The Cultural Revolution of China: Annihilating Culture with each Political and Class Struggle

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China's Cultural Revolution of the 1900s caused radical changes to the People's Republic of China. More a political struggle than actual revolution, the Cultural Revolution had a huge effect on people throughout mainland China. People of all backgrounds had their lives changed as different factions of the Communist Party fought for control of China. The Cultural Revolution has been a large factor on what present-day China has become. It was a disaster for the stability of China and most definitely a failed revolution. In all truth, the Cultural Revolution of China didn't so much as revolutionize Chinese culture than bring it to its knees.

The Chinese civilization has existed for thousands of years (China's Golden Age of Invention). Important inventions such as gunpowder, paper money, and the compass have all come from China (China's Age of Invention). As such, China also has a very rich and diverse culture. In the past, China was the most advanced nation in the world. However, as new innovations developed during the Industrial Revolution and other periods of rapid growth in Western civilization, the Chinese civilization fell behind. Imperialist countries like Britain and France took advantage of this, as seen through such events like the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties.

China has always been a country of high nationalism, perhaps to a fault. The Japanese, a long-time rival to China, perceive a very strong superiority complex from the Chinese referred to as Sinocentrism. It is true that traditionally the Chinese have always felt themselves superior to other countries (“Sinocentrism or Paranoia?”). In ancient times, the Chinese considered people from less advanced civilizations as "barbarians". When imperialist countries began to colonize and take advantage of the now considered uncivilized China, a new kind of Chinese nationalism grew. This nationalism grew due to mistrust of outside countries and resentment towards those who had taken advantage of China earlier. The term “bai gu” or white demon was used for these invaders (Yin). The Chinese lay in wait for a time when their country would be great again.
China also struggled with political problems during the 1900s. The Nationalist Party government of China had been very weak and corrupt. After the Nationalist Party of China was beaten in the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Party took over in 1949. The Communist Party appealed to the Chinese for a variety of reasons. Rich landlords controlled much of the peasants in China. Communism promised an end to this and more power for the lower-class (Pietrusza 14). Mao Zedong, a new leader who was rising in power within the Communist Party of China, promised a much stronger government that would rebuild China into a powerful country. This incited the nationalism most Chinese felt at the time.

Mao's ideas of communism emphasized the importance of peasants and true equality for all people. This idea actually contradicted the Soviets who thought the working class was more important for communism. Also, Mao commanded the army in a very open way. Each soldier felt a sense of camaraderie, as if he was truly important to their cause. This was very different from China's often more dictatorial generals who expected every order followed to the letter. Finally, an event known as the Long March sealed Mao's position as true end-all, be-all power of the Communist Party of China (Pietrusza 16-18). The Long March was a retreat spanning many thousands of miles. Mao had stayed resolute through all of its hardship. This garnered much support for him in the Communist Party. The Chinese now saw Mao as a leader who would surpass any obstacle to further the reconstruction of China’s previous power (Wang).

In 1937 he said "Revolutionary war is an antitoxin which not only eliminates the enemy's poison but also purges us of our own filth. Every just, revolutionary war is endowed with tremendous power. . ." (Mao 33) It seems apparent that it was always Mao's intention to have much revolution. At the beginning of his reign, he had already introduced many reforms. One of those reforms was the Thousand Flowers Movement, a movement in which Mao encouraged criticism on his policies. This turned out to actually be a political ploy to root out his enemies (Zhang). Mao also implemented new land reforms. The policies the land reforms used helped
China's economic progress. Rich landlords had their land taken away and given to the peasants who worked it (Langley 30).

The Chinese people’s lives improved with these reforms. It is this early success that aided in the view the Chinese had towards Mao even in later, less kindly, times. However, Mao himself was not satisfied with this progress. He wanted more. Mao pledged to triple China's steel production. His ambitions included matching the economic level of Great Britain in thirty years and the same economic level of the United States twenty years after that (Wang). Such lofty goals would require much more revolution in Mao's eyes. Thus began the Great Leap Forward.

The Great Leap Forward was an effort to increase China's steel production. Peasants were "encouraged" to donate metal to allow this steel to be created. If they refused to do this, they would be punished. Many people left their agricultural work to pursue this steel-making endeavour. This led to a massive famine that killed millions of people. The steel itself was crude and not of the quality Mao demanded. Instead of great progress, the Great Leap Forward resulted in a massive disaster. People began to question Mao (Thurston). This led to a major power struggle, and one Mao would not avoid. Similar to Joseph Stalin’s fear of being overthrown, Mao was very afraid of losing his power. Zhang Ben Xing states, “I feel Mao really went crazy in the times of the Cultural Revolution. It was really a disaster for China.”

In 1959, Liu Shaoqi replaced Mao as the president of the People's Republic. He was much more moderate than Mao and reversed many of Mao's radical policies. Offended by this, Mao became determined to resist him and other moderates like him. The Cultural Revolution had its motivations here. Mao used it to advocate the revolutionary policies in which he believed, denounce his opponents, and to reaffirm his own power.

The Cultural Revolution was a power struggle that involved many political figures. On Liu Shaoqi's more moderate side was Deng Xiaoping. Radicals included the "Gang of Four"
consisting of Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife), Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan. Kang Sheng, another powerful radical, had used brutal tactics back before the Cultural Revolution. His tactics had not changed since then. Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai were supporters of Mao, though Mao eventually turned his back on Lin Biao.

Liu Shaoqi had much influence over China, and Mao could not endanger his now precarious influence by openly attacking someone the Chinese people supported. Instead, Mao and his supporters attacked him by taking down those who supported him and by accusing him of trying to restore capitalism. Mao needed no real evidence for these accusations--he still had great influence over the media and could report many wild rumors if he so desired (Zhang).

Lin Biao helped in the spreading of rumors to remove Liu Shaoqi. In March 1966, Lin used the excuse of a rumor about a supposed plan to overthrow Mao to move his troops into Beijing. These troops seized radio stations and public security positions, giving more power to the military. Liu Shaoqi now found himself in a very dangerous position.

Trying to save himself, Liu Shaoqi publically admitted his errors in the hopes that this would appease Mao. It did not work. Liu Shaoqi lost almost all of his power and was brutally beaten by mobs of militant men under Mao’s control. His capture and mistreatment led to his death on October 1, 1969. Also disgraced was Deng Xiaoping. However, Mao protected Xiaoping from the beatings, so he did not suffer Liu Shaoqi’s fate. Still, he had lost all his power.

A key part in Mao’s renewal of power was his ability to stir up unrest in the ranks of China’s university students. From these devoted students came the Red Guards, young people devoted to Mao’s cause. They would parade through the streets in honor of Mao and raid houses of those deemed capitalists. Red Guards were allowed free public transportation, free meals, and other benefits. These headstrong youth would abuse their new advantages recklessly for their own good. Train systems were swarmed with poor students who now had an opportunity to travel.
Some made pilgrimages to big cities to catch a glimpse of their leaders, while others went to far off frontiers to “answer Chairman Mao’s call”. These students would sometimes infringe upon the locals, causing havoc in that area (Bo 1-6, 17-19). Mao had a truly god-like image to the youth of this time. His every word was law, and he could do no wrong.

The Red Guards would also use da zi bao or big character posters. These were large posters publicly displayed that students and teachers could use to voice an opinion. Because Mao needed good feedback from his people, there rose a practice in which students were forced to write da zi bao either praising him or denouncing his enemies (Pietrusza 43).

Denouncing others became a way to protect oneself, similar to the witch-hunts of western societies. Neighbors would put up da zi bao accusing people of being imperialists or capitalists to protect themselves. (Jiang 276) In struggle meetings, Red Guards would attempt to force confessions out of innocent people and to make them point fingers at others. Sometimes this would have political motivations. If someone confessed to doing things harmful the Communist Party of China by orders of a powerful political figure, this could be used as evidence against that figure. Other times it was merely to satisfy Mao's claims of capitalists among them. This was somewhat like the McCarthy era in United States history. Wild accusations were made about people fighting against the People’s Republic of China, just as wild accusations were made about communists being among the American people.

Although Mao said, "Policy is the starting point of all the practical actions of a revolutionary party and manifests itself in the process and the end-result of that party's actions," in 1948 (Mao 3), the policies of the Cultural Revolution were far from practical. People were often given no logical reason for imprisonment other than a vague declaration of crimes against the Communist party (Cheng 141). Brutal methods of torture were used on the imprisoned to try and force a confession out of them. Some people were deprived of sleep for weeks (Ye 180), and
others were forced to live in prison while wearing handcuffs at all times (Cheng 300-333).

Nothing good can be said about China's culture in the aftermath. Most evidence of culture was in ruin. Nien Cheng, denounced as a capitalist, soon found that any literature besides Communist propaganda was rare while visiting a bookstore (Cheng 410-412). Her extensive collection of Chinese ceramics was also decimated. Red Guards had stomped on porcelain cups and smashed ornate vases (Cheng 73-77). After the Cultural Revolution, such artifacts became much rarer and museums had to go to great lengths to buy them back.

Another negative effect of the Cultural Revolution was its effect on students. Children no longer went to school during the worst years of the Cultural Revolution (Yin). Some went off to become Red Guards, and others were simply too afraid. Liu Yin describes the children of her time as simply, “playing”. She says, “We would do things like get in groups to read the paper or attack the teachers we didn’t like. There was definitely no studying.”

There was also an impact on the number of skilled workers available after the Cultural Revolution. Mao had a policy of sending city people to the countryside to “re-educate” them by forcing them to do physical labor. Ting-Xing Ye was such a person. If she had not worked hard studying in her limited free time, it would have been a long time before she could leave. She was only allowed to go to college due to her English skills by taking and passing an exam (Ye 222). Not everyone was this fortunate. Without people being formally educated and introduced into the workforce, there was a great impact on the number of people employed in highly skilled jobs.

There is no telling what the true death toll of the Cultural Revolution was. But there is no doubt that many, many people died due to the frenzied patriotism of the Red Guards, the contradictory orders of Mao, and the general power struggle between political figures. Many people committed suicide or were outright murdered (Zhang). These people may never be avenged, and their persecutors may never face the justice they deserve. However, some lived to
tell the tale. Their stories tell the human side of the Cultural Revolution. Their stories tell of just what harm can come from the unchecked ambitions of people.

Mao once said, "A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained, and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." (Langley 16) Indeed, the Cultural Revolution was not kind, restrained, magnificent, or any of the like. The Cultural Revolution was violent, uncontrollable, and extremely destructive. However, if Mao wanted to accomplish anything of actual use to the Chinese culture, perhaps he should have taken up embroidery.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Nien Cheng’s memoir of the accusations thrown against her for having worked for a foreign company gave me insight into just what lengths the Red Guards were willing to go to get confessions out of people for their own political agendas. She also brings a much more educated and mature perspective to me. The details of her imprisonment also gave me a lot of information as to how the law system was working at the time.


Ji-li Jiang’s memoir gave me more insight into how someone would lose their position due to their class background. It also detailed the pressure put upon people to expose people very close to them. The Cultural Revolution’s policies expected children to turn on parents, making false accusations against them to protect themselves. This book showed the extent this could go to.

Liu, Yin. Personal interview. 27 Jan. 2012.

Yin Liu was a child of six when the Cultural Revolution began. She came from an intellectual family that had always found value in traditional Chinese culture. Growing up in those tumultuous times, Liu still retains many vivid memories.

Ma Bo’s memoir of his youth in the era of the Cultural Revolution gave me a sense of the spirit of young people at the time. He and his friends go to Inner Mongolia seeking adventure like so many of his peers. Ignorant to just what exactly was going on, Ma Bo soon realizes that the Cultural Revolution might not treat him favorably after all.


An English edition of Mao’s "little red book", this primary source proved invaluable to me. Much of Mao's speeches, essays, and quotations are printed here. Reading what Mao had to say and what the people of China heard from Mao gave me a lot of insight into the perspective of the people at this time. I found the many contradictions his words and his actions had very interesting.


Baikuan Wang was a child in the countryside of China at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Because he was from a poor family, he actually benefitted from the Cultural Revolution. After much studying, he was able to go to one of China’s top universities, despite his financial background, and be an inspiration to the children in his village of origin. The events of the Cultural Revolution from the
perspective of those in the country and those in the city were very different, so the information he could give me was very helpful.


Ting-Xing's memoir of her childhood in China during the Cultural Revolution taught me a lot about how children who were thought to have a bad class background were treated. It gave me the perspective of someone who didn't fully understand what was going around her. Also, the in-depth descriptions of the moving of city people into the country were very helpful. I learned how people would live long periods of time without seeing their families and how they would grow up in labor camps in the country.

Zhang, Ben Xing. Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2012.

Ben Xing Zhang was a university lecturer at the time of the Cultural Revolution. This led to much ostracism as Mao continually attacked intellectuals and accused them of being a threat to communism. Such a doctrine was very ironic for Zhang, a devout member of the Communist Party for many years. She had lived through World War 2 only to now see the party that had saved her shun her.

**Secondary Sources**

Rob Gifford's trip through China gave me a more Western view on China. With every landmark passed, a tidbit of wisdom on China's history in that region was given, along with some comments on its pertinence to the modern-day China. Though Rob Gifford does not describe China as a wonderful place by any means, he gives great insight into how the nation's power is rising.


This Japanese article let me see China’s ideals from a Japanese perspective. It was helpful to see the subject of Sinocentrism in a different perspective. This article is hopeful of the end of distrust between Japan and China.


This book gave me an overview of the events of the Cultural Revolution along with many photographs. The book used simplistic language as it was targeted towards younger children, so I found this book much easier to understand than some of my other sources. Important events in the Cultural Revolution were emphasized, so I could easily see what the central parts of it were.

This website had information on archeology in China. Attitudes toward archeology show attitudes toward what is dug up. This gave me insight into the importance of culture in China despite events like the Cultural Revolution.


This interview by Nova talked about aspects of the ancient Chinese culture. The importance of inventions like gunpowder definitely has an impact today. For a country with such a long history, I needed some additional background knowledge on the more ancient history of the country to understand its more recent history.