

A New Way to See the Cultural Revolution

By François Cheval

The power of Solange Brand's photographs lies in the innocence shared between the young expatriate and the "true believers" who offer her the very image of their faith. Let's picture Brand, a young French woman of 20 on her motorized Solex bicycle and equipped with her Pentax SV, wheeling across the Chinese capital to the astonishment of its citizens and the Red Guard, freshly arrived from the countryside. She holds their gaze without a trace of reservation, conveying her empathy. Their faces are transfixed and friendly. They offer her the Little Red Book, raising their fists to show their devotion to Mao Zedong.

Plenty of photographers before Brand had traveled to China and shown it to be an open, complex society—Ergy Landau, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Marc Riboud, Fernand Gigon, Jean-Philippe Charbonnier—but Brand is the only amateur to have done so at this crucial moment in the country's history, and the only one able to look past appearances and approach her subjects as equals.

The young people demonstrating in the streets of Beijing in 1966 cannot be compared to the 20,000 soldiers marching through the conquered capital in January 1949, heroes and survivors of the The Long March, gazing outward and earnestly towards the horizon, confident in the future of communism. The Red Guards, on the other hand, "the generation born under the red flag," had known neither the Japanese invaders nor the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party. The only future they envision is an end to the bureaucracy and revisionism of Liu Shaoqi.

The first impression one gets from Brand's photographs is misleading. The stark image of the conquering power in 1949 was standard for its time. Brand renders a more complex picture, combining simple, intimate scenes with revolutionary operas, and all within an urban setting. While the incredible The Long March is the stuff of epics and legends, the Cultural Revolution is more rooted communal dancing with street theatre. Brand's photographs contrast with the icons from the early People's Republic. All we see are ordinary Chinese citizens. There's no heroic images of workers, farmers and soldiers—nothing with a hint of propaganda—only an exchange between people, imbued with curiosity and life.

The full article is available [here](#) in French.