

用革命和生产的新胜利迎接七十年代!



# The Cultural

## A People's History



**Mao Zedong's brutal campaign to purify Communist China, which began in the early 1960s, resulted in a decade of chaos that has left an indelible stain on the nation's politics, says FRANK DIKÖTTER.**

# Revolution

IN AUGUST 1963, Chairman Mao received a group of African guerrilla fighters. One of the young visitors, a tall, square-shouldered man from Southern Rhodesia, had a question. He believed that the red star shining over the Kremlin had slipped away. The Soviets, who used to help the revolutionaries, now sold weapons to their enemies. 'What I worry about is this', he said. 'Will the red star over Tiananmen Square in China go out? Will you abandon us and sell arms to our oppressors as well?' Mao became pensive, puffing on his cigarette. 'I understand your question', he observed. 'It is that the USSR has turned revisionist and has betrayed the revolution. Can I guarantee to you that China won't betray the revolution? Right now I can't give you that guarantee. We

are searching very hard to find the way to keep China from becoming corrupt, bureaucratic and revisionist.'

Three years later, on June 1st, 1966, an incendiary editorial in the *People's Daily* exhorted readers to 'Sweep Away all Monsters and Demons'. It was the opening shot of the Cultural Revolution, urging people to denounce those representatives of the bourgeoisie who were trying to lead the country down the road to capitalism. As if this were not enough, it soon came to light that four of the top leaders in the party had been placed under arrest, accused of plotting against Mao. The mayor of Beijing was among them. He had tried, under the nose of the people, to turn the capital into a citadel of revisionism. Counter-revolutionaries ►



had sneaked into the party, the government and the army. Now was the beginning of a new revolution in China, as the people were encouraged to stand up and flush out all those trying to transform the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

Who, precisely, these counter-revolutionaries were and how they had managed to worm their way into the party was unclear, but the leading representative of modern revisionism was the Soviet leader and party secretary, Nikita Khrushchev. In a secret speech in 1956, which shook the socialist camp to the core, Khrushchev had demolished the reputation of his erstwhile master Joseph Stalin, detailing the horrors of his rule and attacking the cult of personality. Two years later, Khrushchev proposed 'peaceful coexistence' with the West, a concept that true believers around the world, including the young guerrilla fighter from Southern Rhodesia, viewed as a betrayal of the principles of revolutionary communism.

**M**AO, WHO HAD MODELLED HIMSELF on Stalin, felt personally threatened by de-Stalinisation. He must have wondered how one man, Nikita Khrushchev, could have single-handedly engineered such a complete reversal of policy in the mighty Soviet Union, the first socialist country in the world. He arrived at the answer that too little had been done about culture. The capitalists were gone, their property confiscated, but capitalist culture still held sway, making it possible for a few people at the top to erode and finally subvert the entire system.

In short, a new revolution was required to stamp out once and for all the remnants of old culture, from private thoughts to private markets. Just as the transition from capitalism to socialism required a revolution, the transition from socialism to communism demanded a revolution, too: Mao called it the Cultural Revolution.

It was a bold project, one that aimed to eradicate all traces of the past. But behind all the theoretical justifications lay an ageing dictator's



Previous page:  
'Greet the 1970s  
with the new  
victories of  
revolution and  
production',  
poster, 1970;  
Red Guards rally,  
Beijing, 1966.  
Top right: Mao  
Zedong, c.1958.  
Right: Cultural  
Revolution  
propaganda  
poster, late 1960s.  
Far right: Mao's  
Little Red Book  
on sale in Shanghai.



# Mao combined grandiose ideas of historical destiny with an extraordinary capacity for malice. Insensitive to human loss, he nonchalantly handed down killing quotas

determination to shore up his own standing in world history. Mao was sure of his own greatness, of which he spoke constantly, and saw himself as the leading light of communism. It was not all hubris. Mao had led a quarter of humanity to liberation and had then succeeded in fighting the imperialist camp to a standstill during the Korean War.

**M**AO'S first attempt to steal the Soviet Union's thunder was the Great Leap Forward in 1958, when people in the countryside were herded into giant collectives called people's communes. By turning every man and woman in the countryside into a foot soldier in one giant army, to be deployed day and night to transform the economy, he thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors. Mao was convinced that he had found the golden bridge to communism, making him the messiah leading humanity to a world of plenty for all. But the Great Leap Forward was a disastrous experiment, as tens of millions of people were worked, beaten and starved to death.

The Cultural Revolution was Mao's second attempt to become the historical pivot around which the socialist universe revolved. Lenin had carried out the Great October Socialist Revolution, setting a precedent for the proletariat of the whole world. But modern revisionists



such as Khrushchev had usurped the leadership of the party, leading the Soviet Union back onto the road to capitalist restoration. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the second stage in the history of the international communist movement, safeguarding the dictatorship of the proletariat against revisionism. The foundation piles of the communist future were being driven in China, as Mao guided the oppressed and downtrodden people of the world towards freedom. Mao was the one who inherited, defended and developed Marxism-Leninism into a new stage, that of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

Like many dictators, Mao combined grandiose ideas about his own

historical destiny with an extraordinary capacity for malice. Insensitive to human loss, he nonchalantly handed down killing quotas in the many campaigns that were designed to cow the population. As he became older, he increasingly turned on his colleagues and subordinates, some of them long-standing comrades-in-arms, subjecting them to public humiliation, imprisonment and torture. The Cultural Revolution, then, was also about an old man settling personal scores at the end of his life. These two aspects of the Cultural Revolution – the vision of a socialist world free of revisionism, the sordid, vengeful plotting against real and imaginary enemies – were not mutually exclusive. Mao saw no distinction between himself and the revolution. Mao was the revolution.

There were many challenges to his position. In 1956, some of Mao's closest allies, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, had used Khrushchev's secret speech to delete all references to Mao Zedong Thought from the party constitution and criticise the cult of personality. Mao was seething, though he had little choice but to acquiesce. The biggest setback came in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, a catastrophe on an unprecedented scale directly caused by his own obstinate policies. At a conference held in 1962, as some 7,000 leading cadres from all over the country gathered to talk about the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's star was at its lowest. Rumours were circulating, accusing him of being deluded, innumerate and dangerous. Some of his colleagues may have wanted him to step down, holding him responsible for the mass starvation of ordinary people. His entire legacy was in jeopardy. Mao feared that he would meet the same fate as Stalin, who was denounced after his death. Who would become China's Khrushchev? The Cultural Revolution, then, was also a long and sustained effort by Mao to prevent any party leader from turning against him.

## The Early Years (1962-66)

FOUR YEARS BEFORE the formal start of the Cultural Revolution, Mao went on the attack. In the summer of 1962 he launched a Socialist Education Campaign to raise revolutionary vigilance and clamp down on economic activities that took place outside the planned economy. During the last year or so of the Great Leap Forward, control over the economy had relaxed and parts of the countryside had started to de-collectivise in an effort to ward off starvation, as some of the land was handed back to individual farmers. These practices now came under attack, as 'Never Forget Class Struggle' became the slogan of the day. Liu Shaoqi, who had supported a measure of economy leniency to help the country get out of the famine in 1961, threw his weight behind the Socialist Education Campaign. As second-in-command, he soon veered more to the left than Mao. According to Liu, a third of the power in this country was no longer in the party's hands: the talk was all about 'taking power back from class enemies'. Liu presided over one of the most vicious purges ▶

## Mao was particularly concerned with educating the young, seen as the heirs to the revolution

Mao at a Communist rally in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, c.1965. Below: Red Guards and high school and university students parade through Beijing at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, June 1966.

in party history, punishing over five million party members. Whole provinces were accused of taking the 'capitalist road'.

But repression alone would not suffice to counteract the pervasive effects of the counter-revolutionary ideology that had taken hold in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. Mao was particularly concerned with educating the young, seen as the heirs to the revolution. Students at all levels were educated in class hatred and made to study the works of Mao Zedong. Under Lin Biao, the army fostered a more martial atmosphere, in tune with the Socialist Education Campaign. In primary schools, children were taught how to use airguns by shooting at portraits of nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and US imperialists. Military 'summer camps' for students and workers were organised in the countryside. Before the Cultural Revolution began, young people were ready to take on imaginary class enemies.

### The Red Years (1966-68)

ON JUNE 1ST, 1966 the *People's Daily* published an editorial entitled 'Sweep Away all Monsters and Demons'. That same day, celebrated as Children's Day, a poster that had appeared a week earlier on the campus of Peking University was also widely publicised. It alleged that the university leaders were Khrushchev-type revisionists. Students had undergone years of indoctrination during the Socialist Education Campaign and were itching to lash out. They started scrutinising the backgrounds of their teachers, accusing some of being 'bourgeois elements' or even 'counter-revolutionaries'. But some went too far, taking to task leading party members. They



were punished for their activities by work teams sent by Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, put in charge of the Cultural Revolution in the Chairman's absence from Beijing. In mid-July, Mao returned to the capital. Instead of supporting his two colleagues, he accused them of suppressing the students and running a dictatorship. 'To Rebel is Justified' became his battle cry and rebel students did. Red Guards appeared in August, donning improvised military uniforms, carrying the Little Red Book. They vowed to defend the Chairman and carry out the Cultural Revolution. They declared war on the old world and went on the rampage, burning books, overturning tombstones in

cemeteries, tearing down temples, vandalising churches and attacking all signs of the past, including street names and shop signs. This was Red August.

The Red Guards also carried out house raids. In Shanghai alone, a quarter of a million homes were visited and all remnants of the past seized, whether ordinary books, antique bronzes or rare scrolls. 'Mao's Little Generals' also attacked those suspected of being enemies of the revolution, forcing some of them to swallow nails and excrement as jeering crowds looked on. One teacher killed himself after being set upon by students who forced him to drink ink. Another was doused in petrol and set alight. Others were electrocuted or even buried alive. By late September, more than 1,700 had been killed in Beijing alone.

**M**AO WISHED TO PURGE the higher echelons of power and had turned to young, radical students instead, some of them no older than 14, giving them license to denounce all authority and 'Bombard the headquarters'. But party officials had honed their survival skills during decades of political infighting and few were about to be outflanked by a group of screaming, self-righteous Red Guards. Many deflected the violence away from themselves by encouraging the youngsters to persecute ordinary people suspected of being class enemies. Some cadres even managed to organise their own Red Guards, all in the name of Mao Zedong Thought and the Cultural Revolution. In the parlance of the time, they 'raised the red flag in order to fight the red flag'. The Red Guards started fighting each other, divided over who the true 'capitalist roaders' and revisionists inside the party were. In some places, Red Guards besieged the local party committee. In others, party activists and factory workers rallied in support of their leaders, leading to a stalemate.

In response, the Chairman urged the population at large to join the revolution. Just as Mao had incited students to rebel against their teachers months earlier, he unleashed ordinary people against their party leaders in the autumn of 1966. The result was a social explosion



Above, from left: Mao, Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai and Zhou Enlai idealised in a propaganda poster, 1966.  
Left: Mao with Lin Biao, c.1965.



on an unprecedented scale, as every pent-up frustration caused by years of communist rule was released. There was no lack of people who harboured grievances against party officials. There were all those who had been reduced to starvation during the Great Leap Forward in the countryside. In the cities there were workers living in abject conditions, some barely able to feed their families. And, before too long, the victims of earlier campaigns also started clamouring for justice, including those punished during the Socialist Education Campaign. But the 'revolutionary masses', instead of neatly sweeping away all followers of the 'bourgeois reactionary line', also became divided, as

different factions jostled for power and started fighting each other.

By January 1967 the chaos was such that the army intervened, asked to push through the revolution and bring the situation under control by supporting the 'true proletarian left'. As different military leaders supported different factions, all of them equally certain that they represented the true voice of Mao Zedong, the country slid into civil war. Soon people were fighting each other with machine guns and anti-aircraft artillery in the streets.

Still, the Chairman prevailed. He was cold and calculating, but also erratic, whimsical and fitful, thriving on willed chaos. He improvised, bending and breaking millions along the way. He may not have been in control, but was always in charge, relishing a game in which he could constantly rewrite the rules. Periodically he stepped in to rescue a loyal follower or to throw a close colleague to the wolves. A mere utterance of his decided the fates of countless people, as he declared one or another faction to be 'counter-revolutionary'. His verdict could change overnight, feeding a seemingly endless cycle of violence in which people scrambled to prove their loyalty to the Chairman. ▶

抓革命 促生产 促工作 促战备。



Placards of Mao paraded through Beijing, c.1970.

## Over the next three years, revolutionary party committees turned China into a garrison state, with soldiers overseeing schools and factories

### The Black Years (1968-1971)

THE FIRST PHASE of the Cultural Revolution came to an end in the summer of 1968 as new, so-called 'revolutionary party committees' took over the party and the state. They were heavily dominated by military officers, concentrating real power in the hands of the army. They represented a simplified chain of command that Mao relished, one in which his orders could be carried out instantly and without question. Over the next three years they turned the country into a garrison state, with soldiers overseeing schools, factories and government units. At first, millions of undesirable elements, including students and others who had taken the Chairman at his word, were banished to the countryside to be 're-educated by the peasants'. Many had no fixed abode. In some provinces, this was the case for roughly half of all exiled students, as they were forced to live in caves, abandoned temples, pigsties or sheds. Most went hungry. Sexual abuse was rife: thousands were raped by local bullies in the province of Hubei alone, including girls as young as 14. Besides students, entire families, in particular the most destitute and vulnerable ones, seen

as a burden on the state, were removed to the countryside and left to their own devices.

Then followed a series of brutal purges, used by the revolutionary party committees to eradicate all those who had spoken out at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The talk was no longer of 'capitalist roaders', but of 'traitors', 'renegades' and 'spies', as special committees were set up to examine alleged enemy links among ordinary people and party members alike. Anyone with a foreign link in their past became suspect. In Shanghai alone, close to 170,000 people were harassed in one way or another. More than 5,400 committed suicide, were beaten to death or executed. In Guangdong province as a whole, one estimate puts the body count at 40,000. In Inner Mongolia, close to 800,000 people were incarcerated, interrogated and denounced in mass meetings. Torture chambers appeared across the province. Tongues were ripped out, teeth extracted with pliers, eyes gouged from their sockets, flesh branded with hot irons. Although less than 10 per cent of the population in Inner Mongolia were Mongols, they constituted more than 75 per cent of the victims.

After a nationwide witch-hunt came a sweeping campaign against

Below: Red Guards and students brandish Mao's Little Red Book as they parade through Beijing, 1966; a kindergarten child thrusts a spear into an effigy labelled 'US bad'; children aim toy pistols at a caricature of US President Lyndon Johnson.



corruption, further cowering the population into submission, as almost every act and every utterance – inadvertently poking a hole in a poster of Mao, questioning the planned economy – became potentially criminal. In some provinces up to one in 50 people were implicated in one purge or another.

These years were also the high point of a huge industrial project called the Third Front. It aimed at nothing less than the building of a complete industrial infrastructure in the country's interior. Paranoid about a possible enemy attack from either the Soviet Union or the United States, the one-party state carried out a colossal programme to move about 1,800 factories to the most remote and inhospitable areas of the hinterland, far away from the populated plains in the north of the country and the provinces along the coastline. Since about two thirds of the state's industrial investment went to the project between 1964 and 1971, it constituted the main economic policy of the Cultural Revolution. It is probably the biggest example of wasteful capital allocation made by a one-party state in the 20th century. In terms of economic development, it was a disaster second only to the Great Leap Forward.

**S**ELF-RELIANCE also became the guiding principle in the countryside, as everybody had to emulate Dazhai, a people's commune located on a sterile plateau of loess in north China. Dazhai, in effect, was a return to the spirit of the Great Leap Forward, as everything in the village was collectivised once again. The Dazhai model was imposed by the army, as soldiers whipped up the workforce, using the villagers as foot soldiers to increase output. In a province like Zhejiang, a quarter of all production teams reverted to the radical collectivisation of the Great Leap Forward: pigs were slaughtered, private plots confiscated, every tree deemed collective property. Under the threat of war with either the Soviet Union or the United States, the emphasis was on grain and terraced fields appeared everywhere in imitation of Dazhai. Neither climate nor topography mattered, as lakes were filled, forests cleared and deserts reclaimed in desperate attempts, from the Mongolian steppes to the swamps of Manchuria, to emulate Dazhai. Dogmatic uniformity was imposed across the country.

Mao was wary of the military, in particular Lin Biao, who had taken over the ministry of defence in the summer of 1959 and pioneered the study of Mao Zedong Thought in the army. Mao had used Lin Biao to launch and sustain the Cultural Revolution, but the marshal in turn exploited the turmoil to expand his own power base, placing followers in key positions throughout the army. He died in a mysterious plane crash in September 1971, bringing to an end the grip of the military on civilian life. The army was in turn purged, falling victim to the Cultural Revolution.

## The Grey Years (1971-1976)

By now, the revolutionary frenzy had exhausted almost everyone. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, many ordinary people, wary of the one-party state, had offered no more than outward compliance, keeping their innermost thoughts and personal feelings to themselves. Now many realised that the party had been badly damaged by the Cultural Revolution. In the countryside, in particular, if the Great Leap Forward had destroyed the credibility of the party, the Cultural Revolution undermined its organisation. In a silent revolution, millions upon millions of villagers surreptitiously reconnected with traditional practices as they opened black markets, shared out collective assets, divided the land and opened underground factories.

Take, for instance, Yan'an. Set amid dusty, sandstone-coloured hills in northern Shaanxi, it was one of the most hallowed places in communist propaganda, where Mao and his guerilla fighters had





Clockwise from right: agricultural workers in Dazhai, 1971; the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, 1989; Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping (left) with Kim Il Sung, leader of North Korea, 1978.

established their temporary capital during the Second World War. When a propaganda team arrived in Yan'an in December 1974, it found a thriving and sophisticated black market. One village had abandoned any attempt to wrench food from the arid and parched soil, specialising in selling pork instead. In order to fulfil their quota of grain deliveries to the state, they used the profit from their meat business to buy back corn from the black market. Local cadres supervised the entire operation. Elsewhere in the province, entire people's communes had divided up collective assets and handed responsibility for production back to individual families. In many cases, local cadres took the lead, distributing the land to farmers. Sometimes a deal was struck between representatives of the state and those who tilled the land, as the fiction of collective ownership was preserved by turning over a percentage of the crop to party officials. Across the country, from north to south, people raised ducks, kept bees, grew fish, baked bricks and cut timber, always in the name of the collective. In parts of Zhejiang, by late 1971 some two thirds of all villagers were independent – or 'go-it-aloners' as they were known at the time. Much of this was done with the tacit consent of the local authorities, who rented the land to individual households in exchange for a portion of the crop.

**M**ANY DID SO out of sheer necessity, in order to stave off the starvation caused by the planned economy. But in less deprived regions, too, the market thrived. In the county of Puning in Guangdong, around 30 markets covered the needs of more than a million people. They attracted local farmers, artisans and traders, each with goods in their hands, on their back or in a cart. Pedlars offered colourful illustrations from traditional operas, books from the imperial and republican eras and collections of traditional poetry that had escaped the clutches of the Red Guards. There were itinerant doctors offering their services. Storytellers used wooden clappers to mark the most dramatic moments of their stories. Blind people sang traditional folk songs for a few alms. Touts stood outside restaurants selling ration coupons. In some markets, organised gangs travelled up and down the coast, going all the way to Shanghai to trade in prohibited goods. A few went as far as Jiangxi to procure tractors, acting on demand from local villages keen to mechanise.

Some wealthier villages not only planted profitable crops for the market, but also began establishing local factories. There were also underground factories, dispensing altogether with the pretence of collective ownership. In Chuansha, just outside Shanghai, where



**Even before Mao died in September 1976, large parts of the countryside had already abandoned the planned economy**



villagers were mandated by the state to grow cotton, the industrial portion of total production reached 74 per cent by 1975, a rate of growth far superior to the years of 'economic reform' after 1978.

Even before Mao died in September 1976, large parts of the countryside had already abandoned the planned economy. It was to be one of the most enduring legacies of a decade of chaos and entrenched fear. No communist party would have tolerated organised confrontation, but cadres in the countryside were defenceless against a myriad of daily acts of quiet defiance and endless subterfuge, as people tried to sap the economic dominance of the state and replace it with their own initiative and ingenuity.

Deng Xiaoping, assuming the reins of power a few years after the death of Mao, briefly tried to resurrect the planned economy. In April 1979 he even demanded that villagers who had left the collectives rejoin the people's communes. But soon he realised that he had little choice but to go with the flow. By 1980, tens of thousands of local decisions had placed 40 per cent of Anhui production teams, 50 per cent of Guizhou teams and 60 per cent of Gansu teams under household contracts. The people's communes, backbone of the collectivised economy, were dissolved in 1982.

Not only did the vast majority of people in the countryside push for greater economic opportunities, but they also escaped from the ideological shackles imposed by decades of Maoism. Endless

campaigns of thought reform during the Mao era produced widespread scepticism even among party members themselves. The very ideology of the party was gone and its legitimacy lay in tatters. But political freedoms were not to follow. The leaders now lived in fear of their own people, terrified of allowing them to speak again, determined to suppress their political aspirations. In June 1989, Deng personally ordered a military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing, as tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square. The massacre that followed was a display of brutal force and steely resolve, designed to send a signal that still pulsates to this very day: do not query the monopoly of the communist party of China.

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