

The Cultural Revolution

The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” usually known simply as the Cultural Revolution (or the Great 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 (CCP) and went on to affect all of China with its call for “continuing revolution.”¹ This social upheaval lasted from 1966 to 1976 and left deep scars upon Chinese society.

Background

The roots of the Cultural Revolution date back to the early 1960s. After the catastrophic Great Leap Forward, in which more than 20 million people died, Chairman Mao Zedong decided to take a less active role in governing the country. More practical, moderate leaders, such as Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai, introduced 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.

To Mao the revolution had to be a permanent process, constantly kept alive through unending class struggle. Hidden enemies in the party and intellectual circles had to be identified and removed. Conceived of as a “revolution to touch people’s souls,” the aim of the Cultural Revolution was to attack the Four Olds-- old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits--in order to bring the areas of education, art and literature in line with Communist ideology. Anything that was suspected of being feudal or bourgeois was to be destroyed.

Buildup to the Cultural Revolution

Overall, Mao began to fear that the CCP was becoming too bureaucratic and that Party officials and planners were abandoning their commitment to the values of communism and revolution.² Since the Great Leap Forward, he believed that he had been losing influence among his revolutionary comrades, and thus, the battle for China’s soul.

Some members of the Communist leadership argued for a new campaign of radicalism to overcome what they perceived as the stagnation of the country. Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and other officials argued that artistic and cultural works were beginning to criticize communism and should focus more on promoting a revolutionary spirit. Lin Biao, the head of the national army (called the People’s Liberation Army or PLA), was perhaps Mao’s strongest ally. Lin organized hundreds of Mao’s quotes into a book called Quotations from Chairman Mao, better known as the “**Little Red Book**.” Lin required every soldier to read the book and emphasized adherence to the Party line and loyalty to CCP leaders in the Army. Mao praised the PLA as an example for the Chinese people, and Mao’s status and image reached new heights when all Chinese began to study his book of quotations and memorize passages of the book; Mao became a prophet-figure in the minds of many Chinese.

The Beginning of the Cultural Revolution

When Jiang Qing and her allies complained in late 1965 that various cultural productions were openly criticizing the Communist leadership, Mao decided that China needed a new revolutionary movement. Beginning in May 1966, Jiang Qing’s allies purged key figures in the cultural bureaucracy and criticized writers of articles seen as critical of Mao.

This wave of criticisms spread swiftly to high schools in Beijing. Radical members of the leadership, such as Jiang Qing, distributed armbands to squads of students and declared them to be “Red Guards—the front line of the new revolutionary upheaval.”³

Mao endorsed the revolutionary discourse and the attacks on authority figures whom he believed had grown complacent, bureaucratic, and anti-revolutionary. Local Red Guards attacked anyone whom they believed lacked revolutionary credentials, and then turned on those who simply failed to wholeheartedly support their efforts. In August 1966, the Central Committee issued a directive entitled the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (a.k.a. the Sixteen Points) in an effort to define the revolution’s goals. Later that month, Mao began to greet huge parades of Red Guards holding aloft the “Little Red Book.”

However, despite official directives and encouragement from the Party leadership, local forces were left to act according to their own definitions, and many of them ended up inflicting violence upon their communities and clashing with each other. Nobody wanted to be considered a “reactionary,” but in the absence of official guidelines for identifying “true Communists,” everyone became a target of abuse. People tried to protect themselves by attacking friends and even their own families. The result was a bewildering series of attacks and counterattacks, factional fighting, unpredictable violence, and the breakdown of authority throughout China.

Descent into Chaos

The chaos and violence increased in the autumn and winter of 1966, as schools and universities closed so that students could dedicate themselves to “revolutionary struggle.” They were encouraged to destroy the “Four Olds”—old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking—and in the process damaged many of China’s temples, valuable works of art, and buildings. They also began to verbally and physically attack authority figures in society, including their teachers, school administrators, Communist Party members, neighbors, and even their friends, relatives, and parents. At the same time, purges were carried out in the high ranks of the Communist Party.

Overall, the Red Guards and other groups of workers and peasants terrorized millions of Chinese during the 1966–1968 period. Intellectuals were beaten, committed suicide, or died of their injuries or privation. Thousands were imprisoned, and millions sent to work in the countryside to “reeducate” themselves by laboring among the peasants.