rewards were officially protected, stable and legal. Of course, whether the Sparrow-killing Movement was regarded as games and rewards depends on children's own personal thoughts to a large extent, and it is difficult for us to peer into the inner world of every minor holding a slingshot at that time. But what we can be sure of is that children were by no means automatically and passively taking orders from the government.

Made Violence Justice

Whether it was a game or a political movement, the killing of sparrows was at its core naked slaughter. If killing as a children's game can be forgiven with children's naughty; The killing of a vast movement, then, involved a top-down ideology. The killing game across the country gave legitimacy to violence. In 1957 a newspaper report criticised a cruel street game in which sparrows were shot in boxes under the guise of killing four pests. The shooting saw pure killing as a pleasure. The sparrow, meanwhile, were no longer just an agricultural pest, but a political foe. Criticism of the Sparrow Movement shifted from agricultural production to political ideology. Sparrow was seen as an animal symbol of the right wing. The Sparrow-killing Movement was contorted with the struggle against the right²¹. Political ideology reconstructed the way the sparrow is hated, and this complex hatred justified the violence.

21. Liu yi, “ Cong ‘ma que’ dao ‘hai ren niao’ : wu shi nian dai zhong hou qi mie que yun dong de hua yu luo ji ” (“ From ‘Sparrows’ to ‘Pests’ : on the Discourse Molding of Eradicating Sparrows Movement in the Middle and Late Period of 1950s”), pp.107-108.

This hatred and killing directly affected the children involved. As a carrier close to children, children's songs were widely publicized in the Sparrow-killing Movement. Many nursery rhymes were very direct depictions of the anger and hatred that children feel when they catch sparrows. In these children's songs, the author first used a child's voice, accusing the sparrow of food waste, which was also the source of anger and hatred. The way children treated sparrows showed a terrible cruelty. In the crudest way, a nursery rhyme expressed a child's determination to kill a sparrow:

"You eat commune rice, I want your life" (ni chi gong she mi, wo yao ni de ming)²².

Another children's song was even more brutal. It told the story of a child's terrible violence against a sparrow:

"Pull out your feathers, pull out your sinews." (ba ni de mao, chou ni de jing)²³

The cruelty of these ACTS was incompatible with the children's identity. In fact, some scholars had noticed these cruel images of children in the propaganda media at that time. On April 16, 1957, more than a year after the nationwide campaign against the four pests was launched, Ye Qianyu, the head of the department of traditional Chinese painting at the central academy of fine arts, published a commentary titled "Miscellaneous Talk on Youth Art Exhibition" in *People's Daily*. Ye reflected on and criticized the theme of sparrow catching that often appears recently:

22. *Zhong Guo Er Ge Xuan Zi Liao Ben (Selected Chinese Nursery Rhymes)*, Beijing: China Juvenile and Children's Books Publishing House, 1959, p.11.

23. Tang Haibo: *Shao Shan Yao Xin Er Ge (The Songs Of Shao And The New Nursery Rhymes)*, Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 1959, p.25.

After the campaign against the four pests was launched, many “heroes” catching sparrows appeared in the paintings, and I always felt something was wrong. The question was not whether sparrows should be beaten, but whether they agreed to paint innocent children as fierce and heroic. We have been children, also played sparrows. The mood at that time was probably for fun or wanted to get something through their own work. If you insist on being violent and cruel to attack the small sparrows, I am afraid it is wrong. Today's children catch sparrows very hard, in spite of the encouragement of a social force, they just want to get more like a hunter. Therefore, such images are not real.²⁴

These cruel images showed the author's expectation for children. Their callous treatment of enemies like sparrows went beyond their age, and this precocity seemed to be the greatest admiration for children. Many cool, witty and cruel images of children's heroes as adults had been created, among which the most famous and typical one was the Jiao Danwa. Jiao was a child under seven years old living in Gaoqu village, Shanxi Province. He made up his mind to kill the mouse because it had eaten his new books. After convincing his mother with scientific knowledge, he began to use his clever method to catch mice and sparrows (although sparrows did not bite his book), and even delayed his lessons. But he soon balanced his studies with his work catching mice and sparrows. In less than two months, he caught 77 sparrows and killed 29 rats. And also he had obtained the outstanding result in the school study.²⁵

People's Daily and other newspapers publicized the story of Jiao and call him

24. “Kan qing nian mei zhan za tan” (“Miscellaneous Talk on Youth Art Exhibition”), *People's Daily*, April 16, 1957, p.8.

25. “Lu liang shan xiao yin xiong” (“The little hero at the foot of Luliang mountain”), *People's Daily*, January 29, 1958, p.7.

"the little hero at the foot of Luliang mountain" (lv liang shan xiao ying xiong) . His story was also adapted into a comic strip, which was released nationwide and caused quite a stir²⁶. In the case of Jiao, we can find a collision between the adult mind and the child's temperament. The ideas he preached about the state and politics did not seem to come from a child under the age of seven; but his actions, such as catching sparrows, catching mice, and even skipping school, were consistent with his age. What's more, the children in this story were obviously much better than many adults. Whether it was the mother who initially obstructs the Jiao, or the villagers who later raised a lot of objections, these adult images showed a negative situation. The independent story structure of children and adults was widely found in films, plays, children's songs and other literary works released at that time. *Take Hit The Sparrows* (*da ma que*) , a 1958 film that began with a group of sparrows randomly trashing farmland. The old man on the farm could do nothing about it and was even bullied by the sparrows. But soon, a group of resourceful young children appeared. They bravely used all kinds of methods to drive away or kill sparrows and finally save the old people and the farmland. In the song of the same name, an old woman guarding a paddy field was also bullied by sparrows, which arbitrarily pecked at the rice. And it was a child who, with his slingshot, chased away the sparrows and saved the rice fields and his grandmother²⁷.

In this story structure of sparrows, children and adults, adults appear very weak and helpless. Their image was negative. Some adults even persuaded children not to kill sparrows for various reasons. On the contrary, children were smart and brave

26. *Chu Si Hai Xiao Ying Xiong (The Little Hero in The Four Pests campaign)*, Shijiazhuang: Hebei people's fine arts publishing house, 1958.

27. Liu Raoming, *Er Ge Yi Bai Shou (One Hundred Nursery Rhymes)*, Tianjin: Baihua Edition, 1959, pp.116-117.

enough. They were even more righteous and powerful than adults. Their naivety and naivety in confronting external and internal enemies was a reflection of their political purity. These judgments of children became a reason for the government to use children to supervise adults. In 1958, 17 red scarf groups of health supervision (hong ling jin wei sheng jian du gang) were set up in a small town in Zhejiang province after the launch of the Patriotic Health Campaign. The children in the groups had their responsibility and power to stop the unhygienic behaviors (such as spitting and littering) of passengers in the street²⁸. Children and adults formed a contradictory relationship. And children's behavior and thought were endowed with a special rationality and legitimacy. They went from being pure to being righteous. They hold both the scales and the sword of the goddess of justice in their hands. They could make a passionate and cold judgment on sparrows at this time, but what about next?

Conclusion

The prominent image of children in the Sparrow-killing Movement was the common result of official construction and children's own participation. For children, the Sparrow-killing Movement had two different characteristics. It was an agricultural and political movement organized by adults. But in the longer cultural memory, it was a time-honored childhood game full of happy memories to kill sparrows. Different purposes came to the same actions. It just proved the difference of the individual behind the unity of the movement.

28. *Jia Xing Zhuan Qu Wei Shen Gong Zuo Da Yue Jing Zi Liao Hui Bian (Data compilation of the great leap forward of health work in the special area of Jiaying)*, 1958. pp.32-33.

The image of children created by the government brought politics into children's daily life. Political propaganda affirmed the power and political purity of children and implied the contradiction between children and adults. The Sparrow-killing Movement proclaimed the role of children to adults. A strong image of children was an inspiration to children and a warning to adults.

Limited by historical materials, it is difficult to explore the specific impact of this movement from the perspective of children's own psychology. Children's group psychology and emotion were certainly not consistent. The absence of girls in propaganda posters and the news media is often a sign of the gender gap, but it is just one of many distinctions. However, the purpose of this paper is to put forward these distinctions. The public has never been a group of no thought and will only blindly follow the group. They were flesh and blood people, and every twist and turn they go through as they grow up had a profound impact on their subsequent decisions. We have already seen that these children, born in the 1940s and 1950s, went through a slaughter spree in their childhood. And when the red sun rose in the 1960s, these children (or teenagers now) were holding red books and wearing red armbands, ready for another spree of violence. History is continuous, so is life. When these children hold a slingshot, aim at a target, and loosen the rubber band, their choices would determine the destiny not only of sparrows, but also of themselves.

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