

A China Cultural Revolution Epilogue

China: The birth of Western Culture

A Travel Odyssey Photo Journal

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The 1956 Budapest uprising against the Soviet rule preluded this ten-year disaster. The rebellion was brutally crushed by Soviet troops, but its influence was far-reaching. Mao was alerted and very concerned about a possible revolt at home, and he decided to “strangle it while it's still in the cradle”. He was aware that the semi-illiterate mass wouldn't be of any threat to the regime; the only potential was the educated. So in May 1957 he started a campaign called “Let a hundred flowers bloom and let a hundred schools of thought contest” --- people of all walks. Intellectuals in particular were encouraged to criticize the Party's leadership and its policies, and it was “the chance to express one's loyalty to the Party” as the authority put it. Many innocent people fell into the trap. In June of the same year, Mao launched the counter-attack; all those who had carelessly said something “evil” against the Party were labeled “reactionary rightists” and sent to the gulags (official Chinese term is Ganxiao, literally meaning School for Cadres) to be “reformed through labor”. 552,788 intellectuals, together with some millions of others who were destined to be “bad elements” in order to fulfill Mao's 5% quota, had to spend their lives with backbreaking labor and countless humiliating “criticizing meetings”. After the movement, China was silenced.

In 1958, Mao initialized another campaign that resulted in the most tragic famine ever in China and his own step-down. It was referred to as the “Great Leap Forward”. Mao and his colleagues believed by maneuvering the enthusiasm of the public to launch massive-scale labor campaigns, they could modernize China's industry, agriculture and science in a matter of few years (later the time was shortened to “a few months”). Millions were conscripted to set up furnaces to produce steel; anything metal was confiscated as supply of raw materials, from common pots for daily cooking to the priceless cultural relics. Meanwhile in countryside, farmers were to transplant rice into the “model fields” that yield in tens of thousands of kilos of rice per Mu (approximately 1/6 of an acre), a figure enormously beyond possibility. Yet no one dared to challenge this insaneness for the fear of persecution. Government officials competed to lie, astronomical figures of agricultural output were fabricated, and the central government taxed the farmers accordingly to set up the “Great Communist Canteens”. Food was plenty and free, yet the waste was astonishing. The madness soon brought about the punishment--famine. Thirty-five million starved to death in the next three years. Though this number is never approved by Chinese authorities even till today, they did admit in a report years ago that despite the high birth rate at that time, the total population from 1959 - 1962 has decreased by twenty million (as a symbolic gesture of regret, Mao refrained from eating his favorite “Braised Fatty Pork” during this period).

Mao was criticized by his followers and had to step down as the General Secretary of the Party, a symbolic head with little real power; Liu Shaoqi, a more pragmatic and professional communist took his place as Chairman of the State. Even though, Peng Dehuai, then minister of defense and one of the ten marshals, was victimized in 1959 for challenging Mao's authority and trying to halt the lunatic activity before the occurrence of the starvation.

The power thirsty Mao wouldn't be content with nominal supremacy; he wouldn't tolerate his authority challenged without revenge. He was fully aware of tile tactics in power struggle, and he organized his comeback in a well planned procedure. First of all; he had to restore his prestige as an errorless sage. This time he used Lin Biao, successor to Peng, to idolize himself. In 1964, Lin found Lei Feng, a soldier killed in a driving accident, as the puppet

for the idolatry of Mao. Newspapers and radios nationwide began showering the mass with the heroic deeds of Lei. He was elevated above a sage; he was selfless, fearless, desire-less, always ready to sacrifice. And the very only impetus for reaching this level of perfection was his unconditional love and loyalty to Mao, nothing else. In his poetic diary (the authenticity often doubted), Lei expressed his eagerness to study Mao's revolution theory as a daily ritual; as he put it "I could survive three days without water and food, but not one day without studying Mao's books". In that same year, Mao's little "Red Book", containing a collection of Mao's quotations and articles, began to circulate in the army, then spread to the general public; and in the following decade, [the] Chinese published altogether 3 billion copies, made it the most numerous antique for future generations.

Mao won this round. All the negative impact caused by his horrible mistakes was erased; he was again "the Great Leader, the Great Advisor and the Great Steersman", "the only guarantee of the final victory of Chinese revolution"; therefore any revisions of his theory or any, individual against him were to become targets of public condemnation, and the only outcome would be corporal termination.

In 1966 Mao finally began his retaliation. This time he chose, the ignorant yet enthusiastic youngsters as destroyers of his rivals. Mao instructed Jiang Qing, his third wife, and Yao Wenyan, an opportunist writer from Shanghai to issue a series of provoking articles, trying to convince the public that the authority under Liu Shaoqi was the traitor of communist course and has become followers of Soviet revisionist; and that they were restoring the old capitalism. Confusion and chaos were aroused among the young students in universities; they began to post. "Big Letter" articles on campus walls, criticizing their teachers for the "poisoning bourgeois education". Verbal abuse soon became corporal torture: professors were beaten in public, they were forced to kneel and kowtow to Mao's picture to "confess their crimes", their hair was half shaved to insult them, and women teachers were even openly harassed. Meanwhile, Mao showed his approval and support of such brutal activity by publishing his article "Bombard the Headquarter--My Big Letter Poster" on 7th of August, declaring that existed inside the Communist Party a clique of conspirators headed by Liu Shaoqi; and they were to betray the proletarian revolution and restore the capitalism and the revolutionary mass were entitled to bombard them and defend the revolution. This vicious article marked the total commence of a ten-year turmoil.

As early as in June 1966, some middle school students, mostly children of high-ranking officials, organized themselves into small political groups and named them the Red Guards. Mao soon decided to deploy these youngsters. He praised them as "the great creation of communist movement and socialist revolution". "Revolution is righteous and rebellion justified"; and as a gesture of his support, from mid-August to the end of November, Mao received 11 million Red Guards from all over the country at the Tian'Anmen Square. Naturally free transport and accommodation were offered to those "guests of Chairman Mao" at the expenses of local authorities. Encouraged by Mao and his clique, violence and brutality elevated. Schools were closed, and Red Guards went out to eradicate the "feudalism, capitalism and revisionism" and destroy the "Four Olds". Colleges, institutions, news media, publish houses, and local governments have all been stormed; professors, writers, artists, doctors and scientists were labeled as the "reactionary scholars", "monsters and beasts", beaten and humiliated; thousands of households were looted; and countless historic monuments and cultural relics were destroyed; art works were set ablaze ...

And in the course of violence, corporal torture, sexual harassment and even killing were daily meals. Suicide was the only option to guard dignity. According to official statistics released by Chinese authority, that in Shanghai alone, from 23rd August to 8th September, 84,200 households were looted by Red Guards; and in Beijing, 4,922 sites of historical monuments were destroyed or damaged, that was 70% of the 6,843 sites under protection of city government. Even the skeletons of the Ming emperor Wan Li and his wives didn't escape the "revolutionary struggle", they were taken out the tomb, denounced by the furious Red Guards and burnt to ash.

Chaos and violence spread to all walks of life next year. All sorts of organizations were set up in name of the revolution, each declared their loyalty to Mao and denounced the others as enemies of the people. Arguments were soon replaced by fighting. Fists first; clubs and spades afterwards; and then came machine guns and tanks. In August 1967, large scale of fighting broke out in Nanjing, Changcun; Changsha and Chongqing; and in Chongqing alone, 8,000 were killed, dead bodies littered the streets; same month in Daozian County, Hunan Province, over 10,000 were massacred through all kinds of medieval cruelty ...

Victims of the chaos were not only the commoners, high ranking officials including Liu Shaoqi, then [the] number two person in the country, Chairman of the State, were not spared. Liu was slandered as “traitor, spy and the enemy of workers”, beaten and humiliated in public area, then jailed without trial and deprived of the right of appeal. He was denounced and expelled from the Party. He was denied medical care in spite of his diabetes and died in slow pain on 12th November 1969 in Kaifeng, Henan Province and was cremated under a pseudo name.

Mao triumphed as Chairman of the Party and the State after the 9th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in April 1969, Lin Biao was to be his successor, and this victory was ratified and written into the party constitution. Lin Biao was eulogized as “the most intimate comrade of Chairman Mao” “the most loyal and the most steadfast follower and defender of Mao’s revolutionary course.” In those days, everyone was supposed to greet each other or start a meeting by reciting words as “Long live Chairman Mao and eternal health to his intimate comrade, Vice Commander Lin”. Mao’s popularity reached its zenith. His picture and statues were to be seen everywhere; his quotations were to [be] recited at any public meeting; his little red books were to be textbook for all schools; his shrines were to be set up in every house; his image was engraved on badges and pinned on flesh by some to show their loyalty ...

In September 1971, Lin Biao conspired an unsuccessful coup to dethrone and murder Mao. Mao narrowly escaped the assassination, and Lin hurried to flee to Soviet Union in a trident and his plane miraculously crashed in the desert of Mongolia, killing all onboard.

The incident further deepened Mao’s suspicion of all around him, everyone was his enemy, and the only one to be relied on was Jiang Qing, his wife; Jiang together with the other three trusted by Mao, formed a Clique which was to be known later as “the Gang of Four”.

When it came to the year of 1973, the national economy was at the verge of total collapse. And Mao had to reappoint Deng Xiaoping, formerly denounced as a follower of Liu years ago, as the vice premier to aid the ailing Zhou Enlai—prime minister of China, to bring the country back on [the] right track. With many difficulties, Deng carried out some mild and cautious reforms to readjust industry, agriculture, national defense and science. It was during this time, Deng published his famous “Cat Theory” --- “No matter what color the cat is, the one catches mice is a good one”. The reform saved the national economy from total collapse but not Deng himself from his second downfall. Deng’s pragmatic policies offended Mao and the “Gang of Four”, in November 1975, the “anti-Rightists’ Reversion Trend Movement” was initialized against Deng.

In January 1976, the well beloved Zhou Enlai passed away, and the “Gang of Four” was trying to obstruct the mourning activities organized by people nationwide, this led to a total outburst of anger. From the end of March, people in Beijing gathered in Tian’ Anmen Square to lay down wreaths and paste posters of poems and other articles expressing their love to the late Premier and their rage to the Gang (known in China as “denouncing the living by mourning the dead”, this happened again in April 1989 which triggered the Democracy Movement). On 5th of April, the mourning ceremony was brutally suppressed (this time with clubs only), and two days later Deng was deprived of all positions and alleged as the mastermind of this anti-socialist conspiracy.

In September Mao died. And a month later, all members of the notorious “Gang of Four” were arrested. And this marked the end of this the-year catastrophe (four years later, the “Gang of Four” was tried to scapegoat Mao).

The aftermath of the Cultural Revolution is horrendous. Economically, the turmoil caused a loss of 780 billion Yuan (1976 value), which was equivalent to 30 years’ accumulations of all state property! The country’s economy was mountain-sliding and people were destitute; famine and mal-nutrition were common, everything was couponed, even a box of match[es] or a roll [of] toilet paper. This turmoil was even a greater calamity to education and culture. Thousands of scholars were sent to country to be “re-educated” by the illiterate farmers’ schools and colleges were closed’ many classics were banned and set ablaze; historical monuments were taken down to build pigsties... In these ten years the country failed to educate millions of college students, and according to 1982 census, there were 230 million illiterates, many of those lost their chance for education during this ten-year chaos. The turmoil was also a total destruction of the fragile legal system and basic human rights. During this period, millions were detained, arrested, jailed, beaten, harassed and even executed without any trial or the right to plead; millions had to divorce their spouses to save the family from being involved; many were physically or mentally crippled as a result of persecution. Only two months after its beginning and in Beijing alone, 85, 198 were deported to make the city a “crystal place”, 1,772 were beaten to death, 33,695 households were looted...

Perhaps the most disastrous of all is the loss [of] basic moral values. In those years inhumanness was often eulogized as “firmness in revolutionary stance” and any kind of leniency was scolded as “bourgeois hypocrisy”, brutality was often of heroic deeds. The chaos also totally eliminated any opportunity for fair competition, nepotism and flattery replaced merit and diligence ...

Yet the most tragic thing is the oblivion of this tragedy. Twenty-four years after its end, few can still remember it. The young are never told about it and the old are trying to forget it. In early 1980’s some scholars proposed to build a museum to teach future generations about this tragedy, and the proposal was rebuffed. Perhaps for a nation that suffered so much oblivion is the best cure for the trauma. But oblivion of the past is treason to the future; oblivion of the brutality is injustice to the victims; oblivion of this tragedy only brings about another.

As a victim of this disaster, I wish that I just worried too much.

May the millions tortured to death rest in eternal peace!