RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: THE GREAT PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION

China in Mid-1966: "Cultural Revolution" or Struggle for Power?

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No observer of the Chinese political scene will argue with a frontpage headline in the *New York Times* of June 26, 1966, which said that a "titanic struggle" was taking place in China. This struggle has thrown China into turmoil and has already claimed the political careers of at least one senior Politburo member, two top Party propaganda officials (one of them an alternate member of the Politburo) as well as numerous Party and non-Party functionaries—and the full extent of the purge has yet to come to light. The Chinese themselves, with characteristic restraint, have proclaimed that "this great cultural revolution has no parallel in scale, in sweep, in strength or in momentum."[1] Whatever the final outcome of this "revolution," it can be safely said that the Chinese political landscape will be considerably altered after it has run its unpredictable course.

Beyond this bold prediction, there is little that can be stated with certainty in mid-1966. In many respects the "titanic struggle" is still a titanic riddle. Despite the deluge of words which the Chinese have poured out to explain the current events, or perhaps because of it, they have been remarkably successful in obfuscating some of the major reasons, issues and alignments underlying these events. In contrast with previous purges and campaigns, there appears to be no one logical interpretation which will explain all the developments of recent months; an interpretation that seems reasonable for one aspect of the campaign breaks down when applied to another. The most that an outside observer can do at present (and this, one suspects, applies to all but the top leaders in China as well) is to raise a few questions and try to supply some speculative and tentative answers.

[1] "Raise High the Great Red Banner of Mao Tse-tung's Thought and Carry the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution Through to the End," *Chieh-fang Chün Pao* (*Liberation Army Daily*), June 6, 1966; in *Peking Review*, No. 29 (July 15, 1966). For a very good survey and analysis of the campaign, on which I have drawn, see John Gittings, "The Chinese Puzzle; Cultural Revolution and the Dismissal of P'eng Chen," *The World Today*, July 1966, pp. 275-284. Most of the key articles relating to the final and most important stage of the campaign have been reproduced in *Peking Review*, Nos. 18-29. For a chronological survey prepared by the *New China News Agency* see *Peking Review*, No. 25 (June 17, 1966), pp. 15-18.

What then are we witnessing in the China of mid-1966? Is it, as the Chinese claim, a "cultural revolution," designed to eradicate once and for all the remnants of bourgeois ideology? Or is it, as some observers maintain, largely a cynical power struggle for succession in which ideology is used only as a window-dressing? If it is both, what is the connection between them? What is the meaning of the unusual role played by the army? What shifts have taken place in the power relations between the top leaders? This, of course, does not exhaust the list of questions that arise, but an attempt to answer them, though based much more on conjecture than on concrete evidence, may suggest a few clues to what is going on in China.

"Cultural revolution" or struggle for power? The current campaign can only be both. This does not mean that the former was started as an ideological cloak for the latter. What it means is that at some point after its initiation, an ideological rectification campaign (it turned into a far-reaching "cultural revolution" only in its final and intensified stage) became inextricably intertwined with questions of power within the top leadership. While it is fairly easy to see the reasons for the launching of a rectification campaign, it is much more difficult to understand why and at what point it turned into a struggle for power.

The motive behind the "cultural revolution" has been explained many times by the Chinese, and there is no reason not to accept their explanation at face value. Put simply, it is rooted in the obsessive fear of the ageing leaders that unless a constant effort is made to keep the flame of revolution burning, the country is in danger of succumbing to the manifold temptations of "revisionism," which are inherent in the changing environment. The main safeguard against this is to instil in the Chinese citizen the proper ideological outlook, for then he will never change his proletarian colours no matter how his environment changes. For this reason, the principal thrust of the effort to protect the revolution from "revisionism" must be in the realm of ideology.

This, of course, is the chief reason for the endless ideological campaigns as well as for the great importance which the Party attaches to men who labour with their heads rather than with their hands—men who are in a position not only to think for themselves but also to influence the thinking of others. Mao has always deemed it highly important to reform these men, most of whom come from bourgeois backgrounds, and to turn them into true sons of the proletariat. That he has been less than successful is evidenced by the need for periodic rectification campaigns against them, of which the current "cultural revolution" is the most recent.

This "cultural revolution," according to the Chinese, originated at a meeting of the CCP Central Committee in September 1965 when Mao

"pointed to the need to subject reactionary bourgeois ideology to criticism." [2] While it is unlikely that the dimensions which the campaign was to take (quite apart from its power struggle aspects) were foreseen by the leadership, it is clear that it was intended to be a major affair.

The reasons for this are not hard to find. Ever since the failure of the Great Leap Forward the leadership has been worried that the subsequent retreat and relaxation, grudgingly accepted as a necessary expedient to repair the damage done by the Leap, would if unchecked push the country toward "revisionism." As soon as the economic situation took a turn for the better, the Party began to turn on the ideological heat and to tighten the political reins. The signal for this came at the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee in September 1962 when Mao renewed the call for "class struggle." This was followed by the wide-ranging movement for socialist education and several related campaigns.

Whatever the success of socialist education in the rural areas, it is clear that in the intellectual community the movement encountered stiff and stubborn resistance. Not only did the intellectuals take advantage of the limited liberalisation of 1960–62 to criticise the Party and its policies of the Great Leap Forward, but they resisted subsequent efforts to reform them. Mao himself was moved to comment on their obstinacy. In 1963, it is now revealed, he said that in the cultural field ". . . very little had been achieved so far in socialist transformation. . . . Wasn't it absurd that many communists showed enthusiasm in advancing feudal and capitalist art, but no zeal in promoting socialist art." [3] In 1964 Mao complained that most of the associations of literary and art workers and their publications ". . . had not carried out the policies of the Party and had acted as high and mighty bureaucrats, had not gone to the workers, peasants and soldiers and had not reflected the socialist revolution and construction. In recent years they had even slid to the verge of revisionism. If serious steps were not taken to remould them, they were bound at some future date to become groups like the Hungarian Petofi Club." [4]

It is precisely to prevent such a development that it was decided in September 1965 to launch a rectification campaign against intellectuals. A combination of several factors probably accounts for the timing of the campaign, but one of them may be linked with Mao's growing awareness that he will not be at the helm much longer. This apparently explains his increasing preoccupation with ensuring the proletarian purity of the future leaders and with rooting out any bourgeois influence which may corrupt the younger generation.

[2] "Raise High," p. 18.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 17.
[4] *Ibid.*

It should be stressed at this point, however, that although Mao is undoubtedly not in good health, there are no firm grounds for maintaining, as some interpretations have, that he is dying or enfeebled, and that the current campaign has been directed by his successors who have already taken over the mantle of leadership. Available evidence seems to bear out the Chinese assertion that Mao is not only the guiding spirit behind the campaign but also its guiding hand. First, Mao's lengthy absence from public view (from November 1965 to May 1966) was not his first withdrawal from the limelight; he could have directed the nation's affairs behind the scenes, or he could have been ill but still in control. Second, the Chinese revealed that at some point in the campaign Mao intervened personally in an attempt to overcome the intransigence of the Peking Party Committee, and there is no reason to believe that this is a fabrication. Finally, his reappearance in May and thereafter as well as his much-publicised swim in the Yangtze hardly suggest that Mao was on his deathbed during the critical stages of the campaign.

If the campaign had run its course according to what was apparently its original intent it could be interpreted largely as a "cultural revolution"—as Mao's most far-reaching and perhaps final attempt to purify China's recalcitrant intellectual community. Most of its features could be subsumed under this interpretation. The wild charges flung at the offending intellectuals could be attributed to the leadership's penchant for exaggeration and perhaps to the development of paranoic tendencies in Mao (it should be noted, however, that the charges would probably not have been so severe had the movement not become intertwined with a power struggle). The leading role of the Army could be explained by its stature as the most revolutionary organisation on the Chinese scene and by the growing prominence of its commander, Lin Piao. The removal of numerous officials could be ascribed to Mao's desire to get rid of any functionary who could be suspected of so much as harbouring, let alone voicing, bourgeois thoughts. Even the sacking of two of the Party's top propagandists, Lu Ting-yi and Chou Yang, who seemingly have been loyal Maoists, could perhaps be explained by Mao's anger at the officials who were directly responsible for the intellectuals but could not make them toe the line. What cannot be explained by this interpretation, however, is what until now has been the most significant feature of the campaign: the purge of Politburo member P'eng Chen. For, judging by what is known about P'eng, it is impossible to accept most of the charges hurled (indirectly) at him.

P'eng has a well-deserved reputation for toughness and orthodoxy both in internal affairs and in China's foreign relations, and while anything is possible, it is highly improbable that he has suddenly

become a "counter-revolutionary revisionist," guilty of just about every anti-Party crime in the catalogue.[5] Even in the extremely unlikely event that P'eng did advocate more moderate policies, this in itself is hardly sufficient reason for the leaders to break ranks and to react so vehemently against one of their colleagues. Another member of the top élite, Ch'en Yun, disagreed with Mao's policies yet he has been treated very differently. What this suggests is that most of the charges levelled at P'eng Chen can only be a cover for other sins which were deemed serious enough to warrant such a severe reaction. And if differences over policy issues can be ruled out, these sins can only be connected with questions of power.

Questions of power inevitably involve the question of succession. While Mao still appears to be the ultimate source of national policy, his immediate subordinates can hardly be unaware that the day when he will pass from the scene is rapidly drawing closer. Consequently, there must be much jockeying and jostling among them in anticipation of that day. The potential successors, or at least those who consider themselves as such—and P'eng Chen certainly fell into this category—have probably devoted a good deal of their efforts in the recent period to consolidating their bases of power. P'eng's power base was the Peking Party organisation which he has ruled since 1949 and which he must have jealously guarded against outside interference. This was apparently his cardinal crime. The Party's charge against him on this point seems to be the most credible one. As *Hung Ch'i* put it: "The small handful of anti-Party elements in the former Peking Municipal Party Committee regarded the Peking municipality as an 'independent kingdom,' watertight and impenetrable, and nobody was allowed to intervene or criticise it—it was like a tiger whose backside no one dared to kick."[6] If so, then it may be assumed that it was when the ideological rectification campaign threatened his bailiwick that P'eng defied the Party and resisted. This may have been the point when the "cultural revolution" became inseparably linked with a struggle for power among the top leaders.

The evidence for this is circumstantial but suggestive. Although it is unlikely that P'eng opposed a rectification campaign against intellectuals as such, he may have refused to allow it to get too close to home. Viewed in this light, there are a few indications to substantiate the Party's charge that "some of the principal leading members of the former Peking Municipal Party Committee . . . stubbornly opposed and

[5] "Thoroughly Criticize and Repudiate the Revisionist Line of Some of the Principal Leading Members of the Former Peking Municipal Party Committee," *Hung Ch'i* (*Red Flag*) editorial, No. 9, 1966; in *Peking Review*, No. 28 (July 8, 1966), pp. 30-32.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 32.

sabotaged that great cultural revolution." [7] First, the fact that the campaign against Wu Han, the intellectual vice-mayor of Peking, was launched in November, some two months after Mao is said to have initiated it, and then in the Shanghai rather than the Peking press, raises the question whether, from the beginning, P'eng opposed the singling out of one of the men in his administration as the prime target of the campaign. This may also suggest that the very singling out of Wu Han was a move on the part of P'eng's opponents, with Mao's blessing, to get at P'eng himself. It is, however, difficult to credit such an interpretation because it assumes that the entire campaign has proceeded according to plan, which it obviously has not, and because there are other solid reasons for choosing the strongly individualistic Wu Han as a symbol for the campaign.

Second, Wu Han's unwillingness to make the kind of confession that was obviously expected of him, as well as the refusal of other members of the Peking administration and its three organs to follow the lead clearly laid down by the Party strongly suggests that they knew they had a powerful protector. Third, and perhaps most important, the men who were the initial targets of the campaign had no actual power; it is inconceivable that they could constitute any real threat to the régime, and the charges that they planned to usurp the leadership would be utterly absurd unless viewed in the context of a power struggle between the top leaders. Moreover, these charges were made only in the final and highly intensified stage of the campaign, when it obviously became clear that P'eng had to go.

The question then is: why did P'eng act as he did? Surely it was not because he agreed with the views for which the members of his organisation were criticised. Surely it was not out of personal loyalty, for although this could be a factor, it is hardly adequate to justify such drastic behaviour. The answer, it seems, cannot be separated from the question of succession. With this issue in the air, P'eng may have decided to protect his power base at all costs. He undoubtedly could have saved himself by sacrificing some of his subordinates, but at this stage of the power game an admission that the Peking organisation harboured " revisionists " may have been considered sufficiently damaging to eliminate P'eng as a contender for succession. Another possibility is that P'eng overestimated his power and decided to have a showdown, perhaps to challenge Lin Piao who was already clearly emerging as a front-rank contender and whose paper had fired a crucial shot in the nationwide campaign against Wu Han.[8] Whatever the reasons for

[7] *Ibid.* p. 30.
[8] It is noteworthy that the army paper itself has underlined this fact. See " Raise High," p. 18.

P'eng's opposition, it was apparently serious enough to warrant personal intervention by Mao—but to no avail. According to *Hung Ch'i:* "Even after Comrade Mao Tse-tung criticised the former Peking Municipal Party Committee, they continued to carry out organised and planned resistance." [9] Apparently it was only the intervention of the army (not physical, needless to say) that put an end to this resistance.

If P'eng miscalculated his power and prospects, he may not have been the only one. Lu Ting-yi and Chou Yang, for opportunistic or other reasons, may have aligned with P'eng in some way. There is no evidence for this except that it is extremely difficult to explain their removal (and the accusations against Chou Yang) on ideological grounds. One sign, however, may be suggestive: the hesitation of the *Jen-min Jih-pao,* for which Lu was ultimately responsible, to jump forcefully into the fray throughout most of the campaign,[10] possibly until Lu's removal. This, of course, is pure speculation. It could be assumed, with equal uncertainty, that Lu and Chou were ousted because, as has been observed, an increasingly suspicious Mao was furious at the degree of opposition among the intellectuals and lashed out at the two officials (especially Chou Yang) responsible for their reform.

No less puzzling is the removal of Lo Jui-ch'ing as the army's chief of staff. As best as can be determined, Lo has been a faithful follower of Mao's military line and it is difficult to explain his ouster on grounds of policy differences. He was appointed in 1959 to uproot precisely those opinions which he is now indirectly accused of holding. It is not impossible, however, that in the course of carrying out his duties he became converted to a more professional viewpoint and became identified with those professional officers who "had talked about putting politics in command but in practice had given first consideration to military affairs, technique and specialised work." [11]

This raises the entire question of the relationship between the Party and the professional officers. There can be little doubt that at least until the end of 1964 this relationship was generally harmonious, due apparently in the main to Lin Piao's ability to maintain a delicate balance between the needs of politics and professionalism. From mid-1965, however, there have been faint but increasing rumblings of trouble. What this suggests is that in its zeal to "put politics in command" the Party in recent months has overstepped the perimeters acceptable to some

[9] "Thoroughly Criticize," p. 30.

[10] In surveying the campaign, the *Liberation Army Daily* of June 6 listed a number of publications that took part in the campaign but ignored the role played by the *People's Daily* until June 1. See "Raise High," p. 18.

[11] "Turn Our Army Into a Great School in Mao Tse-tung's Thought," *Liberation Army Daily* editorial, August 1, 1966; NCNA-English, Peking, August 1, 1966.

professional officers. As a result, these officers apparently resisted the Party's efforts, and Lo may have sided with them or at least was unable to keep them under control.

At any rate, whatever the extent and significance of the changes in the army, there can be no doubt that the army, and primarily its commander Lin Piao, played an unprecedented and crucial role in the campaign. In a sense this can be viewed as a culmination of two related developments in recent years: the army's increasing significance as the foremost bastion of revolutionary virtues and the growing prominence of Lin Piao. These developments are well known: the tremendous effort and apparent success of Lin since he took over command in 1959 in repairing the mechanism of political control and indoctrination and in keeping it highly operational; his ability to maintain a balance between the demands of politics and professionalism, as evident, at least until recently, in the apparent absence of any serious strain between the leadership and the professional officers; the setting up of the PLA as a revolutionary model for the entire country; the frequent coupling of the army chief's name with that of Mao; Lin's tract on world revolution and at least one important pronouncement on national rather than military affairs,[12] and the attribution to him, as to no other leader, of the distinction of "creatively" applying Mao's ideas.

What all this suggests is that Mao not only has been satisfied with the way Lin Piao has managed to revive and maintain the army's proletarian and political purity, but he may also have indicated his preference for Lin as the man best qualified to keep the flame of revolution burning. Thus it seems only natural for Mao to have invoked the prestige and potential power of the PLA in order to remove the opposition of the Peking Party organisation and then to set the tone for a far-reaching purge.

This purge has been directed at officials suspected of going soft on Mao's brand of Communism (some of the purged officials may have opposed the rise of Lin Piao) as well as at "old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits." It reached a high point in the rampage of the Red Guards and in the incredible and infantile adulation of Mao.

The events of recent months have produced dramatic shifts in the power relations at the top level. Lin Piao has been catapulted to the position of Mao's successor. Liu Shao-ch'i has been unceremoniously demoted in the power structure. Chou En-lai has retained his position as the third-ranking man in the hierarchy. Teng Hsiao-p'ing has slipped somewhat. T'ao Chu, the new propaganda chief and a newcomer to the

[12] See Lin Pao's Letter of March 11, 1966, to departments in industry and communications. The letter was printed in *People's Daily* and all Peking papers on June 19. *Peking Review*, No. 26 (June 24, 1966).

top ruling group, as well as K'ang Sheng and Ch'en Po-ta have risen dramatically. Only time will tell how long the present line-up will endure.

This attempt to interpret recent events in China inevitably leaves many questions unanswered. Given the present dearth of hard data, it need hardly be added that other interpretations can be constructed with equal credibility—or lack thereof. In the uncertainty that currently envelops the Chinese political arena, only this much can be said with certainty: much more information will have to become available before any definitive explanation can be given of what is going on in China in mid-1966.