

CHAPTER 1

A Concise History of the Cultural Revolution

(Extract from *Violence, Periodization and Definition of the Cultural Revolution: A Case Study of Two Deaths by the Red Guards*, by Joshua Zhang and James Wright.)

Although different views exist in regard to when the CR ended, an agreement on its beginning has generally been reached. On May 16, 1966, the Politburo of the CPC issued an important document, prepared with Mao's personal supervision and known as The May 16 Notification (五一六通知). The notification summarized Mao's ideological justification for the CR, laying out the theoretical basis and practical policies for the revolution to come. Its main idea was that there were enemies of the Communist cause within the Party itself who had to be purged. Its issuance marked the onset of the CR.

Rome was not built in a day and neither was the CR. Its origins lay far in the past, years before The May 16 Notification, as such renowned scholars as Roderick MacFarquhar (1974; 1983; 1997) have demonstrated. An understanding of these historical origins of the CR can be sought in many different perspectives, but since they lie beyond the scope of this book, we do not join the discussion here. Instead, we will comment on a few closely related issues that are more germane to our present concerns.

Encouraged by his early successes in the transformation of private ownership in industry to state controlled enterprises in 1956, and by the increase in agricultural and industrial production that occurred in 1957, Mao initiated the Great Leap Forward Campaign (大跃进) in 1958. The goal of the Great Leap Forward was to increase production to levels much higher even than had been achieved in 1957. A popular slogan among the Chinese people at the time was, "Seven years to surpass the UK and eight or ten more years to surpass the USA!" Mao, the architect of the Communist takeover of China, had no doubt that this could be accomplished using Communist economic principles.

The initial efforts of the Great Leap Forward were concentrated on the iron and steel industries. Iron and steel are the materials of progress and so the country attempted to make iron and steel on a massive scale. Smelting furnaces could be seen everywhere, even in remote rural areas. In the meantime, a mass mobilization of peasants into collective communes was undertaken. Peasants were herded to communal dining halls to eat meals from big pots and made to destroy their own pots, pans and woks. Private ownership of anything was to be avoided; collectivism was the way forward. An illusion that China was rapidly entering a pure, virtuous communist era prevailed throughout the country.

The Great Leap Forward turned out to be a total failure. The iron and steel made from backyard furnaces were of low quality and mostly useless. Peasants were hurt by collectivism, resulting in reduced

agricultural production. Local authorities, however, covered up problems and exaggerated production numbers. For example, one village reported an average grain harvest of 120,000 jin per mu¹ in 1958. One jin = 500 kilograms and there are about 6 mu per acre so the claim was 120,000×500×6 kg = 360,000,000 kg of grain per acre. Converted to a better known English measure, that would be roughly a million bushels per acre. The all-time record yield for wheat is about 61 bushels per acre. The claim was self-evidently preposterous and yet local leaders managed to convince the top (national) leaders that the peasants were hoarding food, and the top leaders were so gullible that they worried what they were going to do with so much food.

Mao, following what he had been told by his provincial leaders, steadfastly believed that peasants were lying about their harvest and that reactionaries were hoarding grain and other food. So in another blunder, he ordered a series of “anti-concealment” efforts that led to more purges and more violence. Party leaders went from village to village searching for hidden food caches, torturing and even beating to death peasants suspected of lying.

Flagrantly miscounted yields coupled with bad weather and other policy errors lead to the Great Famine (大饥荒), a three-year period (1959–1961) when food shortages were severe and mass famine engulfed China, cities and countryside alike. Millions of people (estimates are as high as 30 million) died of starvation in these three years. Years later, when the peasants in Anhui Province were asked to recall their sufferings before the Liberation, they would instead spontaneously complain of their ordeals during the Great Famine. Almost every village in that province suffered mass deaths from starvation during the famine.

Inside the CPC, it was an open secret that Mao’s policies themselves were to blame for the famine and resulting misery, and as a result, the Great Leap Forward was formally suspended in 1962. Liu Shaoqi took over as State Chairman. Even earlier, after the Lushan Conference in 1959, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, the moderates and conservatives within the Party, had taken control of the economy.

Although he remained as the nominal head of the CPC, Mao retreated into seclusion. In January 1962, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC hereafter) held an expansion session in Beijing. Since the number of the attendees was 7,078, the session was also known as the 7000-Person Meeting (七千人大会). At that meeting, Liu Shaoqi stressed that the setbacks in the previous years were caused mainly by human errors, not by natural disasters. This allegation implied that Mao should be held responsible for the failed radical policies of the past. Seriously challenged by Liu and his allies, Mao’s prestige within the Party dropped drastically.

While Mao lost control over economic decision making, he concentrated on ideological issues. Mao,

¹ One jin equals 500 kilograms. One mu is about 0.165 acre, so one acre equals 6.07 mu.

who fancied himself a great theorist and an idealist, developed his “theory of the continuous revolution,” believing it to be a major contribution to Marxist-Leninist theory. Mao dreamed of a Utopian society with no exploitation and no oppression. This theory helped Mao in his eventual comeback to power.

In addition to internal turmoil, disasters, purges, and famine, the rift between China and the Soviet Union had widened ever since Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and his policies in 1956. By 1963, the rift had become an open fight. The CPC openly denounced Khrushchev’s Soviet Union, publishing a series of open letters criticizing Soviet revisionism and capitalist restoration. The international debate provided Mao with his chance to restore his power and prestige within the Party and to reassert himself as the rightful leader of the Chinese Revolution. But Khrushchev’s ouster in 1964 also alarmed Mao because it made him fearful of his own political future.

Mao’s re-ascension to power in China demonstrated his skill at the game of politics. He did not initiate a head-on offensive but rather chipped away at his opponents within the party. He first aimed at Liu’s allies and his allies’ allies. Mao’s first salvo was an attack on a historical drama written by Wu Han, the deputy mayor of Beijing and an ally of the Mayor, Peng Zhen, who was in turn an important ally of Liu Shaoqi. Entitled *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (海瑞罢官), the play (or so Mao alleged) was an allegory for Mao’s dismissal of Peng Dehuai (the minister of the Defense Department) who criticized Mao sharply for his policies in 1959 Conference. Wu Han, the author of the play, was soon ousted and his ally and supporter, Peng Zhen, followed shortly thereafter. Peng Zhen sensed his imminent danger and fought relentlessly to protect himself and his allies but to no avail.

Before long, Peng Zhen, General Luo Ruiqing (chief of staff of the People’s Liberation Army [PLA hereafter]), Lu Dingyi (Director of the Propaganda Department), and Yang Shangkun (the director of the Party’s General Office), were being denounced as the Peng-Luo-Lu-Yang Anti-Party Clique. Liu Shaoqi agreed to denounce his loyal former allies in support of Mao. Unlike Peng Zhen, Liu didn’t fight to protect his allies because either he failed to realize the danger or didn’t have courage to fight. The fall of Liu’s important allies one after another brought Mao back to the leadership of the CPC and paved the way to the formal start of the CR. The May 16 Notification was the final green light. Mao’s “continual revolution” was abruptly restarted after a five-year hiatus.

On May 25, 1966, a big-character poster² by Nie Yuanzi, a philosophy lecturer at Beijing University, and other leftists denounced the Beijing University’s administration as being under the control of bourgeois counter-revolutionaries. The poster was nationally publicized on June 1. The poster was praised by Mao and publicized countrywide. The key charge was that the Beijing University administration was

² These are large handwritten, wall-mounted posters that have been used in China since imperial times to express protest, dissatisfaction, or propaganda, or sometimes just communications.

suppressing students' revolutionary fervors. Classes were soon being interrupted in universities and schools of the 7th to 12th grades throughout the country. Students started to engage themselves in the effort to expose counter-revolutionary teachers and administrators in the schools. Soon enough, CPC control over the schools collapsed and chaos followed.

With Mao's approval, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping dispatched Work Groups (工作组) to universities and schools to maintain control. Some scholars believe that this was a trap for Liu and Deng set by Mao. With the inertia from their past experiences, the Work Groups stood with the Party committees of the schools (not with the students) and soon dampened revolutionary fires by labeling a lot of the protesting teachers and students as rightists or counterrevolutionaries. No one dreamed that Mao's real target was Liu Shaoqi himself. In late July, the CCCPC decided to withdraw the Work Groups. In early August, Mao wrote a big-character poster entitled Bombard the Headquarters (炮打司令部) alleging that there was another reactionary headquarters, a bourgeois one, within the party and calling upon the Chinese people to fight against this new counter-revolutionary threat. This fight became the CR.

A Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (a.k.a. The Sixteen Points, 十六条) was passed by the CCCPC on August 8, 1966. This was the first document in which the term "Cultural Revolution" appeared. The Decision defined the CR as a campaign to fight against the "capitalist roaders" in power (those who showed a tendency to knuckle under to pressure from "bourgeois forces"), to criticize counter-revolutionary bourgeois academic authorities and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes, to transform education, literature and art, and to resist and reform all other parts of the superstructure that did not fit the socialist economic agenda. The explicit purpose was to facilitate the consolidation and development of the socialist system. The Decision also called for daring above all else and for the mobilization of the masses. Liu Shaoqi's rank in the Party fell from second to eighth and Marshal Lin Biao rose into his place.

Coinciding with the struggle at the top level of the Party, the Red Guard movement developed swiftly down at the bottom. The Red Guards were fanatical students who formed a paramilitary revolutionary vanguard; they are best described as an armed revolutionary youth organization. By August 18, 1966, a mere ten days after the Decision, Mao received more than a million Red Guards from the country in Tiananmen Square. From August to November of the same year, Mao received more than 11 million Red Guards. Encouraged by their great leader, Red Guards spread the spirit of rebellion across the country. Mao needed these young, naïve, fanatical rebels to break through the establishment system within the Party. To fan the fires of the revolution, the Great Link-Up Campaign was initiated. Millions of Red Guards travelled around the country free of charge to spread their fervors and exchange revolutionary experiences and ideas.

Red Guards were hell-bent to destroy the “old fours,” namely, old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. A wave of destruction in the realms of culture and religion ensued and soon spread to the destruction of humans— that is, to what were known as the Five Black Categories, the “bad guys” of the Revolution—landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, “bad elements” and rightists. Thousands of five black category members were brutally killed during August and September, 1966. The period was known as the Red Terror of August (红八月).

The rebellion in schools soon spread to other sectors of the society such as industry, agriculture, commerce, government, and even the armed forces. As with the American McCarthyists of the 1950s who saw Communist infiltration everywhere in the United States, the Red Guards and their powerful patrons found anti-Communists, counter-revolutionaries, and bourgeois rightists everywhere in Chinese society. On January 3, 1967, the Shanghai municipal government was taken over by rebellious workers.³ The new government was first called the Shanghai People’s Commune, drawing inspiration from the revolutionary Paris Commune that ruled Paris for a brief period in 1871. The name was later changed to the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee. Other provinces and cities followed suit and as they did, the old Party establishment collapsed. The Cultural Revolution Group of the Central Committee (CRGCC hereafter), composed entirely of Mao’s loyalists, such as his wife Jiang Qing, took over the Politburo. Mao’s return to power was complete.

As the rebellion developed, more and more people joined in, including those conservatives who had been sympathetic to and stood with Party leaders at various levels (the capitalist roaders as they were called at that time). In the scramble for power, the rebellion broke into factional struggles. The PLA soldiers and officers were sent out to support the leftist rebels in industry and agriculture, and for military control and training. Unexpectedly, some PLA factions fought with other factions, clashes escalated into brutal violence, and brutal factional violence became commonplace across the country.

Violence involved not only fists and other hand weapons but also guns and even home-made tanks. As the violence escalated, China was dragged to the verge of a civil war. Seeing that the situation was creeping out of control, Mao sent out Workers’ Propaganda Groups to universities and schools to put a halt to the violence in late July, 1968. (A month later, rebellious young people in America took to the streets of Chicago to disrupt the Democratic National Convention; a month earlier, rebellious young people in Paris attempted the May Revolt of 1968. For a time, it seemed as though the earth itself was aflame with youthful revolutionary passions.)

Having finished their historical mission (or just having run out of steam), unbridled young rebels

³ Rebellious workers are not considered Red Guards, which term is normally used only to refer to the student rebels in schools and universities.

became a serious social problem as universities and factories were closed to them. Mao and his allies had largely consolidated their power and no longer needed the Red Guards. In December 1968, most of the students in grades 7 through 12 were ordered to leave for the countryside to be re-educated by poor and lower middle class peasants. It was known as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Campaign (上山下乡).

On April 1, 1969, the 9th Party Congress was held. Marshal Lin Biao was elected as the vice chairman of the Party, thus becoming the number two figure in the Party. Lin was also proclaimed as the universally recognized successor to Mao in the Party Constitution. Rising with Lin were his allies. Many of his subordinates became members of the CCCPC and even the Politburo, foreshadowing a factional divide between Lin's military followers and Mao's civilian allies.

In March, 1970, in the preparation for the 4th People's Congress, Mao expressed his idea to eliminate the position of the State Chairman. Other members of the Politburo, including Lin Biao, thought otherwise. In August, 1971, Mao openly accused Lin of harboring ambitions to usurp the leadership of the Party and State. The only evidence of this was that Lin supported the idea of keeping the position of State Chairman. The split of Mao and Lin was inevitable. On September 13, 1971, it was "officially reported" that Lin's plane crashed in Mongolia as he was attempting to defect to the Soviet Union.

According to some scholars (Wang Nianyi and He Shu, 2001), the opening of the divergence between Mao and Lin was at the 2nd Plenary Session of the 9th Party Congress in Lushan held in late August, 1970. Lin's ally, Chen Boda, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, launched an attack on Zhang Chunqiao, Mao's loyal follower and also a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, over the evaluation of Mao's legacy. Because of his extreme radical ideas, Zhang failed to win the support of many attendees at the plenary session. Mao was surprised and also infuriated to see his loyal follower so isolated. He suspected the conspirator behind the scene was Lin. Mao removed Chen Boda from his position and asked Lin's allies to make self-criticisms, implying a warning to Lin. Lin defiantly refused to acknowledge his "error." Some scholars (Jin Qiu, 1999; Ding Kaiwen, 2004; Gao Hua, 2006) have raised doubts about the Lin Biao Incident, but have only come up with more questions. A reinvestigation of the Lin Biao Incident has repeatedly been called for in recent years.

In late August, 1973, the 10th Party Congress was held. Wang Hongwen, a worker rebel in Shanghai, was elected as the vice chairman of the Party, seemingly a successor to Mao. A new loyal follower to Mao was added. Four of Mao's most loyal followers, Wang Hongwen, Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyan (the latter a Marxist theorist), formed a closed group known as the Gang of Four (四人帮).

Deng Xiaoping, once accused as the number two leader of the bourgeois headquarters, was elected a member of the CCCPC by the congress. He had already resumed a vice-premier position in March 1973 to

help Zhou Enlai, the premier, to restore the country's failing economy.

With Lin's fall, the only opponent left to match Mao's loyal allies was Zhou Enlai. Under the leadership of Jiang Qing, the Criticize Lin and Criticize Confucius Campaign (批林批孔) started with an aim to weaken Zhou's political influence. Now the struggle was between the radicals headed by the Gang of Four and the moderates and conservatives headed by Zhou and Deng. The radicals controlled the mass media and propaganda network and the moderates and conservatives had other sectors under their control.

With Zhou's failing health, Deng became more important and powerful. Deng was effective in restoring the country's economy and social order. But his policies were seen by Mao as dangerous—as threatening to the CR. In late 1975, Mao launched a campaign against Deng to Counter-attack Rightist Deviationist Winds of Reversal of Verdicts (反击右倾翻案风 sometimes more loosely translated as the Campaign to Criticize Rightist Deviationism). Clearly, as the immediate target of this campaign, Deng Xiaoping had lost Mao's favor.

Zhou Enlai's death on January 8, 1976 triggered another wave of conflict. With the unyielding confrontation between the two factions—the conservatives headed by Deng Xiaoping and the radicals led by Jiang Qing—Mao surprised all observers by choosing an outsider, Hua Guofeng, to fill in the position of Premier left open by Zhou. Hua became the man second only to Mao in the Party hierarchy.

The Chinese people had grown tired of ten years of turmoil and unrest. The resentment against the CR finally exploded on April 5, 1976 in the form of an outpouring of popular support for the moderate Zhou Enlai as the now-dead Zhou was being mourned. The incident is known as the April 5 Tiananmen Square Incident (四五天安门事件). Deng was removed from his position once again. The moderates and conservative seemingly sustained a devastating defeat.

Mao died on September 9, 1976, leaving the highest position of the Party undecided. With a note left by Mao to him which said “When you are handling affairs, I will feel relieved,” Hua Guofeng became the number one leader of the Party. It was widely noted that Hua Guofeng was an unskilled politician. The Gang of Four did not feel that Hua could be an obstacle to their ambition to take over the highest position in the Party. But Hua sensed the danger from the Gang and chose to align himself with influential elders in the Party. The Gang of Four were arrested in a bloodless coup.

With the highest power in hand, Hua laid out his policy, which became known as the Two Whatevers (两个凡是). The policy, that is, was to resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave. Hua's policy won wide support within the Party and without as well, strengthening his top position in the Party in the immediate days after Mao's death.

Deng Xiaoping wrote a humble letter to Hua, expressed his willingness to work for him. In the letter, Deng swore that he would never reverse the previous verdict against him, a promise he soon broke. With the support from the elders in the Party, Deng came back to power swiftly.

In August, 1977, the 11th Party Congress was held. At that Congress, Hua announced that the “first” CR had successfully ended. Hua stressed that class struggle would continue to be the main task; the end of the CR did not mean the end of struggle between the classes. However, Hua’s policy didn’t survive long. On December 18, 1978, the far-reaching and influential 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CCCPC was held. Deng won more support in the Party and Hua had to undertake “self-criticism,” admitting his Two Whatevers policy was wrong. The Plenary Session marked the beginning of China’s economic reform. Hua was forced to step down in February 1980.

On June 27, 1981, a Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China was adopted by the 6th Plenary Session of the 11th CCCPC. The resolution stated that the CR brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Party and the Chinese people. This was the CPC’s final verdict on the CR, that it was a disastrous failure. Admittedly, some scholars, rebels, and others might have different views, but few modern Chinese citizens look back on the days of the CR with fondness or nostalgia.