

China's Cultural Revolution

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Take a detailed look at China's '10 years of chaos' and its legacy

Exam links



AQA 2P The transformation of China, 1936–1997

Edexcel paper 2 option 2E.1 Mao's China, 1949–76

Edexcel paper 3 The making of modern China, 1860–1997

OCR Y317 China and its rulers 1839–1989

Mao Zedong (1893–1976)

One of the founding members of the CCP. Often called 'Chairman Mao' referring to his role as CCP party chairman after 1943. Led the CCP to victory in the civil war against Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist Party (Guomindang).

Mao Zedong and his 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' have gained international fame. In the People's Republic of China today, the Cultural Revolution is officially described as the '10 years of chaos'. Officially beginning in 1966, the country descended into violent turmoil. Pushed to the brink of civil war, Mao's last major mass campaign had profound social, cultural and economic consequences. These shaped China, its government and its citizens, for years after the chairman's death in 1976.

What was the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'?

Answering this question depends on perspective. Mao and his decisions were of central importance but, with a population of more than 700 million at the time, China's citizens experienced the Cultural Revolution in many different ways.

Age, locality, gender, class and political affiliation all mattered. National histories and elite-level events were important, but so were local and individual experiences.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership determined that the decade from 1966 to 1976 should be considered as '10 years of chaos'. This was politically useful. It suggested that the experience had been an aberration and not linked to anything that happened before 1966 or after 1976. The labelling exercise also obscures a full picture of events: the Cultural Revolution went through different phases, not all of which were similarly tumultuous.



Mao's grasp for power

Mao had lost some of his power after the Great Leap Forward. In 1962, he withdrew from many of his political posts. Other party leaders, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, began to work towards economic recovery. Yet Mao disagreed with many of their reform initiatives, worrying that China was taking the path of the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev. Mao wanted more revolution, not more party bureaucracy.

An enlarged meeting of the politburo on 16 May 1966 is often taken as the opening salvo of the Cultural Revolution. The official notification passed at the meeting legitimised the need for a Cultural Revolution. Only this could weed out those 'elements' within and outside of the party who had secret bourgeois and revisionist convictions. By June, big character posters and struggle sessions on the campuses of Beijing's universities had set the Cultural Revolution in motion.

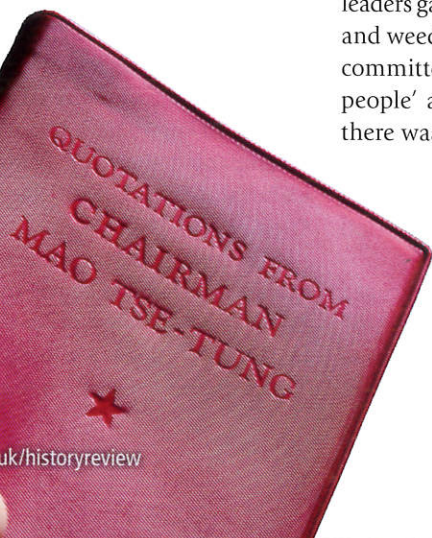
Except for senior officials, however, most people did not learn of the May notification until months or a year later. China's rural population was still in the middle of the socialist education movement, an entirely different campaign. To many outside China's capital, events in Beijing seemed like another localised campaign and nothing of national significance.

Red Guards smash the 'Four Olds'

This impression soon changed when the fervour spread. Mao had targeted China's youth and many readily responded. Red Guard groups formed across the country. Many of those who joined were born around 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established. They grew up learning in school, at home, in movie theatres and in the books they read about the heroic fights of previous generations who had made CCP victory possible. Now they wanted to be revolutionaries as well. Free train travel for millions of young people allowed them to swarm to Beijing. Mao greeted them in several mass rallies.

By August 1966, Mao had called out the campaign to 'Smash the Four Olds'. It attacked 'old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas'. What exactly 'old' meant was not clear. Was it everything dated

Mao's 'little red book' became an icon of the revolution



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before 1949? Given that Mao had said that bourgeois elements and ideas were still rampant across party and society, this included people, ideas and culture produced after 1949, by those previously thought of as proponents of socialism. What had once seemed socialist now could be bourgeois.

Descent into violence

Red Guards violently struggled against their teachers, against party officials and against intellectuals whom they denounced as 'black elements', 'monsters', 'demons' and 'capitalist roaders'. Schools and universities descended into chaos. Local governments stopped functioning. Torture was widespread and many died.

Soon, competing Red Guard groups attacked each other for being insufficiently 'red'. How red one was depended on different factors and on perspective: class label, family background, past actions...they could all matter. Waving and citing from their little red books (*Quotations from Chairman Mao*), people competed with each other to be most loyal to the 'great teacher, great leader, great supreme commander, great helmsman', Mao Zedong.

'Cleansing the class ranks'

By late 1967 even Mao worried that things were out of hand and sought to restore order. An estimated 12 million urban young people were sent 'up the mountains and down to the villages' and told to learn from the peasants. Many were sent to suburban or rural areas around their hometowns where they helped with the arduous work of farming, provided 'barefoot' medical support, and helped build schools. But Red Guards from cities such as Beijing, Tianjin or Shanghai, were sent far away to remote rural areas. The Red Guard generation became the generation of the 'sent-down youth'. Some of them would later remember it as the most traumatising phase in their life.

Revolutionary committees were set up to tame the Red Guards and restore order. Called 'rebels', they were mostly factory workers, and many of them had suffered at the hands of Red Guards. They had the support of the People's Liberation Army. Party leaders gave revolutionary committees orders to locate and weed out 'bad people'. Individual revolutionary committees decided the criteria for identifying 'bad people' and this varied between localities because there was no single national definition.

Purges

The majority of people who died during the Cultural Revolution did not die at the hands of the Red Guards. They were victims of this violent attempt to restore order, which lasted until early 1969, and in some areas until as late as 1971.

People's Republic of China Founded on 1 October 1949 by leaders of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao as a 'people's democratic dictatorship'.

Chinese Communist Party Established in 1921, following the May Fourth Movement and student protests against the Treaty of Versailles. Came to national power in 1949 after holding out for years in rural base areas and fighting the Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek during the Chinese civil war.

Great Leap Forward A utopian industrialisation drive between 1958 and 1961 aimed to help the People's Republic of China fast-track to socialism. It caused the worst man-made famine in Chinese history with an estimated death toll of some 30 million people.

Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) Vice-chairman of the CCP and president of the People's Republic of China. Leading figure in the CCP next to Mao. Purged during the Cultural Revolution and died in November 1969 in prison. Posthumously rehabilitated in 1980.

Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) General secretary of the CCP and vice premier. He was purged and rehabilitated and then purged again during the Cultural Revolution. Became China's most powerful party leader after Mao's death.

Lin Biao (1907–71)
Marshal in the People's Liberation Army and Mao's chosen successor and 'closest-comrade-in-arms'. Fell from grace after 1969 and died in a plane crash with his wife and son in 1971.

Hua Guofeng (1921–2008) Eventually Mao's chosen successor. Deputy governor of Hunan province who was quickly promoted to membership in the Politburo. Only leader in China to hold the consecutive titles of state premier, chairman of the CCP, and chairman of the central military commission for a few years after 1976.

Jiang Qing (1914–91)
Mao Zedong's fourth wife and former Shanghai actress. Major advocate of the Cultural Revolution and eventually denounced as a member of the 'Gang of Four'. Death sentence was commuted a few years after the trial. Committed suicide.

'Gang of Four' Label used in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution to attack Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, and her three closest colleagues. The term is attributed to Mao, who shortly before his death warned his wife that they should not form a 'Gang of Four'.

In successive waves of purges across China's many different provinces, thousands were detained, killed or committed suicide. By early 1969, cleansing had in some parts turned so violent that even the party leadership reproached committees telling them to calm things down. Moreover, it was in the more remote provinces of south, southwest and west China that violence was at its most brutal, and least reported.

The end, which was not the end

Mao's personality cult was at its apex by 1968. Red Guards had been fervent supporters of the cult. Yet the cult was most useful during the restoration of 'order'. Ritual study of Mao Zedong Thought became important to reasserting ideological control. Shrouded in secrecy, the Fourth National Party Congress convened in Beijing in April 1969. People's Liberation Army General **Lin Biao** was officially enshrined as Mao's successor.

The rise and fall of Lin Biao

Lin was a careful, sometimes even feeble, man. He had, however, cleverly promoted Mao's cult of personality and the little red book. Lin proclaimed Mao's words to be the 'spiritual atom bomb' that would make possible world revolution.

Lin Biao's star rose quickly during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, and it fell just as quickly. Already in 1969, Mao had begun to distrust the political ambitions of his 'closest comrade-in-arms'. At the same time, Mao worried about the possibility of impending war with the Soviet Union.

By 1971 Mao's allies, long wary of Lin's influence, presented Mao with evidence that Lin and his comrades were planning a coup. Lin's wife and son, fearing arrest, convinced him to flee the country by plane late one night. The plane crashed above the Mongolian steppe, reportedly on its way to the Soviet Union, leaving no survivors.

Most people only learned of Lin Biao's death 2 months later. He was thoroughly discredited in a national propaganda campaign. Anyone labelled a supporter of Lin Biao, be it at national or local level, was purged.

Reaching out

A form of normality returned in the early 1970s. Plenty of people listened to illegal radio broadcasts and read banned books. Black markets thrived and schools and universities slowly resumed regular schedules. Top-level party purges continued, but many citizens across the country had by then grown accustomed to weathering the occasional political storm.

During these later years, China broadly engaged with the wider world. Many were surprised when the People's Republic of China took over representation of China at the United Nations in October 1971. They

Questions



- What was the Cultural Revolution?
- What was Mao Zedong's role during the Cultural Revolution?
- What were the social effects of the Cultural Revolution?

were even more surprised when, in 1972, Mao sought rapprochement with the USA. This was confusing for the average Chinese citizen. Had they not, for decades, been taught that Americans were the worst kind of imperialists?

Contested memories

Mao died on 9 September 1976. On his deathbed, he chose **Hua Guofeng** as his successor. Hua was an unlikely candidate and did not enjoy wide support within the party apparatus. Within days, Hua and a small group of top leaders had **Jiang Qing** and her closest allies arrested and denounced as the 'Gang of Four'.

Hua's star quickly waned though. Within 2 years, Deng Xiaoping took over and initiated economic and some political reforms. These were passed at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978. This meeting has since become synonymous with the end of the Mao era and the beginning of 'reform and opening'. At the official end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng set China on a path to building 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

For ordinary citizens, the transition out of the Cultural Revolution was less smooth. In 1978, the party centre announced that people who had been arrested for alleged crimes in the previous 10 years could have their cases re-examined. 'Unjust, false and wrong cases' would be reopened. Plenty of people were rehabilitated, the verdicts against them overturned, or at least corrected. This did not work everywhere. Many local officials, worried that their own actions of previous years would come to light, stalled residents' attempts to seek redress.

'Gang of Four' trial

CCP leadership took two important measures to deal with the heavy legacy of the Cultural Revolution. They staged a nationally televised trial of the 'Gang of Four' in late 1980. A major propaganda campaign accompanied the trial. It blamed the evils of the Cultural Revolution on the criminal acts of Jiang Qing and her colleagues.

This legitimised the continued rule of the CCP, the same party that had begun the Cultural Revolution. At local level, many people who had participated in the revolutionary committees were labelled as 'Gang of Four' elements, accused of being part of

this conspiracy, and punished representatively. They became scapegoats in an attempt to re-write the past.

Writing Mao's legacy

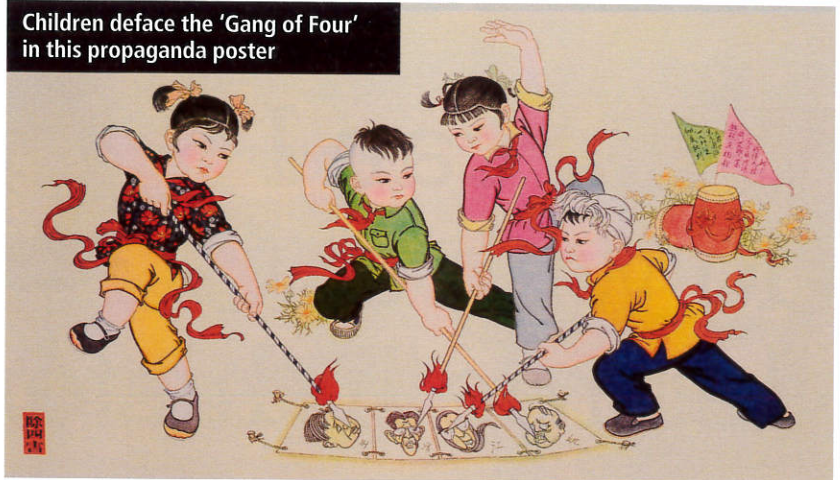
In June 1981, CCP leadership also issued the 'Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People's Republic of China'. This document circulated widely and people read it in study groups. Mao was held responsible for the Cultural Revolution, but he was also credited with the accomplishments of the Chinese revolution at large. He was, in short, 30% wrong and 70% right.

Shaping history

Yet people's memories were not so easily shaped. Together with the military crackdown on protesters in June 1989, the Cultural Revolution is the greatest trauma in the history of the CCP. It is not a taboo though, but much talked and written about. Very critical histories continue to be censored and are published outside of China. Some who participated in the violence of the Cultural Revolution have since apologised, but many have stayed silent. Many bear the weight of past experiences while they continue to live next to the families of those who wronged them or whom they wronged.

Former Red Guards, party members and intellectuals, mostly from China's urban areas, speak and write most about the Cultural Revolution today. Their stories are heard and they shape history. The experiences of workers and rural residents are seldom heard, particularly outside of China. Without them, however, any history and memory of the Cultural Revolution is incomplete.

Children deface the 'Gang of Four' in this propaganda poster



Further reading

- Morning Sun* — online documentary film and collection on the Cultural Revolution. Available at: www.morningsun.org.
- Red Color News Soldier* — a photographic exhibition of the Cultural Revolution. Available at: <http://colornewssoldier.com>.
- Brown, J. and Johnson, M. (2015) *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, Harvard University Press.
- Cheek, T. (ed.) (2010) *A Critical Introduction to Mao*, Cambridge University Press.
- Cook, A. (ed.) (2014) *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, Cambridge University Press.
- MacFarquhar, R. and Schoenhals, M. (2006) *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press.

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Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

Modern Chinese history has gained in popularity as the general public, especially in the West, have sought to know and understand more about how China has 'converted' from control under Mao to a (supposedly) more liberally administered state. Such interest is especially strong in schools and colleges, which is reflected in Chinese history taking a more prominent position in the specifications of all of the awarding bodies.

Jennifer Altehenger's article is useful as it provides an up-to-date overview of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It also makes two key analytical points: first, that the label '10 years of chaos' is misleading and was used by Chinese politicians after 1976 to depict the events as an aberration. Second, that the impact of the revolution can be viewed differently according to whose perspective is focused on. Students should bear these points in mind when forming their own views about the consequences of the Cultural Revolution.