



REAPPRAISING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

by Harry Harding

The changes in Chinese politics in the four years since the death of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) have been breathtaking. But none has been more significant than China's repudiation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the tumultuous movement that dominated Chinese life for a decade, and that Mao's associates once described as their country's greatest contribution to Marxist theory.

The Cultural Revolution, as one American scholar has described it, was "one of the most extraordinary and puzzling events of the twentieth century."¹ It was the attempt of an aging Mao to shake up the Chinese Communist Party, reshape its policies, and ensure that his vision of continuing revolution for China would survive his own death.

Mao's efforts met determined resistance from many of his colleagues on the 17-man Party Politburo, most notably the party's vice-chairman, Liu Shaoqi, and its secretary-general, Deng Xiaoping. Mao sought to bend the party to his will by inciting the youth of China's cities—the Red Guards—to protest against officials straying from the Maoist course. On August 5, 1966, Mao affixed a wall poster outside the offices of the Central Committee urging China's youth to "bombard the headquarters" of local party chiefs. The official press and radio picked up the Chairman's call and sent it throughout China.

Heeding Mao's summons, millions of young Chinese took to the streets of the country's major cities in the fall of 1966. They ripped down the old signs on shops and avenues, replacing them with such "revolutionary" names as "East Is Red Store" and "Anti-Revisionism Street." They proposed that traffic lights be reversed so that red would mean "go." They invaded the houses of "class enemies"—those who had been capitalists before 1949—and smashed all that smacked of the foreign, the "bourgeois," the old. They burned Western embassies, ransacked government offices, beat schoolteachers, and humiliated party officials at mass rallies. Chaos enveloped China's cities; in many places, the Army had to step in to prevent civil war.



"Destroy the Four Olds!" This poster was part of the campaign to eradicate "old ideas, old cultures, old customs, and old habits" that marked the start of the Cultural Revolution in August 1966.

After three years of "struggle and criticism" that saw large numbers of "revisionists" dismissed from the government and the party, the leaders of the Cultural Revolution set to overhauling China's social programs, economic policies, and political institutions to make them match Mao's egalitarian and populist ideals.

These efforts, led by the "Gang of Four," continued despite growing opposition until the Chairman's death in September 1976.* The ultraleftists had achieved some fundamental changes: the partial decentralization of the economy, the selection of college students on the basis of political purity rather than academic credentials, the training of "barefoot doctors" to tend the peasants of the vast Chinese countryside, the dispatching of millions of high school graduates and bureaucrats to rural

*The "Gang of Four"—Politburo radicals Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Jiang Qing (Mao's wife)—were arrested on October 6, 1976, less than a month after Mao's death.

areas for physical labor and ideological indoctrination, the appointment of popular representatives to serve on "revolutionary committees" at almost all levels of government.

Mao and his associates characterized the Cultural Revolution as the way to "expose and smash the renegades, enemy agents, and capitalist roaders" holding positions in the party. It would, they maintained, prevent the kind of "capitalist restoration" with which Nikita Khrushchev had allegedly defiled the Soviet Union in the late 1950s.²

What is more, they described the Cultural Revolution as the first of many such episodes. As late as August 1977, Hua Guofeng, Mao's successor as Party Chairman, endorsed the Cultural Revolution as "a momentous innovation which will shine with increasing splendor with the passage of time," promising his countrymen that more such revolutions would take place "many times in the future."³ Repeated turmoil, it was believed, would act as the purgatory required for China's ultimate entry into the socialist utopia.

Rose-Colored Glasses

What is so striking in retrospect is the degree to which the Chinese leadership's justification of the Cultural Revolution was accepted by academics in the West, and particularly in the United States. From Harvard to the University of Chicago to Berkeley, American scholars produced an enormous body of literature on the new movement in China. They never reached complete consensus, but the prevailing interpretation, at least after the first year or so, was highly favorable.

Three themes dominated their analyses.

The first was that the Cultural Revolution was a movement that deserved a fair hearing, even if it appeared to the casual observer to be irrational or even bizarre. A 1971 collection of scholarly essays on the Cultural Revolution, for example, concluded with the earnest admonition that "it is our present duty to try to understand what is occurring in the Chinese People's Republic. To do so, we must start by examining our own assumptions and perspectives."⁴

Harry Harding, 33, is coordinator of the Wilson Center's East Asia Program, on leave from his post as associate professor of political science at Stanford University. Born in Boston, he holds an A.B. from Princeton (1967) and an M.A. (1969) and Ph.D. (1974) from Stanford. He has written China: The Uncertain Future (1974) and Organizing China: The Problem of Bureaucracy, 1949-1976 (forthcoming).

Following this line of investigation, many analysts held that the Cultural Revolution was motivated not by fanaticism but by Mao's distinctive vision of a fair and just society. As one younger American China specialist then at Stanford put it, the Cultural Revolution was not a wrongheaded assault on the institutions and policies necessary for modernization but rather a reflection of Mao's belief that "bureaucracy and industrialization do not necessarily lead to an improved quality of life."⁵ Or, in the words of a more senior scholar at the University of Chicago, "In making the Cultural Revolution, Mao has been motivated by a noble vision. It is a vision of society in which the division involving domination and subjection will be blurred, the leaders will be less distinguishable from the led in status and privileges, and the led will take part more directly in the policy-making process."⁶

A second theme was that the reforms adopted during the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution were both equitable and effective.* The innovations that Radio Beijing called "new born things" were variously praised in America as ways of "breaking down elitism," of "bridging the gap between the people and their leaders," and of preventing China from "ossifying in the morass of bureaucratism and statism."⁷ One political scientist depicted the organizational changes of the Cultural Revolution as an attempt to fashion "flexible institutions which are responsive to popular interests, encourage direct mass participation, and are capable of controlling development on the basis of values meaningfully determined by the people."⁸

Third, most American scholars believed that the costs of the Cultural Revolution were tolerable, even necessary. One could not make an omelet without breaking eggs. They acknowledged the Cultural Revolution's violence but downplayed it, usually portraying the bloodshed as "sporadic" and "limited." Many analysts took pains to point out that the victims of the Cultural Revolution were seldom executed or imprisoned *en masse* as the victims of Stalin's great purges had been; they suggested that being sent to the countryside for "re-education" was not really so very unpleasant.

As these scholars saw it, the chief shortcoming of the Cultural Revolution was that it had not fully achieved its original high purposes. Its "promise was aborted," one specialist com-

*Indeed, China's Cultural Revolution was considered so promising that the American Academy of Political Science held a three-day conference in New York in October 1972, attended by some of the country's leading Sinologists, to consider (among other things) whether the Chinese experience might help the United States and other Western societies solve some of their own economic and social problems.

CHINA'S FRIENDS

Like Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and other communist countries, China has posed special problems of intellectual integrity for visiting Western newsmen and scholars. As Sinologist Orville Schell noted recently in the New York Times, let the reader beware:

Just as the Chinese have analyzed their own society, dividing it into class categories (peasant, landlord, intellectual, etc.), they have also sought to categorize their [American] guests, to glean out the "friends of China" and give them special treatment and assistance.

Such "friends" have often had a long-standing relationship with the Peking government, first expressed in the early years of Senator McCarthy and John Foster Dulles, when pro-Chinese sentiments took a measure of courage. At the same time, they were often rewarded by being allowed to visit the People's Republic while others were barred. In later years, as tours became commonplace, these "friends" were rewarded with permission to stay longer and to visit parts of China (such as Tibet and Xinjiang) not normally open to visitors.

Needless to say, along with these perquisites came certain unspoken obligations. A "friend of China" felt constrained from disappointing his host by writing anything critical or unflattering. Indeed, there was something about the presumption of this "friendship" (which was repeatedly toasted and extolled) that tended to draw a writer into what can only be described as a Chinese magnetic field. The constant incantation of the word "friendship" had a numbing effect on one's ability to see clearly and think independently. All the special treatment and effort extended on one's behalf seemed to require repayment. And the only kind of repayment that the Chinese would accept in return for their hospitality was ideological agreement.

The "friends" felt some fear of endangering Chinese acquaintances.

But one fear above all predominated: the fear that if one uttered or wrote "incorrect" thoughts, one would never again be allowed back. And to one degree or another, I think most of us who have written about China did capitulate to this fear.

[The Chinese] particularly capitalized on the eagerness of people on the Left to believe in the healing powers of "the revolution." And when the wreckage of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Gang of Four was finally cleared away [in 1977] many "friends of China" were left with a somewhat embarrassing bibliography of works supporting leaders who had been shed from the back of China like last year's skin from a reptile.

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plained in 1977, when its leaders were forced by rivals to compromise and retreat from principles.⁹ But a sweeping indictment of the whole movement did not necessarily follow. As another analyst argued, "Mao's assault did not succeed in totally eliminating privatism, self-interest, and elitism from Chinese society. . . . But should Mao be condemned for trying?"¹⁰

Since the Chairman's death in 1976, however, the Chinese themselves have done precisely that, to the silent consternation of many academics in America and the West. The Chinese leaders now say that their country was never in danger of "capitalist restoration," that Mao's view of the situation in China at the time "ran counter to reality," and that the "new born things" of the Cultural Revolution were impractical and utopian. The Red Guards were led by "careerists, adventurists, opportunists, political degenerates, and the hooligan dregs of society." The fullest official account, issued in October 1979, concludes that the Cultural Revolution not only was unnecessary, but also was a "calamity" for China, an "appalling catastrophe suffered by all our people."¹¹

Hearing from "Ghosts and Monsters"

The new Chinese leadership has also disclosed the startling human costs of the Cultural Revolution. In an interview with Yugoslav journalists early last July, Party Secretary-General Hu Yaobang estimated that 100 million Chinese — more than 10 percent of the country's population—suffered "unjustly" during the movement. The governor of Guangdong (Kwangtung) has charged that in his province alone, some 40,000 people died an "unnatural death" during the Cultural Revolution decade. The post-Mao leadership claims to have "rehabilitated" almost 3 million victims of the movement, but for many, such as former Party Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi, who died in prison in 1969, rehabilitation has occurred posthumously.

China's official repudiation of the Cultural Revolution invites another look. This time, however, we should be skeptical. The Chinese who today preach a new gospel condemning the Cultural Revolution are its principal surviving victims, the "ghosts and monsters" so often beaten, dunced, and denounced by the Red Guards. If we simply translate the revised authorized version into English, we will be repeating the mistakes we made in the late 1960s, when we took the official rationale for the Cultural Revolution at face value.

A sober re-evaluation, following neither the old nor the new Chinese line, would probably include the following conclusions:

China was clearly not on the verge of a capitalist restoration in 1966, but Mao still had much to worry about. Across China, as memories of revolution faded, party cadres were becoming arrogant mandarins, state bureaucracies were ossified and inefficient, and economic inequalities were increasing.

But Mao exaggerated the problem. Although his motives were almost certainly sincere, his vision was clouded. Old, ill, and suspicious, he magnified the threat to "revolutionary" values and placed his faith in an unreliable, uncontrollable mass movement.

Once Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, different groups acted from different motives. Contrary to the 1980 official line, many Chinese did, in fact, respond enthusiastically to the movement's initial stages. But many city youths joined the Cultural Revolution mostly because it suddenly gave them a license to exercise power, an opportunity to stay out of school, and an invitation to barnstorm the major cities of the country at state expense. And, not surprisingly in a gerontocracy like China's, many younger officials seized the chance to purge older men who blocked the way to promotion. No image of the late 1960s in China is more erroneous than that of the spontaneous uprising of the masses, striking boldly and unselfishly to combat injustice and bureaucratic insensitivity.

Mobilizing Hatred

In some matters, especially science, technology, and the arts, the effect of the Cultural Revolution was devastating; and China lost nearly a decade because of the anti-intellectual obscurantism of the movement's leaders. In other areas, however, such as university admissions and public health, the Cultural Revolution clearly recorded some egalitarian gains. The economic policies of the Cultural Revolution—particularly the goal of a "small but complete" economic system in every province, and the disparagement of material incentives—certainly produced some inefficiencies. But it is difficult to argue, as the current leadership does, that the economy grew more slowly during most of the Cultural Revolution decade than it did during the years just preceding it.

In fact, the dramatic recent changes in socioeconomic policy are less a repudiation of the Cultural Revolution, as Deng and his colleagues would have us believe, than a re-evaluation of some of the basic assumptions underlying Chinese economic planning since the early 1950s.

Officials now emphasize, variously in word and deed, pro-



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"Well, I can tell you this—something's burning!" was the caption of this 1967 cartoon by Pat Oliphant. China's Cultural Revolution baffled Western newspaper readers and fascinated scholars.

ductivity bonuses, the role of the market, expansion of light industry, production of consumer goods, and the opportunity for China's manufacturing enterprises to deal directly with one another rather than via the state bureaucracy. All this marks a significant departure from Mao's 1950s proposition that socialist development, in China as in the Soviet Union, required a centralized planned economy, an emphasis on heavy industry, and austerity in consumer goods.

Above all, an assessment of the Cultural Revolution would have to emphasize the enormous human costs of the movement. The most tragic of these now lie in the past: the cases of torture, imprisonment, persecution, and death that number in the tens of millions. But other costs continue, particularly the cynicism and disillusionment of a generation of young people whose idealism was first fostered and then suppressed, and the demoralization of many rank-and-file party and government officials.

Even more important, these costs were the predictable result of the methods employed in the Cultural Revolution—the consequences of the deliberate mobilization of hatred against ill-defined "class enemies."

In sum, a fair re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution boils down to two points: It was a movement whose ostensibly noble

purposes were distorted by the passions and personal ambitions of its activists; and its costs far outweighed the benefits of any of its reforms. As we have seen, this judgment sharply contrasts with the benign assessments offered by most Western academics and journalists during the late 1960s and early '70s. The remaining question, of course, is why this should be.

There are several explanations:

First, there was the assumption of many China specialists that there was a clear rationale behind the Maoist rhetoric that deserved sympathetic understanding. Yet sympathy often led American academics dangerously close to making apologies for the entire movement.

To complicate matters, Americans were barred from China during the Cultural Revolution's heyday. They got only limited glimpses of Chinese life, via strictly guided tours, once China began to open its doors to the West during the early 1970s. Thus, those who sought to understand the Cultural Revolution from afar had to rely on official Chinese information, Red Guard documents smuggled to Hong Kong, and wall posters translated by a few Japanese journalists in Beijing. All too often, American academics accepted the official line. Conversely, sources (such as refugee accounts) that exposed the darker side of the Cultural Revolution were usually dismissed as unreliable.

Rejecting Old Dreams

Last but not least, the Cultural Revolution in China coincided with another "cultural revolution," of sorts, in the United States. Those years brought the maturation of the post-war Baby Boom, the growth of the civil-rights movement, war in Vietnam, and considerable social upheaval and political turmoil. All this affected academic perceptions of China. The late 1960s saw the emergence of a contingent of young, often radical, Asia specialists in the universities who, like so many earlier generations of Americans, often projected their own dreams and aspirations onto China. It is difficult to forget the fervent (if somewhat hypocritical) applause with which one student audience at Stanford in the mid-1970s greeted the claim by a two-week visitor to China that there was no rape and little premarital sex in the PRC, supposedly because its young people "sublimated their sexual energies toward more exalted goals."

Today, we need a broad, sober reassessment of the Cultural Revolution by American academics, not only because the current Chinese leaders are revising official history, but because our earlier accounts were distorted and unrealistic. For China

scholars (as for other area specialists), the general lesson is plain: A sympathetic understanding of trends in foreign countries is no substitute for tough-minded analysis. As China embarks on its new course of "modernization," and as American contacts with Beijing multiply, our ability to see clearly the world's most populous nation in all its contradictions and complexity will become even more important.

NOTES

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