

## The Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976

### Key issues:

- The purpose of the Cultural Revolution (from Mao's perspective): was it more of ideology, or power, or both?
- The impacts of the Cultural Revolution: positive or negative? And to whose perspective?

### The aims of the Cultural Revolution:

- The context of the pragmatic CCP leaders' response to Mao's failed policies in the Great Leap Forward is crucial in understanding his aims for the Cultural Revolution as either a power struggle or a revolution based on his ideology, or even both
  - Pragmatic leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi acquired great influence as they reversed the policies of the Great Leap Forwards
    - From the power perspective: Mao felt threatened that he was being politically sidelined by these leaders who were coming to dominate policy-making
    - From the ideology perspective: Mao felt that these leaders were leading the party away from revolution and communism, and towards the capitalist road; he wanted to stop this 'revisionism'
- **Characteristics of this pre-Cultural Revolution period (c.1962-1966)**
  - **Disillusionment of some of the pragmatic CCP leaders with Mao's leadership**
    - A number of senior party members, more pragmatic and less idealistic than Mao, began to question what they believed to be the precipitous and careening course charted by their Leader
    - They were disappointed with the initial results of the GLF and the communes
    - They were critical of Mao's handling of the dispute with the Soviets – they considered Soviet aid important to China's economic, military and scientific development
    - They were also doubtful about the wisdom of a breakneck pace of agricultural collectivisation and industrial expansion
    - They were doubtful about the emphasis on ideology (redness) over expertise in technology and weaponry
    - They thought the incessant mass campaigns sapped national energies and was a distraction from the development of China
    - *Response of these leaders*: because of their association with Mao and their actual control of the daily operations of the party and governments, whereas Mao secluded himself in isolation, they believed that they were in a better position to assess the needs of the nation more accurately than Mao
  - **These pragmatic leaders became more influential and powerful within the CCP**
    - This was so particularly after the party reorganisation in 1956 (so even before GLF started in 1958)
      - Here, Mao retained the chairmanship of the Central Committee but Liu Shaoqi became first vice-chairman and exercised certain functions for the chairman
      - Deng Xiaoping was appointed party general secretary
    - These leaders favoured a less precipitous course of action in order to cultivate a more stable social order and priority for industrial development

over agricultural collectivisation (while Mao pushed for mass movements, increased speed in collectivisation, the Great Leap and Communes)

- By 1958 the Central Committee had come under the tight control of Liu and Deng
- Finding the idea of the Communes unsound, at its Sixth Plenum

**Mao was able to carry out his Cultural Revolution, partly because he had his own supporters in the Party (against the pragmatists)**

- **Lin Biao**
  - Lin Biao was Defence Minister after Peng was ousted in the Lushan Conference in 1959
  - From 1966-1971, Lin did Mao's bidding; and played an important role in promoting Mao's glory through furthering his cult of personality
  - Interestingly, he may have helped to build up Mao's self-esteem after the Great Leap Forward
  - A sycophantic figure to Mao?
  - E.g. in 1963 he compiled the 'Quotations from Chairman Mao' or the Little Red Book
    - Distributed to all soldiers and used for study sessions
    - Later distributed to schools, universities, shops and factories
  - E.g. he supported Mao's desire for a politicised military instead of an unpoliticised one (against the ideas of Peng)
    - E.g. he abolished all ranks and insignias in 1965
- **The Cultural Revolution Group**
  - Later renamed the 'Gang of Four'
  - Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao, came to be dominant
  - And the Cultural Revolution saw her rise as a leading public figure
    - Previously, she had agreed to stay out of politics for 30 years and to devote herself to taking care of Mao when she married him

#### **Aims of the Cultural Revolution**

- **Mao was worried that Liu Shaoqi (then successor to Mao) would betray him; a power struggle or to preserve his ideology?**
  - An example had been set by Khrushchev who had denounced Stalin
  - Corresponding action by Mao: when Liu proposed resurrecting the Sino-Soviet alliance because of the intensification of the Vietnam War, Mao decided at a party meeting on Jan 25, 1965 that Liu must be disinherited and the party shattered in order to be reconstructed
- **Mao wanted to revive the revolutionary spirit within the people**
  - He wanted to re-establish his line of revolution, to revitalise the youth, politicise the masses, and combat old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking

#### **Early developments of the cultural revolution**

- **The first move by Yao Wenyuan, with his "Comment on the Newly Composed Historical Play 'Hai Rui Dismissed From Office'" (Nov 10, 1965)**
  - Yao attacked Wu Han's play as being critical of Mao
  - Was attacked as an allegory of Mao's dismissal of Peng at the Lushan Conference
  - **This was in response to the fact that apart from Wu Han, other members of the Peking Municipal Government had made more explicit criticism of Mao**
    - \*further evidence to Mao that his position was threatened high in the party hierarchy
  - This was a strategic move by Mao
    - If he attacked Wu Han, he could implicate the Peking Mayor Peng Zhen as part of a counterrevolutionary plot, and ultimately implicate his patron and Mao's perceived rival, Liu Shaoqi

- **The Maoists went on the attack against the Peking leadership**
  - Wu Han recanted on Dec 30, 1965, admitting that he failed to use class struggle in his play
  - On March 26, 1966, the Mayor Peng Zhen disappeared
- **Officialisation of the cultural revolution in the Party**
  - On Apr 18, 1966, the Liberation Army Daily editorialised: “Hold High the Great Red Banner of Mao Tse-Tung’s Thought and Actively Participate in the Great Socialist Cultural Revolution”
  - The Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee adopted several key resolutions:
    - Target of attack in this revolution: ‘those within the party who are in authority’ and who were ‘taking the capitalist road’
    - Announced the creation of the Red Guards as a ‘shock force’ to carry the movement from the capital to the provinces
      - This was to bypass the party machinery and the Youth League, which were under Liu’s control
    - Called for the establishment of permanent ‘cultural revolutionary groups, committees and congresses’ at all levels
    - Called for the application of Mao’s ideas on the mass line, the class struggle and the theory of contradictions
  - A seventeen member Central Cultural Revolution Committee was formed
    - Jiang Qing was its first vice-chairwoman
  - Central Cultural Revolutionary Committee, together with the military under Lin, and the State Council under Zhou, became the ruling triumvirate, with Mao over all

### Characteristics of the Cultural Revolution

- **Attack on the party (leadership and cadres)**
  - In August 1966, Mao declared that the main targets were top party leaders who were taking the capitalist road
  - The Red Guards attacked Liu Shaoqi as a revisionist and a Chinese Khrushchev, and pressured him and his wife into self-criticism
  - In Nov 1968 the CCP Central Committee announced that Liu had been ousted from all party and government posts
  - Other prominent officials who were attacked, humiliated, dismissed, purged:
    - Deng Xiaoping, the party general secretary
    - Zhu De, founder of the Red Army
    - Bo Yibo, a vice-premier and chairman of the State Economic Commission
    - Along with several hundred government and party leaders
  - Success of Mao’s regaining of power:
    - The Ninth Party Congress, on Apr 1969, unanimously elected Mao Chairman of the party and the Central Committee, with Lin Biao as vice-chairman
    - The new party institutions reaffirmed the Thought of Mao as the guiding policy of the party and the state, and designated Lin Biao as his successor
  - Attack on cadres:
    - Jiang Qing and Lin Biao provided the Red Guards with a list of ministers and officials who would be abused and humiliated
    - Many ministerial departments were purged in Jan 1967
    - The CCP officials were subjected to a replacement rate of about 60% and up to 400000 died

- the historian Lee Feignon pointed out that this served to decentralise (in effect undermine) the bureaucracy and reduced it to 1/6 of its former size **(so Mao successfully achieved his goal of undermining the bureaucratic state? At least in the earlier stages?)**
- **The expansion of the Mao cult**
  - Huge portraits of Mao went everywhere
  - By 1966, all Chinese had to bow three times before Mao's portrait
  - Over 2 billion badges with Mao's face were made
  - Mao appeared in seven massive rallies at Tiananmen Square up to Nov 1966 – over 10 million people were transported free on railways from all over China to Beijing to these rallies
- **The enthusiasm of the youth in the Red Guards**
  - They received official encouragement from Mao, saying that 'to rebel is justified'
  - Mao saw them as a tool for permanent revolution, and wanted to make the young feel that they had a special role to play in the creation of a new socialist China
  - By July, almost all schools had Red Guard detachments
  - Mao exploited the grievances of the students: the education system, inept teachers, rote learning and lack of jobs after graduation
  - Mao would use them to attack the party and to attack traditionalism
- **Traditionalism was attacked**
  - In 1966 Mao encouraged the young to destroy the four olds – old culture, old thoughts, old customs and old habits
  - The Red Guards thus defaced or destroyed many of China's monuments and landmarks
    - E.g. attacked temples like the Thousand Buddhas at Qixia Temple in Nanjing
  - Traditional Chinese customs like feng shui, fortune telling and use of traditional costumes were attacked
  - Organised religion came under attack – Tibetan Buddhists and Muslims came under assault
- **The West was attacked too (both culture and in diplomatic relations)**
  - Jiang Qing was at the forefront of this
  - Anyone with decadent tendencies like wearing Western clothing, jewellery or make up were publicly humiliated
  - Assault on Chinese foreign policy
    - In June 1967 the Red Guards took over the Foreign Ministry and called for a more revolutionary foreign policy
    - China broke off relations with several countries
    - Red Guards attacked the British, Soviet, Indian, Indonesian and Burmese embassies in Beijing in August 1966
- **The education system was overturned**
  - The government suspended classes which freed over 103 million pupils, 13 million in secondary schools and 0.5 million to join the struggle
  - During the revolution, the number of schools increased and were extended to neglected parts; e.g. shifted resources to the rural schools
  - Examination based curriculum was replaced by a more practical curriculum
  - Primary school enrolment rose from 116 million in 1965 to 150 million in 1976 and middle school enrolment rose from 9 million in 1965 to 68 million in 1977
- **Brutality and violence inflicted on enemies of the revolution**

- Many were forced to do hard labour in the countryside or subjected to solitary confinement
- In many areas executions were used and ritual cannibalism was even practised
- **Decentralisation of the economy (just as had been attempted during GLF)**
  - Can be seen as a result of the undermining of bureaucracy (one of the aims of the CR)
  - Where peasants and workers would run their own work units
  - Mass mobilisation to develop the economy
  - In agriculture
    - Peasants were required to abandon all side-line occupations like rearing pigs to earn extra money
    - Purpose? To destroy any semblance of capitalism
    - However, negative effect: stagnation of rural productivity and living standards
  - In industry
    - A focus to develop industrial and military facilities and infrastructure deep in the interior provinces in Western China
    - Purpose? To prepare for a nuclear conflict and the threat of enemy strategic bombing
    - However, negative impact: highly wasteful programme which absorbed half of China's capital investments
  - to the traditionalists, economic policy in the CR hindered faster economic development as mine and factory managers were denounced by the Red Guards and replaced by unqualified ones (**i.e. the general favouritism towards 'redness' and away from expertise; the anti-intellectual current in the CCP**) and there was fighting in the mines and work stoppages at major plants and mass absenteeism was also found in major industries

### **the degeneration into chaos with Red Guard factionalism, 1967-68**

- **the identities of the opposing factions**
  - one group was children from red backgrounds like peasants, workers, CCP cadres, who got involved to defend their parents
    - they were opposed to Mao's intentions to clean up the CCP
  - another group were those from the black classes (landlords, capitalists and GMD officials) who wanted the opportunity to get rid of their negative class labels
    - far more radical as they were motivated by great anger due to the discrimination they faced since 1949
- **the moderating influence of Zhou Enlai**
  - on the one hand, Zhou supported Mao, maintained a working relationship with the military under Lin Biao and the Cultural Revolution Group
  - on the other, exerted his moderating influence to keep the turmoil within bounds
  - Zhou also protected officials and generals who came under Red Guards attacks
    - e.g. he defended Nieh Jung-chen, head of the National Defense Science and Technology Commission
  - Zhou brought the chaos under control by mediating a 3-way alliance
    - between PLA representatives, revolutionary party cadres, and representatives of the revolutionary masses in the Revolutionary Committees at the various levels

- **clamping down on the Red Guards**
  - the chaos went beyond what Mao sought
    - the Red Guards began to clash with one another in the summer of 1967 and the worst fighting was in Sichuan and Wuhan
  - in July 1968 Mao summoned the five student leaders representing major Red Guard groups in Peking to reprimand them for their 'ultra-leftism' and factionalism
  - the army was brought in to restore order
    - in Jan 1967, Mao instructed the military to intervene and restore order by breaking up all militant revolutionary organisations to prevent civil war
  - the students were sent to the countryside
    - in July 1968 the red guards were disbanded and sent to the countryside to live amongst peasants to experience the dignity of labour
    - from 1967 to 1972 12 million young people were sent to the countryside
  - a power vacuum was formed which was filled in by the military

#### **increased autonomy of mass organisations**

- **these mass organisations were unwilling to accept the reassertion of party power**
  - accounts of armed resistance to the restoration of party power
  - in many factories the workforce refused managerial authority

#### **mao tries to regain control**

- **clamping down on the Red Guards (see above)**
- **halting the creation of autonomous, self-governing communes**
  - Mao told Zhang Chunqiao to transform the Shanghai People's Commune into a revolutionary committee which was a three-way alliance comprised of representatives from the masses, the PLA, and the CCP cadres
  - Purpose was to decrease the power of the workers and assert the power of the PLA
- **Restoration of the party establishment**
  - The Party committees were declared to be the leading body in the revolutionary committees
- **A turn to the right in policy**
  - The rights of the production team were reasserted and private plots, limited handicrafts and limited trading were protected
  - The use of wall newspapers for political agitation and the expression of grievances were curtailed
  - Examinations were restored and the authority of teachers protected
- **However, the importance of the party remaining in touch with the ground (operating through the Mass Line) was reinforced**
  - In some places members of the factory revolutionary committee, including Party cadres, spent **one-third of their time in the office**, one-third at a May the 7<sup>th</sup> cadres school and one-third working on the factory floors
  - Admission policy to schools and colleges under Mao's orders gave high priority to workers, peasants and soldiers who had been recommended by their committees or units
  - Students were expected to spend two months of the year in productive labour
  - There was the restoration of small industries owned and operated at the commune and brigade level

#### **Historiography:**

- It can be argued that with the reversal back to the Right, Mao's CR was to eliminate his rivals
- However, a case (by Jack Gray) can be made that since the CR initially was according to Mao's ideology, consistent since pre-1949 days, then ideology is a crucial factor for the CR