



# **The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction**

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# **THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

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## **A Very Short Introduction**

**Richard Curt Kraus**

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*For Anthony Kraus, a civilized beast*

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# Contents

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List of illustrations

Preface

1 Introduction: China's unfinished revolution

2 "Politics in Command"

3 Culture: "destroy the old, establish the new"

4 An economy of "self-reliance"

5 "We have friends all over the world": the Cultural Revolution's global context

6 Coming to terms with the Cultural Revolution

Timeline

Major actors in the Cultural Revolution

References

Further reading

Websites

Index



# List of illustrations

---

1 Map of China

2 Mao Zedong wearing a Red Guard armband

White Lotus Gallery

3 Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai greeted by officials waving the Little Red Book

White Lotus Gallery

4 Poster opposing factionalism, as the Red Guard movement was disbanded

White Lotus Gallery

5 *The Rent Collection Courtyard*

White Lotus Gallery

6 Poster of army musicians performing in the countryside

White Lotus Gallery

7 Peasants of the model Dazhai Production Brigade in political study

White Lotus Gallery

8 Poster of smallpox inoculation

White Lotus Gallery

9 Poster of peasant leader and mother studying through the night

White Lotus Gallery

10 Jiang Qing entertains foreign guests

White Lotus Gallery

11 Flier for People's Sandwich of Portland

Courtesy of People's Sandwich of Portland; design by Aaron Draplin and Matt Reed

# Preface

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China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution shook the politics of China and the world between 1966 and 1976. It dominated every aspect of Chinese life: families were separated, careers upended, education interrupted, and striking political initiatives attempted amid a backdrop of chaos, new beginnings, and the settling of old scores.

Yet the movement remains contentious for its radicalism, its ambitious scale, and its impact upon almost a billion lives. It is difficult to make sense out of this complex, often obscure, and still painful period. This book attempts to offer a coherent narrative. Fortunately, we can now draw upon a vital literature of scholarship, memoirs, and popular culture, which has appeared both inside and outside China.

The Cultural Revolution was violent, yet it was also a source of inspiration and social experiment. Why did the Cultural Revolution exhilarate people, and why did so many become disillusioned? The challenge is to take the Cultural Revolution seriously rather than simply dismissing it for its absurdities and cruelties.

Much of what we think we know about the Cultural Revolution turns out to be mistaken. For example, most of the features of the Cultural Revolution were already in place nearly two years before its ostensible beginning in 1966. Red Guard membership was much more extensive than Westerners imagine, but the youth movement's heyday was much shorter, less than two years. Arts policy was destructive yet also part of a longer-term plan for modernizing China's culture. The Cultural Revolution shook the economy but certainly did not shatter it, for it grew at a respectable rate. Despite China's isolation, the Cultural Revolution laid the foundation for China's transformation into a manufacturing platform for a neoliberal world economy. The Cultural Revolution is far from forgotten in China today, nor does the government ban its discussion.

The story of the Cultural Revolution is complex. I try to minimize the specialized jargon that crops up in writing about Chinese politics, but readers should be warned about the odd word "cadre," a Party or state bureaucrat in the People's Republic. The word refers to individual officials, not to a group as in the West. I have tried to be sparing in introducing unfamiliar Chinese place names, although this may make the Cultural Revolution seem more Beijing-centered than is warranted; it was an intense national movement with many local peculiarities. Names of political campaigns also play a larger role than in Western public life. To Chinese, instead of mystification they offer a mnemonic tag and a context for both political and emotional assessments of the Cultural Revolution's diverse currents.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: China's unfinished revolution

China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution sprang to life in May 1966 and lasted through the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. It was proletarian more in aspiration than in reality, given that four-fifths of Chinese were peasants. It was cultural, in that its most consistent targets were the arts and popular beliefs. It was not in itself a great revolution; it made a lot of noise but only shook up the state—it did not overturn it. Like most revolutions, it overstayed its welcome. It is tempting to regard this raucous decade as the last and perhaps final push in a century-long trajectory of Chinese revolution, after which China got down to the serious business of building a modern nation.

China's present leaders, often former Red Guards themselves, have little interest in examining the link between Maoist China and the country today. They avoid awkward discussions about their own youth and they adhere to an unspoken understanding to discard recriminations from that period. Western media are tempted to sharpen the contrast between a good China (which fills our stores with products and carries our debt) and a bad China (which once marked the limit of Western power in the world). But accounts that simply proclaim Mao Zedong to be a crazy tyrant, and that China's *real* modern history begins only with his death, miss important dimensions of the rapid and penetrating social change that has occurred since the Cultural Revolution's end.



1. Map of China.

In contrast, this book draws out the connections between the isolated and beleaguered China of the 1960s and the newly risen global power of today. These two Chinas are not the opposites that we sometimes want them to be. Like other twentieth-century Chinese leaders, Mao wanted a strong, modern China; some Cultural Revolution policies contributed to this goal, others were remarkably

unhelpful but even so added to the distinctive direction followed by contemporary China.

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Rather than fence off the Cultural Revolution as a historical swamp, one can stress its connections to our present world, situating this rather nationalist Chinese movement within a global context. The Cultural Revolution was part of the global movement of radical youth in the 1960s and 1970s. Western protestors boasted of imagined or emotional links to China's rebels. During the Cultural Revolution Beijing and Washington tempered their long hostility with Nixon's 1971 visit, reshaping the international politics of Asia, and sowing seeds for China's decades of spectacular economic growth. The Cultural Revolution and its subsequent anti-leftist purge battered China's bureaucracy so severely that there was little cogent questioning of policies that turned the nation into a vast workhouse for the world's globalized industry.

## **Modernization and nationalism in China's revolutions**

The iconoclastic revolutionary tradition of modern China begins at least with the failed Taiping Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century, the bloodiest effort to overthrow the weak and corrupt Qing Dynasty, which finally fell in 1911. The Guomindang (Nationalist Party) of Sun Yat-sen and then Chiang Kai-shek gave revolution a more modern face in a sustained effort to unite and modernize China. They were joined by the Communists, first as allies, then as rivals in a civil war to determine how extreme the revolution would be. When the Guomindang retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the socialist revolution on the mainland was secured.

But the revolution in culture had only begun. Each of the revolutionary waves that swept over twentieth-century China was passionately concerned with transforming culture. Many would say that the Qing Dynasty's collapse was heralded by its abolition of the classical civil service examination in 1905, sundering a centuries-old nexus of education, upward mobility, social control, and ideological dominion.

In the confused decade following the 1911 establishment of the Chinese Republic, modernizing intellectuals led the May Fourth movement of 1919. Demonstrations on that date protested Japan's receiving Germany's former territorial privileges in China at the end of World War I, but May Fourth activists carried a much broader modernist agenda. Dominating China's intellectual life for decades, the May Fourth movement regarded the major obstacle to social progress and modernity to be Confucian culture with its patriarchy, land tenure system, and opposition to learning foreign ways. The May Fourth modernizers believed in the liberation promised by science, and in the transformative potential of democracy. They also claimed a special mission for intellectuals in leading China, a privileged position not so different from the Confucianism they opposed.

China's revolutionary politics were also nationalist as well as modernizing, punctuated by strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts against foreign firms, and finally overwhelmed by the enormity of Japan's invasion. Although critics charged May Fourth activists with Westernizing China away from its own roots, indignation at imperialism kept that from occurring. The Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek organized a "New Life movement" to attack superstition, close temples, destroy statues of feudal gods, and urge a new morality for China, but then backed away from such radicalism.

The new Communist Party, profoundly influenced by the May Fourth movement, early emphasized cultural transformation. But after Mao Zedong's 1935 ascendancy as Party leader culture occupied a

new and central strategic role. Mao, one of the founders of the Communist Party in 1921, became the Party's chief by leading Communist rebels from their South China bases, surrounded by Guomindang forces, to the remote northwestern city of Yan'an, in 1934–35. This year-long strategic retreat, known as the Long March, preserved a core of the Communist troops but forced the Party to rethink its relationship to their local peasant hosts.

As the war with Japan intensified, Mao recognized that the Party needed to win the support and trust of China's peasants. The Party set up a program to retrain urban intellectuals and former workers to accomplish this. This 1942 rectification movement involved conscious rejection of elitist ways, a sometimes chest-thumping celebration of peasant virtues, and a series of arts productions aimed at spreading revolutionary values by appealing to peasant audiences. The Maoist rectification sharpened the Party's ability to combat both the Japanese invaders and the Guomindang. At the same time, it suppressed the cosmopolitan tendencies of May Fourth, preferring peasant art to imported music and drama. In 1945 the Communists adapted Chinese opera (*The White-Haired Girl*) and ballet from a well-known peasant dance (*yang-ge*), and it encouraged Party intellectuals to write in accessible, nonliterary ways.

The arts were intended to serve politics. But Mao also argued that higher artistic standards would create more persuasive propaganda. Most of the intellectuals at Yan'an went along with the new nativist line happily enough. They could see its effectiveness when peasant audiences viewing *The White-Haired Girl* wanted to kill the actor singing the role of the evil landlord. But after the Japanese defeat, and after the flight of the Guomindang, many of the Yan'an ways were put aside, as the victorious Red Army marched into China's cities, and the Communist Party assumed rule over a sophisticated nation, rather than a guerilla base in the hinterlands. The Party's cultural agenda broadened, readmitting some of the cosmopolitan instincts put aside at Yan'an. One Communist painter exclaimed excitedly on the eve of the liberation of Beijing: at last we will be able to make oil paintings!

## **The first seventeen years**

Revolutionary China's first decade was broadly successful. The new People's Republic restored social order after a devastating civil war. Land reform and new economic programs brought dramatic economic growth. Military success against the United States in the Korean War encouraged new respect for Beijing. Expansion of higher education pleased intellectuals eager to build a better China, and the arts looked both to foreign and to native traditional inspiration.

The first important sign of indecision among Communist Party leaders came with the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956–57. Overly confident in the wake of a smooth "Socialist Transformation" of economic life in 1956, Mao Zedong reached out to non-Party intellectuals, encouraging them to speak out on public affairs, even to criticize the Communist Party. At first hesitant, many intellectuals eventually responded to the appeal to "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom," revealing greater bitterness than the Party had anticipated. Changing course abruptly, leaders abandoned the liberalism of the Hundred Flowers for a fierce anti-rightist campaign in 1957, in which a million intellectuals were labeled as "rightist elements," many losing their jobs and some sent to labor reform camps for the next two decades.

Silencing the critics encouraged the Great Leap Forward of 1958, a massive effort to break through

constraints on economic growth by mobilizing China's greatest resource, its labor power. The Great Leap was visionary, exhilarating, and mistaken. Newly established agricultural cooperatives were combined into larger communes, aiming to gain productive power through reorganization, including pooling child care and cooking. While the Great Leap did bring important infrastructural changes in the form of new agricultural factories, roads, and bridges, a lack of administrative feedback exacerbated unrealistic production goals. Lower officials, anxious of being judged "rightist," too quickly assured their bosses of successes in every field. The Party emphasized the contributions that could be made by politically inspired amateurs, denigrating the constraints often posed by professional experts. There were huge public works projects, some of which were successful, and other campaigns that were ultimately harebrained, such as the poorly conceived "backyard" steel smelters or the campaign to destroy sparrows.

The Great Leap resulted in a vast famine as agricultural production collapsed in many provinces. Operating with unfoundedly optimistic production figures, the state increased quotas for grain procurement even as it reduced resources for agricultural production. Disease and malnutrition resulted in perhaps twenty million to thirty million deaths in 1960–61, the greatest famine of the twentieth century.

The Party was slow in comprehending this disaster. Aware that the Great Leap was not going well, in the spring of 1959 Mao withdrew as head of state in favor of Liu Shaoqi, veteran leader of the Communist underground during the revolution. Later that year, several senior Party leaders faulted the Great Leap for being poorly administered, overly ambitious, and out of touch with the people. Marshal Peng Dehuai, the minister of defense and a veteran revolutionary, led the criticism. Mao's response was fierce and unrelenting. The purge of Marshal Peng reminded all how strong a cult the Party had built around Mao Zedong, and how difficult it was to constrain him.

The economic emergency was exacerbated by the collapse of China's relations with the Soviet Union. Once China's "elder brother in socialism," Soviet leaders were suspicious of Chinese assertions of an autonomous developmental path. Past military cooperation in Korea faded when China sought help in building an atomic bomb. A Soviet bomb was readied for shipment to China, only to be held back as Soviet leaders hesitated to build up a potential rival. As conflict intensified, in 1960 the Soviets recalled six thousand technical advisors, who took with them the blueprints for hundreds of unfinished industrial projects, leaving their Chinese comrades in the lurch.

Tensions with the Soviet Union probably strengthened Mao's hand at a time of great vulnerability, by stoking Chinese nationalism. While Mao retained the Party chairmanship, China tried desperate experiments to repair economic damage from the Great Leap. Local leaders relaxed their Great Leap intolerance of profit-making peasant markets in order to stimulate food production. Supervision of cultural activities lightened, as the Party cultivated the intellectuals and experts whom it had recently punished.

## **Rekindling the fire of revolution**

The political situation was tense as the Party sought to lead the nation beyond the "three bad years" of 1959, 1960, and 1961. Mao Zedong kept his position as Party chairman, although daily administration was in the hands of President Liu Shaoqi and the Party secretary-general Deng Xiaoping. Liu and Deng supported lightening the hand of the Party, mild market reforms, and a looser cultural regime,

all within a familiar Leninist framework. Mao and his followers did not accept such liberalization easily, instead advocating greater political work to keep China from abandoning its revolution.

A fundamental principle of Chinese politics is that the political elite maintains an appearance of unity even when disagreeing strongly. Thus tensions over policy choices were hidden. Indeed, the array of policy options under experimentation were not viewed as two diametrically opposed policy “lines” except retroactively, after the Cultural Revolution began. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, radicals criticized the “Seventeen Years” since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Their goal was to make the case for a sharp departure from a period they misrepresented as a unity.

One area of contention was rural corruption. A “Socialist Education Campaign,” launched in 1962, sought to boost fading revolutionary spirit within the Party by emphasizing ideological purity and recalling the class struggles that had brought the Communists to power. Disagreement over Maoist approaches to handling local leadership in the countryside elicited resistance from Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other top leaders.

Despairing that administrative campaigns would ever shake up the bureaucracy, Mao lectured his colleagues in 1962 that they should “never forget class struggle.” This meant talking about it “every year, every month, every day, at conferences, at party congresses, at plenary sessions, and at each and every meeting.” Mao hoped to reinvigorate the Chinese revolution by calling upon people to be true to its historical roots in overthrowing capitalists and landlords, and to protect the new status of workers and peasants.

Mao pressed for a revolution within the revolution. In the chairman’s view, the old ruling classes had been overthrown shortly after the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, yet their influence lived on in people’s everyday assumptions and behavior. The revolution had destroyed the material bases for landlord and capitalist power, but their ideologies were embedded within new China’s institutions, especially education, the arts, and popular culture. Mao distinguished between two kinds of counterrevolutionary influence. Feudalism, the product of the old landlord class, was often at odds with the bourgeois ideology adapted by Chinese capitalists, heavily influenced by their foreign ties. However, in defeat, the two defeated social forces joined hands to confuse and mislead Communists, discouraging their proper ambitions and deflecting them from their goals.

Thus one did not have to be an actual property holder to hold capitalist or landlord beliefs. Indeed, one of the Cultural Revolution’s most common terms of abuse would become “capitalist roader,” applied to veteran Communists who strayed from the Maoist path. Mao’s approach was strikingly nonmaterialist for a lifelong Marxist, but it represented his effort to come to grips with the new dynamics of socialism in China. And it provided an intellectual foundation for a massive purge of his enemies in the Party.

After the revolution, the Party oscillated between left-leaning periods, when the virtues of workers, peasants, and soldiers were paramount, and conservative phases when the “masses of laboring people” was a more inclusive concept, extending to intellectuals, office workers, shopkeepers, and other such classically “petty bourgeois” citizens. The call to remember class struggle signaled Mao’s leftism at a time when his Party rivals were tolerating or encouraging much more eclectic economic policies. The Maoist ideal of a Party for workers, peasants, and soldiers was counterpoised against the notion of a Party that reached out also to intellectuals, technical experts, religious leaders, overseas Chinese, and former capitalists.

These strains were barely contained in the four years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong was honored by all in name, but he complained that the Party secretary-general Deng Xiaoping treated him like the corpse at a funeral, respecting his image but ignoring his views. Others were more supportive, especially the new minister of defense, Marshal Lin Biao. Lin, one of the heroes of the revolution, replaced Mao's critic, Marshal Peng Dehuai. He led a program to expand the army's prominence and political impact. When China exploded a nuclear bomb in 1964, the prestige of the military increased. Lin molded the army into a bastion of leftist politics. He halted trends toward professionalization of the officer corps by abolishing titles of military rank and their insignia. China's army was made up of peasant recruits, and the Ministry of Defense regarded itself in some measure as the political patron and even voice of millions of peasants. Mao turned also to a group of radical intellectuals, and increasingly, to his wife, Jiang Qing.

Jiang Qing's 1938 marriage to Mao in Yan'an had provoked controversy among top Party leaders. Many remained fond of Mao's previous wife and distrusted the Shanghai actress who had beguiled their leader. They compelled the new couple to agree that Jiang Qing would stand back from political leadership. Jiang Qing accepted this begrudgingly, taking low-level assignments in cultural organizations in the 1950s. But by the early 1960s she was restive, resentful, and a willing ally for her increasingly angry husband. As tensions mounted in 1966, she linked up with Lin Biao to organize a February conference on the arts within the People's Liberation Army, marking both her new public role and underscoring that the army was in Mao's camp.

From 1962 through 1966, Mao and his followers organized many model programs that later became identified with the Cultural Revolution. Mao's "Little Red Book" (*Quotations from the Works of Mao Zedong*) was prepared by the army in 1963 to spread radical values among soldiers through required political study. Urban young people began to be resettled in the countryside in a serious program that would be adapted to rid cities of troublesome Red Guards by 1968. Maoist canonization of the model soldier, Lei Feng, began 1963. The Dazhai production brigade, the Maoist model for rural organization, established its political credentials in 1964, as did its twin model for industry, the Daqing oil field. The Third Front economic development campaign, by which new industries were built in secure interior regions, was launched in 1964, albeit with secrecy.

That does not mean to suggest that the Cultural Revolution really began several years earlier than we know. But Mao and his supporters already had a coherent program for China. The eruption of political turbulence after 1966 was fueled in part by their frustrations in carrying out these leftward initiatives against the resistance of a professional bureaucratic elite, which was busy developing a more stable and routinized system. What Mao added in 1966 to fire up the Cultural Revolution was the mass mobilization of groups who had not previously been active in Chinese politics.

Mao, feeling that the Party organization was controlled by his adversaries, and fearful of his rivals, turned beyond the Party for allies. Just as he recruited new leaders for his cause, he turned to non-Party activists, the "rebels" who answered his call for "a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Mao's appeals struck a chord with many who felt that life in China was unfair, that it had not lived up to ideals of revolution.

Mao Zedong met with the visiting novelist and French minister of culture André Malraux, in 1965. Mao told Malraux that "the thought, culture, and customs which brought China to where we found her must disappear, and the thought, customs, and culture of proletarian China, which does not yet exist,



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