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The Cultural Revolution in China

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ABSTRACT

The Cultural Revolution was a political movement launched under the leadership of Mao Zedong that aimed to establish the hegemony of socialist ideology over the political culture and society of China. Was it an ideology driven, puritan agenda to put China on the path of communist revolution or was it an intense political struggle within the Communist Party to establish the total dominance of Mao's leadership.

Keywords: China, Mao, Cultural Revolution

“The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, usually known simply as the 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 and went on to affect all of China with its call for ‘continuing revolution’.”

(Spence 2001)

The Cultural Revolution was a political movement launched under the leadership of Mao Zedong that aimed to establish the hegemony of socialist (or Maoist) ideology over the political culture and society of China. In actuality it was a measure to rid the party and state apparatus of ‘reactionaries’ and ‘counter revolutionaries’. These were the party leaders who were perceived as a threat to the authority of Mao in China, as they had criticized many of Mao’s policies and advocated a new line of economic reforms. As Mao had famously stated the very objective of the Cultural Revolution, ‘*Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? This is the main question of the revolution.*’ (Dikotter 2016)

The origins of the movement lay in the reverses received by the Chinese Communist Party in the ambitious policies of Great Leap Forward (1958 – 61) and the subsequent disaster of Great Chinese Famine (1958 – 62). The Great Leap Forward was a rapid industrialisation programme launched as an integral part of the second five – year plan. The over emphasis on iron and steel production led to a decline in agricultural productivity. The resulting famine led to the death of an estimated 20 million people. This catastrophe in the economic arena brought in a change in the political apparatus. Mao decided to take a less active role in governance of China, and the

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party line came to be dominated under the more liberal and practical leadership of Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai.

Liu Shaoqi, with the aid of Deng Xiaoping, initiated the policy of 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 (Spence 2001). The rise of Liu and Deng within the party hierarchy also posed a potential threat to Mao.

At the same time, there were incidences of corruption, bureaucratization and bourgeois elements rising in the Party as well as the society. Mao had a genuine concern to tackle these issues, as well as to ensure that the revolution stays. According to him the ultimate purpose of the Cultural Revolution was to perpetually keep the ideas of revolution alive in order to ensure that communism survives and strengthens in China (Jian 1999: 363). The official documents of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution state that 95 per cent of the cadres are revolutionary, that only a “small handful of capitalist roaders” have “wormed their way” into the party and that even leading cadres who have made serious mistakes can be re-educated by the masses (PL Magazine Nov. 1971).

Thus, the Cultural Revolution emerged as a struggle between two camps – the ‘Left’ led by the proletarian leaders like Mao, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai; and the ‘Right’ led by Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Tao Chu. Victory went to the ‘Left’, preserving and consolidating the hold of Mao over China.

There were increasing complaints in the mid-1960s from sections of party leadership, under Jiang Qing, stating that art forms were being used to mount criticism over the party leadership, and was indirectly questioning the foundations of communist China. The ‘soft – reformist line’ was blamed for the phenomena. Mao Zedong came to the conclusion that China was in need of another revolution to bring back the revolutionary zeal in the society (Spence 2001). It was believed by him that the elder generation of leaders had ‘doted’ the younger ones with wealth and privilege without preparing them for the future exercise of power (Jian 1999: 364). There was a need for inculcating the spirit of ‘permanent revolution’ in the minds of the young. Mao asked the students and youth cadres to openly challenge authority, who they believed had got complacent with the revolutionary doctrines or had developed bourgeois characteristics. The ‘Red Guards’ were to be the vanguard of the new revolutionary line – ‘class war within the communist party’.

The chaos and violence went on increasing in the years of 1966 and 1967 as students decided to participate in ‘revolutionary duties’ leaving apart their educational programmes. They were encouraged to destroy the “Four Olds” – old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking – and in the process ended up destroying many of China’s temples, heritage sites, valuable works of art and architecture. They also began to verbally and physically attack authority figures in society, including their teachers, school administrators, Communist Party members, neighbours, and even friends, relatives and parents (Spence 2001). The party run ‘People’s Daily’ encouraged the youth to take up a more radical role in creating a new China by eradicating the evil influences from the Chinese society. Mao was projected as the truest of all revolutionaries and the liberating voice of the proletariat.

“... it is little wonder that in the early stages of the Revolution, the process of mobilizing the masses was the same process of deifying the Great Leader. The cult of personality was now pushed to the extremes... the newly created cultural forms virtually combined the rights of imperial worship with that of a religious cult: the little red book of Chairman Mao’s quotations had become China’s bible.”

(Jian 1999: 364)

This period witnessed an official ‘class purge’ of the leadership within the party. The leaders who had voiced any dissent against Mao at any given time were removed from party posts and enquiries were started against them. The most high profile target of this purge was Lin Shaoqi, the Chairman of People’s Republic of China from 1959 to 1968. He was labeled as a ‘capitalist roader’ and was publicly humiliated, abused and later sent to a detention camp. He died in the camp due to lack of medical care. Deng Xiaoping was sent, on three occasions, to work in a factory for “re-education” in Maoist ideology. He was one of the fortunate few that escaped the purge.

The period witnessed the rise of the ‘Gang of Four’ that was to dominate the Party machinery. It included Mao’s last wife [Jiang Qing](#), the leading figure of the group, and her close associates Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyan, and Wang Hongwen. It was also supported by Lin Biao, a Marshal of People’s Liberation Army. However, Lin was later branded as a counter revolutionary and accused of planning to assassinate Mao. Lin died in an air crash in 1971. The period after Lin’s death also saw the rise of internal political strife and struggle for leadership with the moderate leaders like Deng Xiaoping as the ambitions of the ‘Gang of Four’ soured higher.

By 1974 Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had started to withdraw from the active political duties due to chronic illness. Mao appointed Hua Guofeng as his second – in –command. After Zhou's and Mao's death in 1976, Hua seized power and arrested the leaders of 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 had been made handy scapegoats of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, leaving Mao's reputation officially unblemished. The arrest of the Gang of Four on October 6, 1976 is hence considered by many as the end of the Cultural Revolution. (Spencer 2001)

The effect of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was wider than imagined. It virtually brought the economy to a standstill as the workers and youth were principally active in 'revolutionary duties of class purge'. The entire education system was disrupted as the universities and colleges remained closed due to negligible attendance of students. The working of the government was also effectively crippled as the bureaucratic machine along with party institutions were the chief targets of the 'Red Guards'.

The reversal of the Revolution began with the rise of Deng Xiaoping in the Party hierarchy. He adopted a more liberal policy on economic restructuring by opening up the economy to foreign trade, and gradually to capitalism. However, the greatest consequence of the Cultural Revolution was the eroding of the Communist Party's authority and trust over the Chinese society. The political domination remains, but there are growing under currents for demand of political reforms and initiating democratic procedures.

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