

Introduction to the Cultural Revolution

Adapted from Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2001

The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” usually known simply as the Cultural Revolution (or the Great Cultural Revolution), was a “complex social upheaval that began as a struggle between Mao Zedong and other top party leaders for dominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and went on to affect all of China with its call for “continuing revolution.”¹ This social upheaval lasted from 1966 to 1976 and left deep scars upon Chinese society.

Background

The roots of the Cultural Revolution date back to the early 1960s. After the catastrophic Great Leap Forward, in which more than 20 million people died, Chairman Mao Zedong decided to take a less active role in governing the country. More practical, moderate leaders, such as Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai, introduced economic reforms based on individual incentives—such as allowing families to farm their own plots of land—in an effort to revive the battered economy. Mao detested such policies, as they went against the principles of pure communism in which he so firmly believed. Nevertheless, China’s economy grew strongly from 1962 to 1965 with the more conservative economic policies in place.

At the same time, Mao started to worry that local party officials were taking advantage of their positions to benefit themselves. Rather than resolving such cases internally to preserve the prestige of the CCP, Mao favored open criticism and the involvement of the people to expose and punish the members of the ruling class who disagreed with him; he framed this as a genuine socialist campaign involving the central struggle of the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie.

Buildup to the Cultural Revolution

Overall, Mao began to fear that the CCP was becoming too bureaucratic and that Party officials and planners were abandoning their commitment to the values of communism and revolution.² Since the Great Leap Forward, he believed that he had been losing influence among his revolutionary comrades, and thus, the battle for China’s soul.

Some members of the Communist leadership argued for a new campaign of radicalism to overcome what they perceived as the stagnation of the country. Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and other officials argued that artistic and cultural works were beginning to criticize

communism and should focus more on promoting a revolutionary spirit. Lin Biao, the head of the national army (called the People’s Liberation Army or PLA), was perhaps Mao’s strongest ally. Lin organized hundreds of Mao’s quotes into a book called *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, better known as the “Little Red Book.” Lin required every soldier to read the book and emphasized adherence to the Party line and loyalty to CCP leaders in the Army. Mao praised the PLA as an example for the Chinese people, and Mao’s status and image reached new heights when all Chinese began to study his book of quotations and memorize passages of the book; Mao became a prophet-figure in the minds of many Chinese.

The Beginning of the Cultural Revolution

When Jiang Qing and her allies complained in late 1965 that various cultural productions were openly criticizing the Communist leadership, Mao decided that China needed a new revolutionary movement. Beginning in May 1966, Jiang Qing’s allies purged key figures in the cultural bureaucracy and criticized writers of articles seen as critical of Mao.

That same month, the top party official in Beijing University’s Philosophy Department wrote a big character poster, or *dazibao*, attacking the administration of her university. Faculty at the country’s other universities soon began to do the same, and radicals among faculty and students began to criticize Party members. This wave of criticisms spread swiftly to high schools in Beijing. Radical members of the leadership, such as Jiang Qing, distributed armbands to squads of students and declared them to be “Red Guards—the front line of the new revolutionary upheaval.”³

Mao endorsed the revolutionary discourse and the attacks on authority figures, whom he believed had grown complacent, bureaucratic, and anti-revolutionary. Local Red Guards attacked anyone whom they believed lacked revolutionary credentials, and then turned on those who simply failed to wholeheartedly support their efforts. In August 1966, the Central Committee issued a directive entitled the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (a.k.a. the Sixteen Points) in an effort to define the revolution’s goals. Later that month, Mao began to greet huge parades of Red Guards holding aloft the “Little Red Book.”

However, despite official directives and encouragement from the Party leadership, local forces were left to act according to their own definitions, and many of them ended up inflicting violence upon their communities and clashing with each other. Nobody wanted to be considered a “reactionary,” but in the absence of official guidelines for identifying “true Communists,” everyone became a target of abuse. People tried to protect themselves by attacking

friends and even their own families. The result was a bewildering series of attacks and counterattacks, factional fighting, unpredictable violence, and the breakdown of authority throughout China.

Some believe that this chaotic, violent response stemmed from the two decades of repression that the Party had imposed on China. Two particularly effective methods by which the CCP controlled the Chinese population were assigning class labels to each person, and giving the boss of each work unit nearly unlimited control over and knowledge of the lives of all the workers accountable to him or her. As a result, freedom of expression was denied, people were totally dependent on their bosses and were obliged to sacrifice and remain completely obedient to the Chinese nation, and only Party members exercised direct influence over their own lives. Thus, to the youth of the day, the Cultural Revolution represented a release from all their shackles, frustrations, and feelings of powerlessness. It also gave them the freedom to enact revenge on those whom they believed exercised undue influence over them or whom they had been told were “class enemies.”

Descent into Chaos

The chaos and violence increased in the autumn and winter of 1966, as schools and universities closed so that students could dedicate themselves to “revolutionary struggle.” They were encouraged to destroy the “Four Olds”—old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking—and in the process damaged many of China’s temples, valuable works of art, and buildings. They also began to verbally and physically attack authority figures in society, including their teachers, school administrators, Communist Party members, neighbors, and even their friends, relatives, and parents. At the same time, purges were carried out in the high ranks of the Communist Party.

On New Year’s Day **1967**, many newspapers urged coalitions of workers and peasants to overthrow the entire class of decision-makers in the country. The Red Guards were instructed to treat the Cultural Revolution as a class struggle, in which “everything which does not fit the socialist system and proletarian dictatorship should be attacked.”⁴ Radical revolutionary groups responded with fervor, attempting to gain control over local organizations. However, the end result was that local authorities and Party leaders were now dragged into the fighting that was quickly enveloping the rest of society. In the absence of coordination, rival “revolutionary units” fought Party leaders and each other, and the unending series of local power struggles multiplied even further.

Overall, the Red Guards and other groups of workers and peasants terrorized millions of Chinese during the 1966–1968 period. Intellectuals were beaten, committed suicide, or died of their injuries or privation. Thousands were imprisoned, and millions sent to work in the countryside to “reeducate” themselves by laboring among the peasants.

The breakdown of order reached its peak in the summer of 1967: opposing worker and student factions clashed throughout the country, with particularly intense violence in Beijing and Guangzhou, and massive fighting between local militant groups and the PLA in Wuhan led to the deaths of more than a thousand protestors. In perhaps the final straw, radicals assumed control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 1967 and began to appoint their own radical diplomats to Chinese embassies around the world.

Return to Order

At this point, most party leaders, including Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Jiang Qing, agreed that the disorder was becoming too widespread to control and the country was in serious danger of falling into anarchy. They began to emphasize studying Mao’s works rather than attacking class enemies, used workers’ groups to control student groups, and generally championed the PLA while denouncing “ultra-left tendencies.” Nevertheless, armed clashes continued until the summer of 1968, when Mao called on troops to quell an uprising at Qinghua University in Beijing. Five people were killed and 149 wounded in the confrontation, including workers who were shot by students. After this final gasp of violence, a semblance of order returned to the country: “Revolutionary Committees” consisting of representatives from the PLA, “the masses,” and “correct” Communist Party cadres were established to decide on leadership positions and restore order.

Although its most chaotic phase had ended, the Cultural Revolution officially continued, and with it the unpredictable persecution of many Chinese. For example, the “Campaign to Purify Class Ranks,” which lasted from late 1967 until 1969, attempted to rid the Party of those with “bad” class backgrounds. Its goal was to identify Communist Party cadres who had ties to the West or to landlords or rightists and subject them to psychological pressure in group sessions to confess their mistakes. Ironically, this led to the persecution of many of the most militant Red Guards: these were people who had tried to abandon their poor class background and prove their “Redness” by acting militantly during the Cultural Revolution. Despite their previous revolutionary fervor, they were now tortured and banished from the CCP.

Many Chinese accused of being counterrevolutionaries were sent to the countryside to engage in hard rural labor as a complement to their political indoctrination. They were urged to praise Mao and Lin Biao and to condemn Liu Shaoqi as a revisionist bourgeois. Their conditions were extremely basic, and many who were old or weak suffered from the demanding labor and lack of comforts.

Lin Biao’s Downfall

In 1969, Lin Biao was named Mao’s successor at the National Party Congress. The same year, Soviet troops clashed with Chinese troops on China’s northern border, leading to widespread support of the PLA, which Lin Biao led. However, in 1970, Mao began to criticize some of Lin’s top officers and changed the constitution so that Lin could not ascend to a higher post. Then, in late 1971, the CCP announced that Lin had attempted to assassinate Mao due to

frustration over seeing his political ambitions blocked. Lin had then tried to flee China with his family in a plane, which crashed in Mongolia in September 1971, killing all on board. This story was impossible to prove, and many believe it was fabricated. Nevertheless, the Party now painted Lin Biao as a “renegade and traitor” and condemned him as an enemy of the people. However, after revering Lin Biao as one of the country’s greatest heroes for nearly a decade, the about-face caused many Chinese to doubt, perhaps for the first time, the honesty of the Communist Party and its leaders. Most historians believe that Mao felt threatened by Lin’s growing power and popularity and began to worry that Lin would overthrow him. Thus, Mao eliminated Lin to consolidate his role as uncontested leader of the Party.

The Later Years of the Cultural Revolution

The early years of the Cultural Revolution had left the educational system in disarray. High schools and universities were gradually reopened in the late 1960s and especially the early 1970s, but it wasn’t until 1973 that examinations for entrance into universities were reinstated. These examinations replaced “revolutionary purity” as the basis for college admissions. Overall, it is estimated that some 16 million urban Chinese youth had been sent to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. While they were supposedly there to develop solidarity with the peasants and contribute their labor to the revolution, they were also relocated to ease the overcrowding of Chinese cities. Years of living in the countryside meant that this generation lost out on educational opportunities and that its intellectual capacity was underdeveloped.

Another result of the 1969 border clashes with the Soviet Union was China’s quest to find friends abroad. China reestablished ties with the West after President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and signed trade deals with Western nations. To ensure that the influx of elements of Western culture would not dilute the Cultural Revolution’s ideals, Mao simultaneously launched the “Anti-Lin Biao Anti-Confucius” campaign, urging Chinese to stay true to Marxist values.

End of the Cultural Revolution

By 1974, China’s two most powerful leaders, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, were chronically ill and unable to govern effectively. The four main remaining leaders of the Cultural Revolution, led by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, engaged in an internal power struggle with more moderate, pragmatic Party members like Deng Xiaoping.

Zhou Enlai died in January 1976. Many Chinese deeply mourned his death because they believed that he was a moderating force who had put the well-being of the Chinese people before all else. On April 5, 1976, thousands of Chinese gathered in Tiananmen Square to commemorate Zhou and to ask for “more openness in government, an end to dictatorship, and a return to the true spirit of Marxism-Leninism.”⁵ As with all previous such requests under the CCP, these demonstrations were suppressed.

Chairman Mao Zedong, China’s supreme leader for 27 years, died

on September 9, 1976. The entire country entered an extended period of grief over Mao but did not protest as they had after Zhou’s death. Hua Guofeng, the CCP’s second-in-command, seized power and arrested the four remaining leaders of the Cultural Revolution, labeling them the “Gang of Four.” They were accused of dozens of crimes, including masterminding most of the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution against Mao’s wishes. They made handy scapegoats for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, leaving Mao’s reputation officially unblemished. The arrest of the Gang of Four on October 6, 1976, is thus considered by many to mark the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The reversal of the extreme policies of the Cultural Revolution continued in December 1978, when a conference of Party leaders declared victory in the struggle against Lin Biao and the Gang of Four and proclaimed that China could now progress to “socialist modernization,” which in practice meant opening up to the West and transitioning to capitalism. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping became the undisputed leader of China. He led the country down a definitive road toward capitalism, greater economic freedom, and stronger links with the outside world. The Cultural Revolution had ended, and in its place was something quite nearly its opposite: pragmatism, interdependence, openness to outside influences, and capitalism. The CCP’s monopoly on power and attempts to control the population remained, but the Cultural Revolution had severely damaged the CCP’s legitimacy, and it would no longer enjoy the trust and absolute power it had during that tumultuous 10-year period of modern Chinese history.

Resources

- 1 Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001).
- 2 The example of the Soviet Union haunted Mao. When Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death in 1953, he criticized Stalin, instituted political and economic reforms, and backed away from the absolutism that characterized Stalin’s rule. Mao greatly admired Stalin, so he was shocked at Khrushchev’s reforms and believed that the Soviet Union had abandoned true communism. These tensions resulted in a break in relations between the two former allies in the early 1960s.
- 3 Spence, 604.
- 4 Spence, 607.
- 5 Spence, 621.