

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN CHINA: AN INTERPRETATION¹

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The Cultural Revolution, as the Chinese are fond of saying, was very complicated. And this complication begins with the name itself, which, more fully, was called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Whether the Cultural Revolution was ‘great’ or not depends a great deal on where you stand. But in China now, among both the leadership and the great majority of the Chinese population (I am willing to presume), it is seen as a ‘great disaster.’

Whether the Cultural Revolution could be considered ‘proletarian’ or not first depends on what you mean by ‘proletarian.’ This point opens up the entire question of the character of the Chinese Revolution. And if it was a ‘proletarian’ revolution, then who was its target? China was officially ‘socialist’ and the received ideology from the 1950s and early 60s denied the existence of class struggle under socialism. China was a society ruled by a Communist Party, still declared a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” There are a lot of issues raised here that are still hotly debated within Marxism.

In addition, it was a ‘cultural’ revolution. But there is some ambiguity in this term. First, it refers to a wider rather than narrower definition of ‘culture.’ Rather than being specific only to what we might term the ‘cultural sphere,’ principally the arts, it refers to the whole range of social institutions and practices current in Chinese society. We get closer to it by recalling the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, with the base referring to the economic institutions in society to the political, ideological, cultural, and social institutions that arise from this base.

Few Marxists, however, accept the base/superstructure difference at all categorically. The Cultural Revolution was supposed to extend into the factories and the communes and result in a boost to production quantitatively, and to have important economic consequences qualitatively. Since the time of Lenin, Marxists have brought back the important role of the subject and the creative dimension of politics. History has undermined the notion of historical inevitability.

Perhaps it was more a ‘revolutionary movement’ than a revolution. But if it was not successful enough to be a revolution, it also lacked some elementary qualities to be a revolutionary movement because it lacked ideological coherence and effective leadership.

At first glance the Cultural Revolution appears to be a series of paradoxes. You have, for example, a country that is ruled by a Communist Party that, itself, begins a mass movement aimed at some important leaders in the Party. It did not have its origin in mass politics, or in opposition from below to the ruling party. It was set in motion by the Central Committee – or at least a section of this Central Committee – using such slogans as, “It is right to rebel.”

Second, one of the principal tenets of a Marxist party since Lenin has been the importance of leadership, but there was very little leadership offered to the young, cultural revolutionaries. It was called a ‘proletarian’ revolution, but most of the shock troops of the rebellion were young students from high schools, universities, and technical colleges. They formed the bulk of the Red Guards. They were people with little experience and big ideas, pumped full of a sense of their own importance.

Third, the Cultural Revolution was not only set in motion by the ruling communist party – or sections within it – but the Red Guards were instructed by the Chairman, Mao Tse-tung, to “bombard the headquarters,” that is, the leadership of the Communist Party. He didn’t mean, of

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course, all leadership, and ‘bombard’ did not mean using heavy artillery, and explicitly not heavy violence.

Fourth, a revolution implies, necessarily, the use of violence. The Red Guards, however, were instructed to carry out the Cultural Revolution by way of argument, great debates, and ideological struggle. But it rapidly turned violent, and factional fighting broke out in communes, factories, and particularly in institutions where intellectuals were in a majority, that is, in universities, and among artists and journalists. This factional fighting was ended only following the intervention of the army by 1969, which disarmed all sides.

In one form or another, the Cultural Revolution may be said to have continued into the 1970s, again being officially sponsored. First was the campaign to criticize Lin Biao, the Minister of Defence and the successor to Mao as Chairman. It was said officially that he was killed in an airplane crash after unsuccessfully attempting to escape to Russia – a very fishy story. Then the campaign against Confucius, an ancient Chinese philosopher. Then a campaign against ‘bourgeois right’ which is the principal that, in a socialist society, distribution is according to the principle “to each according to his work.” It was easy for outsiders to get the impression of a society in the struggle to develop further along a socialist path; that revolutionary values were alive, well, thriving, and in the ascendant. In fact, the opposite was the truth, and the image itself was part of the problem.

What I hope to do is give a brief interpretation of the *politics* of the Cultural Revolution within its own terms. I will not see it as a power struggle between personalities as if the ideological and political differences between the groups are unimportant – after all, they were all a bunch of communists. It is, however, most importantly a power struggle. I also won’t deal with the issue of Chinese nationalism and the importance of national feelings in, for example, the opposition to Russia. The Sino-Soviet dispute was more than just traditional enmity between ancient, national rivals, although any full account must take this factor into consideration. Similarly, there was a strong anti-Western element to the Cultural Revolution, some of which was likely a reflection of ancient Chinese ethnocentrism – the supposed superiority of the Middle Kingdom – and some element of assumed racial superiority. But Chinese isolationism and the fear of contamination from the West was also political and ideological.

Finally, I will deal with Cultural Revolution within the theory of Chinese Marxism. Here I will assume a great deal that is openly debated on the left, such as the need for a revolutionary party. The Cultural Revolution was an attempt to deepen the Chinese revolution in a socialist direction under the Chinese Communist Party. There are, however, very serious questions about whether degeneration is inevitable under such a party. This is the debate whether Lenin’s revision of Marxism went beyond the pale. If it is true that a Leninist party *must* produce a new ruling class and move away from socialism, then the Cultural Revolution failed, ultimately, because of its Leninist assumptions, and there is little further need to analyze it. For the moment I will leave this question aside and concentrate on the Cultural Revolution within its own terms, as a movement to reform the Communist Party and not replace it as the dominant force in society.

When did the Cultural Revolution begin and when did it end?

It was launched in 1967 and was declared officially to be over ten years later, after Mao was dead and stuffed rather than buried. But the real beginning was almost ten years previously, at the time of the Sino-Soviet dispute.

To put his matter as briefly as possible, many questions were being raised about what many in China, and the West (although in different terms), saw as the failure of socialism in

Russia. It seemed clear that a new elite had come to power in the USSR and ruled in its own interests rather than in its professed role as the leading element of a workers' and peasants' state. The Soviet mode of economic, political, and social development, under the new elite, was moving away from a society that was socialist. In the case of industrial development, the Soviet model involved concentration on heavy industry at the expense of agriculture and rural industries. A great divide had been opened between the city and country, which was deepening to the point at which rural exploitation was occurring – a new kind of primitive accumulation that was consolidating new vested interests.

Factories were under the control of a system of one-management. Increasingly, emphasis was placed more on enterprise profitability and less on state planning. Material incentives had become the chief means for motivating work and moral, socialist incentives were being downplayed. In theory, the USSR was declared to be a classless society – class struggle was over. Internationally, the USSR began to implement a strategy of peaceful coexistence with the West and in ideology, it embraced a theory of peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism.

All these changes in practice and theory the Chinese put together under the term “revisionism.” Clearly, no social theory can remain unchanged over time. The use of the suffix “ism,” however, indicates that the Chinese Communist party had concluded that these changes amounted to a wholesale betrayal of the socialist path; they amounted to a capitalist road to modernization, not a path to furthering socialism. Some in China concluded that capitalism had already been restored in the USSR, but from my perspective, the restoration of capitalism was not really the issue. What was at issue was the development of a new mode of production that was different from both capitalism and socialism.

Within China, the Soviet mode of development had been the model that was followed in the 1950s. Many Chinese Communist party members were also bureaucrats and managers who occupied positions of power in the new social structure. Their interests were tied to the privileges and perks of their position. These interests were careerism and personal aggrandizement.

At this point in the Revolution, Mao and others did a theoretical reappraisal of socialist construction. They argued that development along the Soviet path not only led to increasing inequalities, but that such inequalities had become consolidated. The creation of a new stratum of managers, bureaucrats, and other people in leadership positions in the USSR, who were increasingly divorced from the working class, had amounted over time to a new class, a new bourgeoisie, and a new ruling class. The same situation was occurring in China, although it had not yet reached its end point. A group of people the CCP called “capitalist roaders” occupied positions of power in China's Communist Party and were behind the Soviet model which led inevitably to a new bourgeoisie. They were taking China along a path that would entrench their own positions of power and privilege. Mao said that the new bourgeoisie was arising from within the CPP among the capitalist roaders taking the Soviet path.

From this point of view, the Cultural Revolution is another rectification campaign meant to keep China on a socialist path. There had been many campaigns in the past that had been designed to root out what the Chinese saw as incorrect tendencies in the Party. They were more than just power struggles, although they certainly were power struggles, because the outcome of the struggles affected the direction Chinese development would take. Early rectification campaigns, for example, were meant to reinstill the “Yenan Spirit” of self-sacrifice and serving the people and combatting individualism and careerism. They stressed the importance of working directly with the people and of doing concrete investigations.

The Cultural Revolution, then, was the largest and most ambitious of these rectification campaigns. Sociologically, it was an attempt to routinize revolution, if that is not too much of a contradiction in terms. The idea comes close to that of “permanent revolution.” The Cultural Revolution attempted to create a number of new institutions to make rectification permanent and deepen socialist education. These measures included introducing productive work in schools and creating new local government bodies known as Revolutionary Committees in factories, neighbourhoods, and other institutions. These committees included representatives from all classes of people who worked in the organization or lived in the neighbourhood. Leaders were required to spend part of their time doing productive work along with ordinary workers. University entrance requirements were changed to add ideological and character elements in addition to demonstrated competence. Students would have to complete two year’s work before being admitted to higher study. The Party set up special schools for cadres which stressed ideological preparation. Intellectuals were sent into the countryside to spend time working on collective farms to help them develop socialist ideas and practices and learn respect for manual labour. In terms of economic development, the Cultural Revolution stressed self-reliance and “walking on two legs” which meant using whatever technology was available at the time to its full advantage.

These reforms mostly in the cultural sphere were meant to deepen the revolution but they would not succeed without struggle at every level against some powerful vested interests. Most of the intended targets of the Cultural Revolution were leadership people and party members. The two primary targets were identified as Liu Shao-Chi and Teng Hsiao Ping.

From our present vantage point, even though the Cultural Revolution was launched as a decision of the CCP, it appears that that the forces behind it were in a minority in the party. It can be seen not as a great experiment in socialism, but as a last-ditch effort, when it was already too late, to try to prevent the country from following the path of the Soviet Union and revitalizing the revolution. Just as China under Mao had followed a different revolutionary path after the Long March, so, too, it would forge its own path to socialist development. But the forces in favour of the status quo were too strong; the Cultural Revolution lacked a clear ideology; and its leadership was largely absent.

It now appears that the Cultural Revolution relied on two very thin reeds.

The first was youth, full of steam and energy, but lacking in experience. Mao miscalculated. He thought that people would be able to tell the difference between a revolutionary and a bureaucrat through their practice, and it was only a matter of releasing their creative energies. But socialist education was lacking. There was a huge potential for ultra-leftism here.

The second reed consisted of intellectuals, at least those intellectuals who professed to be upholding the socialist road. Again, there were serious short-comings here. Intellectuals possess great potential for either dogmatism or careerism. The former leads them in the direction of ultra-leftism; the latter leads them to the path of least resistance: if the revolutionaries were in the ascendant, they could try to swing their way. The writing on the wall, in 1967, was that it was unwise to be identified as a revisionist. One of the fascinating things about the Cultural Revolution is how quickly careerists cottoned on to the new movement. There is nothing simple about human motivation, even conscious motivation. Those who waved the red flag or the Little Red Book most vigorously were often those who most openly had only recently seen the error of their ways, and could just as easily reverse their opinions.

The result of this kind of leadership and these kinds of troops meant that the Cultural Revolution quickly became ultra-left – extremely so. As the Revolution developed, it did not become a struggle between revolutionaries and revisionists. In many cases, self-proclaimed revolutionaries fought other self-proclaimed revolutionaries who were not deemed revolutionary enough. Neither side could be supported.

The revolution demonstrated two negative tendencies. One in China is called mountaintopism. It is highly sectarian, isolates its followers from most people, and tends to left-extremism. The second tendency is rightist: to sacrifice principle for short-term advantages, particularly personal ones. Both tendencies were found among the temporary and localized leadership of the Cultural Revolution.

The result of ultra-left leadership is that it leads directly to the acceptance of the Right. So in 1976, very quickly, the most prominent leaders of the Cultural Revolution and its later manifestations were arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. The capitalist-roaders quickly came out of the closet and began to turn China back to the kind of development that had been followed in the 1950s, with all the implications this kind of development has for China's future. The speed and success of the coup of 1976 is a tribute – if that is the right word – to the failures of ultra-left leadership.