

The Beginnings of the Cultural Revolution

According to Lin Piao, then very close to Mao, as early as 1962 Mao was "first to perceive the danger of the counter-revolutionary plots of Liu Shao-ch'i and his gang," and that Mao attempted unsuccessfully to regain the "first-line" control of the party.²¹ By mid-1964 he had developed serious doubts about Liu's fitness to be his successor—believing that Liu might disown him as Khrushchev had repudiated Stalin.²² When Liu proposed resurrecting the Sino-Soviet alliance because of the intensification of the Vietnam war, Mao decided at a party meeting on January 25, 1965, that Liu must be disinherited and the party shattered in order to be subsequently reconstructed.²³

Mao wanted to re-establish the supremacy of his authority, his line of revolution, his work-style, to revitalize the youth, politicize the masses, and combat old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking—and to do so with a single, immediate expurgation. The sense of urgency might have been prompted by considerations of health. In 1964 he was 71, suffering from Parkinson's disease, and possibly the victim of a stroke in the fall of that year. He told Edgar Snow that "he was soon going to see God," and in August 1965 André Malraux noticed a nurse at his side. It is highly possible that Mao felt that he had only a limited time in which to rectify the problems he saw.

The first salvo of the Cultural Revolution was fired by the editor-in-chief of the Shanghai branch of the *Liberation Army Daily*, Yao Wen-yüan. The November 10, 1965 issue of *Wen-hui Pao* printed Yao's "Comment on the Newly Composed Historical Play 'Hai Jui Dismissed From Office'"—an article that attacked Wu Han, the deputy mayor of Peking and a former university professor.²⁴ Wu had earlier written a story, "Hai Jui Scolds the Emperor," under a pseudonym in the *People's Daily* on June 16, 1959, not long before the dismissal of Defense Minister P'eng. Hai Jui, a mid-16th century Ming official, supposedly reprimanded the emperor in these words: "For a long time the nation has not been satisfied with you. All officials, in and out of the capital, know that your mind is not right, that you are too arbitrary, that you are perverse. You think that you alone are right; you refuse to accept criticism; and your mistakes are

21. Harrison, 492; Solomon, 453.

22. Solomon, 459.

23. Edgar Snow, "Mao Tse-tung and the Cost of Living: Aftermath of the Cultural Revolution," *The New Republic*, April 10, 1971, 19.

24. Not a Communist member, but one of the Democratic League.

many."²⁵ The story was later rendered into a historical play entitled "Hai Jui Dismissed from Office," which appeared in the January 1961 issue of *Peking Literature and Art*. In this new version, Hai Jui was portrayed as an honest official who lost his governorship because the emperor disliked his proposal of returning to the peasants land that had been seized by rich landlords. It required little imagination to see that the author implied the emperor to be Mao and the dismissed official to be P'eng. Naturally, Mao did not miss the point, as he later stated on December 21, 1967: "P'eng Te-huai is 'Hai Jui' too."²⁶

Two other members of the Peking Municipal Government were even more scathing in their criticism of the leadership. They were Teng T'o, secretary of the Peking Municipal Committee, editor of its theoretical journal, the *Frontline*, and former editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily* (1954-59); and Liao Mo-sha, director of the United Front Department in the Peking Municipal Committee. Under the pseudonym Wu Nan-hsing,²⁷ the three of them jointly published sixty-seven articles in the *Frontline* between October 10, 1961 and July 1964, criticizing the Leader by implications or historical analogies. Particularly outspoken, Teng wrote 153 articles in the *Peking Evening News* between March 1961 and September 1962 under the general title, "Evening Chats at Yenshan." One of these "Evening Chats," dated June 15, 1961, sarcastically compared, by allusion, the Great Leap with building a castle in the air. Another article, "Special Cure for Amnesia," which appeared in the *Frontline* of July 25, 1962, read in part:

There are all sorts of illnesses in this world . . . one of which is called "amnesia." Anyone who has this disease has a lot of trouble, because it cannot easily be cured. . . . The man who has this illness . . . often forgets what he has said or done. Gradually he will become temperamental . . . easily angered, and finally mad. . . . Another symptom is that he often faints. If not cured in time, he will become an idiot. Once one of these symptoms is discovered, he must take a full rest and stop talking or doing things, otherwise the result will be disastrous.²⁸

The frequent appearance of sarcastic writings using historical analogies or allusions to criticize Mao and his policies suggested a coordinated effort

25. Chün-tu Hsüeh, "The Cultural Revolution and Leadership Crisis in Communist China," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXII:2:173 (June 1967).

26. Solomon, 479.

27. Wu for Wu Han; Nan for Nan-tsun, Teng's pen name; and Hsing for Fan Hsing, Liao's pen name.

28. Quoted in Chün-tu Hsüeh, 175.

directed by individuals very high in authority. Since all three contributors were members of the Peking Municipal Government, it was clear that the mayor, P'eng Chen, or someone higher in the party hierarchy, was behind them. Mao was ready to launch a counterattack but Peking was so tightly controlled by its mayor that Mao could not find room "to put in a needle."²⁹ In the summer of 1965, he disappeared to Shanghai, where at a branch meeting of the Central Committee in September, he called for attacks on "reactionary bourgeois ideology." The groundwork was laid for a gigantic counteroffensive. Under his and his wife's instructions, the editor-in-chief of the Shanghai branch of the *Liberation Army Daily*, Yao Wen-yüan, fired the first shot of the Cultural Revolution on November 10, 1965, when he attacked the play "Hai Jui Dismissed from Office." Wu Han was denounced for his "humanism" and lack of "class view," since he held that Hai Jui of the official ruling class could understand and help another class—namely, the peasants. Other attacks quickly descended on Wu Han, Teng T'o, and Liao Mo-sha, now dubbed the "Black Gang." They were accused of falsifying historical figures to satirize the present Leader, of deceiving people into learning the virtues of the feudal past, of blurring the class struggle; and of urging the restoration of land and private economy.

Mao's selection of Wu Han as the first target was well thought out. As deputy mayor of Peking and a leading intellectual associated with Teng and Liao, Wu's chastisement would inevitably involve the other two and perhaps Mayor P'eng Chen. If it were proven that P'eng was part of this "counterrevolutionary and revisionist" gang, then his patron, Liu Shao-ch'i, would be implicated. Since their criticism of the Maoist mismanagement of the economy and practice of the "personality cult" resembled Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, they could be branded as revisionists. Thus, a literary and cultural revolution exploded into a bitter power struggle among the top leaders.

The Full Swing of the Purge

Under mounting pressure, Wu Han recanted on December 30, 1965, admitting that he had failed to use Mao's theory of class struggle in his play. Unsatisfied, the Maoists insisted on getting at the "truth." Apparently unaware of the depth of the attack and confident of his hold on the party machinery, Liu left Peking on March 26, 1966, on a prescheduled state visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan. That very day, Mayor P'eng Chen, a

29. Mao's own expression, quoted in Gene T. Hsiao, 397.

vice-premier and the eighth-ranking member of the Politburo, disappeared.

On April 18, the *Liberation Army Daily* editorialized: "Hold High the Great Red Banner of Mao Tse-tung's Thought and Actively Participate in the Great Socialist Cultural Revolution." It was a clear declaration of the army's support for Mao and his policy. During Liu's absence, the Maoists closed in on the Peking Municipal Party Committee and extracted confessions from the Black Gang. In early May, Mao's spokesman in Shanghai, Yao Wen-yüan, charged that the Liu faction intended to replace Premier Chou En-lai with P'eng Chen and to rehabilitate former Defense Minister P'eng Te-huai and his revisionist line at the expense of Lin Piao. On May 16, an article in the *Red Flag*, edited by Mao's private secretary Ch'en Po-ta, asked: "Who has been sheltering Teng T'o and his group?" On June 1, Maoist forces seized control of the *People's Daily*, which then belatedly joined the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, Mao's health apparently had improved: in July 1966 he demonstrated his vigor by swimming in the Yangtze River and urged the youth to relive the revolutionary experience with him by "advancing in the teeth of great storms and waves."³⁰ Mao proved himself physically capable of conducting the Cultural Revolution.

Mao's reliance on the army to crush the party catapulted Lin Piao to new heights of power and prestige. He became the strong man and the main pillar of support for Mao when Mao returned on July 18, 1966, to Peking—which had been made secure by Lin and his army. On August 1, Mao named him the first vice-chairman of the Central Committee, i.e. the second-ranking member in the hierarchy, while Liu fell to eighth. Side by side, Mao and Lin reviewed the Red Guards (then being formed), while Mao fondly addressed Lin as his "closest comrade-in-arms." On August 5 Mao wrote the first wall poster: "Bomb the (Liu-Teng) Headquarters!"

The Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee adopted several key resolutions. It designated as the target of attack "those within the party who are in authority" and who were "taking the capitalist road." It announced the creation of the Red Guards (*Hung-wei ping*) as a "shock force" to carry the movement from the capital to the provinces—bypassing the party machinery and its Youth League, which were under Liu's control. It called for the establishment of permanent "cultural revolutionary groups, committees and congresses" at all levels, and the application of Mao's ideas on the mass line, the class struggle, and the theory of contradictions. On November 22, 1966 a seventeen-member Central Cultural

30. Solomon, 464, 476.

Revolutionary Committee was formed, with Mao's secretary Ch'en Po-ta (editor of the *Red Flag*) as chairman, and Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing, as first vice-chairwoman. This Revolutionary Committee, together with the military under Lin Piao, and the State Council under Chou En-lai, became the ruling triumvirate, under Mao's guidance. In particular, Lin seemed to have taken over the purge during the second half of the Cultural Revolution.

The youthful Red Guards envisioned themselves as "revolutionary successors" and "revolutionary rebels," dedicated to the elimination of old thought, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Vowing to uphold the Thought of Mao, they were determined to expunge bourgeois influences and revisionist tendencies. They wrote big-character wall posters (*Ta-tzu pao*), ransacked private property, rampaged cities, renamed streets, attacked those with modern attire and haircuts, and humiliated foreign diplomats. By the spring of 1967 the Red Guard disturbances reached alarming proportions.³¹

The Red Guards attacked Liu Shao-ch'i as a revisionist and a Chinese Khrushchev, and pressured him and his wife into public self-criticism. Thousands of them marched by his house demanding his dismissal. In November 1968 the CCP Central Committee announced that Liu had been ousted from all party and government posts.

Other prominent officials who had been attacked, humiliated, dismissed, and purged included Teng Hsiao-p'ing, the party general secretary; Chu Teh, a founder of the Red Army; Po I-po, a vice premier and chairman of the State Economic Commission; and several hundred government and party leaders.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, Premier Chou En-lai played the role of a "conflict manager" superbly. He supported Mao, maintained a working relationship with the military under Lin Piao and the Cultural Revolutionary Group under Chiang Ch'ing—while exerting his moderating influence in an attempt to keep the turmoil within bounds. Many times he spoke out against the excesses of the Red Guards.

It was due to Chou's mediation that a three-way alliance between the PLA representatives, "revolutionary" party cadres, and representatives of the "revolutionary" masses was created in the Revolutionary Committees at the various levels—thus achieving some coherence among the different groups which might otherwise work at cross purposes. Chou also protected officials and generals who came under Red Guard attacks. He defended Nieh Jung-chen, head of the National Defense Science and Technology

31. William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927-71* (New York, 1973), 392.

Commission which directed advanced weapon projects, against the militant's threat to disturb the atomic research and weapon programs in winter and spring of 1968. All in all, Chou worked diligently to keep the Cultural Revolution under control.

Yet, the help of the army was still needed. In January 1967, Mao instructed the military to intervene and restore order. In retrospect, it was a momentous decision, for it gave Lin Piao and the PLA a golden opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the decimation of the party organs at different levels and to penetrate deep into industry, plants, and other important institutions. Unprecedentedly, the military became a powerful political force.

The violence and chaos wrought by the Red Guards may have surprised their original organizers. In July 1968 Mao summoned the five student leaders representing major Red Guard groups in Peking to reprimand them for their "ultra-leftism, their sectarianism, and the mad fratricidal combats." With tears in his eyes he said that they had let him down.

Meanwhile, intensive preparations were made for the convocation of a party congress, the first since 1958. The Ninth Party Congress, which finally opened in April 1969, unanimously elected Mao chairman of the party and the Central Committee, with Lin Piao as vice-chairman. The new party constitutions reaffirmed the Thought of Mao as the guiding policy of the party and the state, and designated Lin as Mao's successor. The Central Committee was enlarged to include 170 regular members and 109 alternates, a substantial percentage of whom were army commanders and leaders of the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution in Retrospect

The Maoists proclaimed the Cultural Revolution a great victory because it re-established the supremacy of Mao's authority and of his thought and ideology, which were deemed essential to China's progress. It was a planned upheaval conducted by Mao from the start and seen as part of a *continual* rectification movement that must erupt periodically to insure the purity of the party and the correctness of its line.³² In 1967 Mao warned that in the future there would be "one, two, three, or four Cultural Revolutions."

Obviously the Cultural Revolution benefitted Lin Piao and the military, but it was significant that Mao's wife also rose to national prominence

32. Solomon, 476.

during the prolonged period of upheaval. In the early sixties, with Mao's blessing Chiang Ch'ing developed an active interest in reforming the arts and produced eight "model operas." She then took over the media as a prelude to winning control of the national culture and the people's minds. "She felt she needed such command over popular consciousness, including recognition by the masses, as the basis of her personal power and authority," remarked her American biographer.³³ That she was a power behind Mao in precipitating the Cultural Revolution was beyond dispute. She accompanied him to Shanghai in 1965, jointly directing Yao Wen-yüan to fire the first shot of the Cultural Revolution, and a year later she was catapulted to the post of first vice-chairperson of the Central Cultural Revolutionary Committee. Her meteoric rise could only be the result of Mao's sponsorship. In purging his senior associates he unwittingly, or wittingly, made way for her and her followers to build up a power base, and she exploited the opportunity to the hilt. Asked whether the Cultural Revolution involved struggle over succession and civil war, she readily acknowledged: "There's some truth in that."³⁴ One might say that whatever other motives Mao may have had in launching the Cultural Revolution he certainly opened a way to thrust his wife into the forefront of national politics, positioning her for the ultimate bid for succession.

In retrospect, the Cultural Revolution ushered in a decade of turmoil and civil strife that drove the country to utter chaos and the brink of bankruptcy. The party had been decimated and many of its leaders purged or dismissed. Industrial and agricultural productions suffered severe setbacks, and the disruption in education caused the loss of a generation of trained manpower. In fact, not only was the younger generation deprived of education but a great many middle-aged and senior scholars and scientists were sent to the countryside to do menial chores, denying them for years the opportunity for research and teaching. The damage in effect involved three generations. Poignantly, the Cultural Revolution turned out to be anticultural, anti-intellectual, and antiscientific, for knowledge was considered the source of reactionary and bourgeois thought and action. Countless officials and individuals were wrongfully accused of anti-revolutionary activities and driven to suicide or imprisonment. Yet for the revolutionary purists, no price was too high and no sacrifice too great for the perpetuation of the Maoist vision and approach to socialist transformation. In 1981, an authoritative assessment of the Cultural Revolution was made (see chapter 36).

33. Roxane Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (Boston, 1977), 380.

34. *Ibid.*, 297.