

## **China's Cultural Revolution**

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### 1. Themes and Goals

This unit uses memoirs of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to broaden students' understanding of political activism and the motivations behind political campaigns. By studying the Cultural Revolution in the context of the sociology of mass mobilization, students will gain an awareness of the power behind politics and ideology. Through personal accounts and scholarly writings this unit shows how leaders use ideas, ideology, and "information" (i.e. propaganda) to mobilize people for their own aims. It also illustrates how these forces can work in the everyday lives of normal people. In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese politics under Mao, students will hopefully understand the substantial power of ideology and a charismatic leader in motivating people towards destructive ends. They should also be able to think more rigorously about where and how values and social relations are shaped and molded — values and culture are not static and can be substantially influenced by politics.

One objective of the unit is to cultivate a critical attitude toward political and cultural campaigns regardless of their national context. Students may also gain insight into contrasting ideas of political mobilization, ideological manipulation, and the complex politics of mass movements. Clearly these themes are central to understanding Chinese politics from 1949 to 1978, but they can also help students ask broader questions about political movements and the ability of ideology to mask power.

The Cultural Revolution ranks among the largest political movements of modern history, and its professed aim was to renovate the cultural values of the Chinese nation. Populist in ideology, the movement was directed against "intellectual" and "bourgeois" elements. By targeting urban intellectuals, the Revolution channeled the energies of the masses in the service of Mao Zedong's efforts to re-assert firm control over the nation and the ruling party. The result was a cult of personality so effective that it rivaled familial ties — traditionally seen as the bedrock of social relations in China — in its claims on people's loyalties. Ideology began to transform everyday life on a massive scale.

In part, people were motivated to participate in the Revolution by their love of Chairman Mao. As Liang Heng recounts in his memoir, *Son of the Revolution*, “Mao” was among the first words he learned to say as a child. This mythical “Mao” was produced through the nation’s modern educational and media systems, and he quickly developed into a god-like figure whose actions and apparent beneficence were beyond reproach. In this context a new “truth” emerged which demanded that people reconsider their own actions and look critically at those around them. As revolutionary ideals developed into orthodoxy, zealous converts began to denounce friends, colleagues and relatives as traitors to Mao and the Revolution.

The ethical and political questions raised by such actions are relevant beyond East Asia. Students often ask “How could they [the Chinese] behave this way?” without reflecting critically on the abundance of similar events in other national contexts. In this connection, comparisons with Nazi Germany, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, the Ukraine during Stalin’s reign, or contemporary North Korea is often helpful. Perhaps equally enlightening is a discussion of the ways such dynamics work in the United States. What did McCarthyism share with the Cultural Revolution? How did it differ? Has the “war on terror” played on similar themes? One could assign selections from Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* to help with such comparisons.

## 2. Audience and Uses

This unit is derived from work done in a class on Chinese Politics. It could also be used in the following courses:

- History of Communism
- Chinese history
- Sociology (mass movements)
- Comparative politics
- Political theory

This unit could also fit well with theoretical discussions about political theory, capitalism, totalitarianism and democracy. Further readings might include Karl Marx’s *On Society and Social Change*, and Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

## 3. Instructor's Introduction

*Recommended Reading:*

Dreyer, June Teufel. *China’s Political System: Modernization and Tradition*. New York: Paragon House, 2003.

This is one of many good textbooks on Chinese politics under Mao. It provides enough information to get a full picture of what’s going on without including too much detail. Instructors could read as much or as little of the chapters about China from 1949 to 1978 as they

wished, but the section on the Cultural Revolution is quite short and is noted below as an essential reading for students.

*Brief overview:*

There are several motives that scholars discuss for Mao's decision to encourage the Cultural Revolution. On one level the Revolution was a way for Mao to regain control over decision-making in China. After the failures of the Great Leap Forward (a massive effort in the late 1950s to develop industry and agriculture that resulted in famine and starvation), Mao had more or less stepped aside and Liu Shaoqi was making more of the political and economic decisions. In supporting and instigating the Cultural Revolution Mao was able to reassert his primacy, and he quickly moved to arrest certain of his political rivals, including Liu. One can also see the Revolution as Mao's attempt to keep bureaucrats and cadres from getting too complacent or powerful. The masses were empowered as a check on official power. Lastly, one might argue that the Cultural Revolution was a result of Mao's personal philosophy about the need for continual revolution and his skillful creation of a totalitarian regime where any criticism or independent thought was to be extinguished. Mao distrusted the urban, educated elite, and these were among the people who suffered the most during the Cultural Revolution.

*Detailed background notes:*

1960-1965:

- There was a general feeling in the early 1960s that the Great Leap Forward was an unmitigated disaster.
- In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward Mao removed himself (or was pushed) from day-to-day decision-making. Liu Shaoqi became President of the People's Republic of China (head of the bureaucracy).
- The Sino-Soviet split was another problem. Khrushchev came to power in the Soviet Union during the 1950s, and as a way of legitimizing his own power, he denounced Stalin for creating a cult of personality. He was also critical of the Great Leap Forward and argued that the Chinese party's focus on the peasantry was misguided. By the early 1960s, there was an obvious rupture in Sino-Soviet relations.
- By the mid 1960s, Mao was convinced that there were some substantial problems in China. He thought that the urban population was being coddled and favored over peasants and that something was necessary to spur on a more egalitarian and participatory society. He believed that Chinese intellectuals were paying lip service to Marxism-Leninism but that they were not really revolutionary enough. These people were "revisionists" in Mao's eyes, that is, they were still prone to bourgeois and capitalist ways. Further class struggle was necessary if the country hoped to achieve true socialism.

### 1965-1968:

- Mao's motivations for launching the Cultural Revolution can be seen as:
  - By re-igniting revolution it would clear the way for socialism in China.
  - He thought it a shame that the youth of China had not had the opportunity to fight in the Revolution. The Cultural Revolution would thus give them a chance to experience revolution.
  - In the mid 1960s Mao wanted to regain his position within the CCP, so the Cultural Revolution was in part motivated by a power struggle at the very top of the Party.
- Mao mobilized students and young adults from throughout China to serve as "Red Guards," or agents of the Revolution. This movement started when schools invited children to mimic the official criticisms of "revisionism" in China. They were instructed by teachers to think of instances where they had come across counter-revolutionary thoughts or actions. At first students copied the criticisms published in the newspaper. Then students began to get bolder and singled out their teachers and others they felt had slighted them.
- Meanwhile, work units were encouraged to do likewise. Sometimes a work team would be sent to the countryside or to schools or work places to oversee and spur on the process.
- Groups of students began forming to take up Mao's call to advance socialism and ferret out counterrevolutionaries. A party meeting in 1966 praised these student groups and the Red Guards. The Party sanctioned the mass uprisings that had begun to occur throughout China.
- Mao even wrote a big character poster at Beida (Beijing University) calling for students to attack the party establishment: "Bombard the headquarters!"
- Why were students involved and why did they respond so zealously?
  - Out of idealism and love for Mao
  - Out of the need to belong to something
  - Venting frustration at the school system and inequalities that favored the children of cadres
  - Thrill-seeking, possibly
- Youth with bourgeois class backgrounds were excluded and persecuted by the Red Guards.
- Children of officials often formed their own Red Guard groups and were branded as "royalists" for protecting their parents.

### Mid-1968:

- Mao was frustrated by the chaos and called in the Red Army to restore order in urban areas.
- Work came to a standstill in offices, factories, and schools. Mao's political aims had been achieved as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were purged from top leadership positions and vehemently denounced.
- Red Guard units were disbanded and students were sent to the countryside and/or mobilized into the People's Liberation Army.

#### 1969-1971:

- The next stage of the Cultural Revolution was marked by the appointment of Lin Biao as Mao's "close comrade in arms and successor." The Gang of Four (Jiang Qing, Wang Hongwen, Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao) and the radicals who had helped Mao shape the policies of the Cultural Revolution had consolidated power at the top.
- This period was relatively calmer than the previous two years. Many people had been sent to labor in the countryside and some areas were more peaceful than others. Peasants had to cope with an influx of students and bad elements. Many radicals who were "sent down" to the countryside tried to bring the Cultural Revolution to rural areas, with varying degrees of success.
- The People's Liberation Army's power increased during this period and there were conflicts at the top levels of leadership between military leaders and the radicals led by the Gang of Four.
- Lin Biao was killed in 1971 in a supposed plane crash after he and some associates supposedly attempted a coup against Mao. They were reportedly trying to escape to the USSR after the coup attempt failed.
- Reports of the coup attempt and Lin's death led to increased skepticism of the party and distrust of national level policies. People were baffled that Lin could be loved by Mao and then turn around and plot to kill him.

#### 1972-73:

- The radical Gang of Four, led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, made politics the criteria for advancement. Ideological dogma was taught in schools. Again, those from "good" class backgrounds were favored over those with "rightist" or bourgeois backgrounds.

#### 1973-76:

- This period was marked by a power struggle at the top between the Gang of Four and moderates who wanted to turn down the political heat. Really this was a fight for who would take over when Mao died. Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated. Moderates seemed to have Mao's acceptance as new policies were drafted for economic development and an open attitude towards science and investment emerged.

#### 1976:

- Mao died and the moderates, led by Deng Xiaoping, began to consolidate power over the Gang of Four (they were arrested and put on trial in 1977) and other hardliners.

#### 4. Student Readings

- \*\*\* Most Important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

##### A. Memoirs

Any one of the following books can be used. The student activities below were originally written for *Son of the Revolution*, but they work for the other books as well.

- \*\*\* Heng, Liang and Judith Shapiro. *Son of the Revolution*. New York: Knopf, 1983.

*Son of the Revolution* is Liang Heng's personal account of what his family experienced during the Cultural Revolution. As a newspaper reporter (an intellectual) his father was a frequent target of criticism and his mother chose to divorce his father rather than be associated with such a suspect person. Liang's book describes the anguish and conflict that he and his two sisters suffered as they came of age within a family and country in the midst of massive social upheaval.

- \*\*\* Gao, Yuan. *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Gao experienced the Cultural Revolution as a student in a Red Guard unit. His father was a low level political official and fell in and out of favor during the chaos. Gao describes the exhilaration and anguish of students caught up in the tide of revolution: Gao felt powerful and gleeful when his faction was on top, and sullen, angry, and tormented (physically and emotionally) when his faction was persecuted. Gao's account makes it clear that almost all his classmates, family members, teachers, and fellow villagers ultimately were victims of a mass movement run amok.

- \*\*\* Da, Chen. *Colors of the Mountain*. New York: Random House, 1999.

Da Chen's family was labeled part of the landlord class, and so during the Cultural Revolution his father and grandfather were repeatedly taken away to labor camps and made to write self-criticisms. The rest of the family was made to suffer as social outcasts and objects of criticism and persecution. Chen fell in with a group of outcasts who become a surrogate family and community for him. He also took English lessons on the sly from an elderly Chinese Baptist woman on the edge of his village. Ultimately, Chen triumphed when the Cultural Revolution wound down and politics receded from the forefront of every aspect of life.

## B. Background Reading

- \*\*\* Dreyer, June Teufel. *China's Political System: Modernization and Tradition*. New York: Paragon House, 2003. pp. 129-136.

Provides a concise overview of the Cultural Revolution.

- \* Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

This reading is very helpful both for students with little or no knowledge of Chinese history or those seeking to learn the broader context of a particular person or event in Chinese history. Spence gives a useful description and explanation of events in China from the end of the Ming Dynasty in the 1600s through the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Students should use this book as either a starting point for their inquiry into areas of interest about China, or as a reference tool to look up particular events, ideas, and people in Chinese history.

## C. Mao's Writing

The following essays by Mao are relevant to discussions of the Cultural Revolution:

- Schram, Stuart, ed. *Chairman Mao Talks to the People; Talks and Letters: 1956-1971*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1975. Essays #16-18, 22.

This is a volume of primary documents from Mao. There are speeches, letters, essays, and personal notations, all of which have been translated into English.

- \*\* "Talk to Leaders of the Centre." Pages 253-255.  
[also available at [http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9\\_58.htm](http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9_58.htm)]
- \*\*\* "Speech at a Meeting with Regional Secretaries and Members of the Cultural Revolutionary Group of the Central Committee." Pages 256-259.  
[also available at [http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9\\_59.htm](http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9_59.htm)]
- \*\*\* "A Letter to the Red Guards of Tsinghua University Middle School." Pages 260-261.  
[also available at [http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9\\_60.htm](http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9_60.htm)]
- \* "Talk at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group." Pages 275-276.  
[also available at [http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9\\_71.htm](http://www.maoism.org/msw/vol9/mswv9_71.htm)]

#### D. Film and Website

- \*\* *Morning Sun*. Prod. and Dir. by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, 2003. 115 min. Available for rental (\$125) and purchase (\$295) through National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) <<http://www.naatanet.org/>> See also [www.morningsun.org](http://www.morningsun.org)

This documentary is an attempt to reconstruct for the contemporary audience the emotional and psychological climate during the Cultural Revolution. While it does not provide a chronological history of the Cultural Revolution, the film examines the impact of the period as a whole on the people who lived through it. The companion website features an impressive collection of photos, music, and other primary source materials from the period.

#### 5. Student Activity

The following questions can serve as paper topics or discussion questions.

1. During the Cultural Revolution how was “reality” different from the rhetoric of the various phases of the campaign? In answering this question please examine the different perspectives of at least three of the following groups impacted by the Cultural Revolution: peasants, cadres/officials, students, red guards, and intellectuals.

*Things to highlight in discussion and/or look for in student papers:*

Discuss the ideals of the revolution and of the slogans and great character posters and compare with the reality of what was actually going on. For example, Red Guards were supposed to hold up the ideals of chairman Mao and to seek out those who were not loyal enough party members. “Evidence” of disloyalty could be something as simple as a defaced picture of Mao. Also, works of literature (or art or music, etc.) that were once examples of good socialist thinking (like books by Lenin) were sometimes later seen as “evidence” of corrupt, improper thinking and thus could get the owner into trouble. By asking students to discuss the different experiences of various groups of people in society (peasants, cadres, students, etc.), encourage students to note who was empowered by the Cultural Revolution and if there were fundamental shifts in who became powerful and why. Discuss the relationship between society’s values, power, and privilege.



2. How were urban and rural areas impacted differently by the Cultural Revolution? Did different groups in society (cadres, intellectuals, workers, red guards, students) play different roles in urban and rural settings?

*Things to highlight in discussion and/or look for in student papers:*

Again, look for students to understand who plays what role in the Revolution and who has power in society. Look for insights into the urban/rural cleavages that exist in China and how this was impacted by the Cultural Revolution. Also, students should note that a person's location (in the city or in the countryside) will impact their behavior and the role that they play in society.

3. One of the things that occurred during the Cultural Revolution was a breakdown of the family structure (this happened more in urban areas than rural ones). Do you think that this was part of the goal of the leaders of the Revolution or was it an unintended consequence? What purpose(s) might have been served by destroying families?

*Things to highlight in discussion and/or look for in student papers:*

This question really interests students, and they are often disturbed by the fact that there isn't a clear answer to the question of whether the breakdown of the family that occurred during the turmoil was part of Mao's goal or whether it was an unintentional consequence. In order to really answer this question students need to discuss Mao's larger goals of ending the old Confucian order in China and of breaking down old loyalties to family and kin. Under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule, one's loyalty was to the Party and to Mao, not to family units. However, there is no specific "evidence" that Mao wanted to break apart nuclear or extended families. Students could argue either side, saying that a clear consequence of sending parents for re-education and middle school students out the countryside was the destruction of the family, hence this must have been part of the goal. Or, they could argue that these were just attempts to remake society's values and loyalty, and if family bonds were severed, it was just an unfortunate consequence.

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