

An OVERVIEW of the Chinese Cultural Revolution

During the 1960s and 1970s, a tumultuous political movement took place in China. Called the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the struggle, violence and events impacted citizens across the country. One of the most startling aspects of the Revolution was the number of Chinese youth enlisted to lead the battle against the perceived enemies, China's educated intellectual class. Known as the Red Guard, they ran the purges, punishments, and killings that resulted in decades of deprivation for the Chinese people.

Background: The Revolution

In the late 1940s, the Communist Party of China and the Chinese Nationalist Party were locked in a civil war to determine who would hold the power in China. In the 1949 Revolution, the Communist Party achieved a victory. Led by Mao Zedong, (also known as Chairman Mao), the party took power and formed a new government with Mao at its head as the Chairman of the Communist Party of China. The country was renamed the People's Republic of China with Mao Zedong as leader. But by 1966, Mao's iron-handed authority weakened after the failure of his plans for prosperity. He launched what came to be known



Mao Zedong's official portrait hanging in Tiananmen

as the Chinese Cultural Revolution to regain credibility and authority as well as to revive the revolutionary spirit that led to victory in the 1949 Revolution.

In order to launch an attack against some of the leadership in the Communist Party and reassert his authority, Mao mobilized his closest allies: a group of radical supporters including his wife, Jiang Qing (Madame Mao), and Chinese defense minister, Lin Biao. To re-ignite revolutionary spirit and change direction, Mao called China's young people into action. He urged them to purge the corrupt and damaged elements of Chinese culture and society. The youth movement coalesced into the Red Guard. Their orders in the summer of 1966 were to attack and eradicate the Four Olds of Chinese society: old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas.

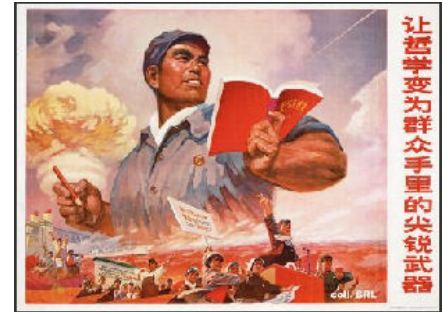


Red Guard holding Mao's Little Red Book

What Happened? Who and What were the Targets?

Mao shut down schools across China. In his messages to youth, he encouraged the Red Guard to attack current Communist Party leaders who had grown comfortable and were now disregarding their revolutionary ways. The student movement escalated quickly as the students formed paramilitary groups. Red Guard students were soon ready to take on the old Communist Party leadership who had lost their way and were now embracing the status quo.

Another interesting development was the personality cult that grew up around Mao and the many statements and declarations made at the start of the Revolution. The emerging cult was helped along with the *Little Red Book*, a collection of Mao's quotations, created by Mao and the Chinese Defense Minister, Lin Biao. It was distributed to Red Guard members who carried the books and quoted key phrases and ideas. Millions of copies were printed and distributed throughout the country.



A propaganda poster with Mao's Little Red Book in the hands of a Red Guard member.

Energized by the support of the leadership, the Red Guards harassed and physically attacked the elderly and the citizens considered a part of the middle-class, intellectual population: teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, musicians and artists were all victims. Millions of people were persecuted all across the urban areas of China. They suffered public humiliations, imprisonment, torture, and harassment. Many were sentenced to hard labor. Their homes and personal property were confiscated. Historical cultural sites, art works, and

buildings were ransacked or destroyed. A large number were forced to leave the cities and towns for the rural countryside during the *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement*.

Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement

One of the major policies put in place during the Revolution was the “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside” movement (1968-1980). Mao Zedong decided that urban middle class students would be sent to farm villages or into the mountains to be re-educated by learning from the workers and farmers. Approximately 17 million educated youth were “sent down” to live and work in rural villages and mountain settlements. It was, in reality, a form of exile. Many consider this group of student, whose education was so rudely interrupted, China’s “lost generation.” Chen Yi was one of those students.

From summer 1966 to summer 1967, anarchy reigned in Chinese cities because of the Red Guards actions. At the same time, various factions within the Red Guard were engaged in a power struggle. Things were so far out of control by September, 1967, that Mao and Lin called in the army to clamp down on the Red Guard and restore order. The solution was to forcibly push the Red Guard members out to the rural areas of China to also learn from the peasants.

This marked the end of the first phase of the movement. The social violence and instability crashed the economy. Industries failed; people were out of work and out of resources.

What Happened Next?

In 1969, Mao officially chose Lin as his successor. Then Lin made an unfortunate decision. During border skirmishes with Soviet troops, Lin went overboard and declared martial law. To Mao, this looked like a power play. Mao ended his support for Lin and enlisted the help of Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, to put pressure on Lin. This caused a major split in the Chinese Communist leadership. In 1971, as Lin attempted to escape to the Soviet Union, he died (rather suspiciously) in a plane crash. Military leaders were purged, and Zhou Enlai took greater control of the government.

How and when did it End?

China became more stable when Zhou revived the educational system and restored officials to their positions in the government. But in 1972, Zhou was diagnosed with cancer and Mao suffered a stroke. Knowing that they needed to pass power on to the next generation of leaders, Mao and Zhou threw their support to Deng Xiaoping, who was purged in the first phase of the Cultural Revolution. However, more radical leaders were opposed to Deng. Led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, the group wanted the revolution to continue to pursue more radical goals. Madame Mao and her group came to be known as the Gang of Four. For several years, the country swung between these two sides. Then in early 1976, Zhou died and the Gang of Four persuaded the very ill Mao to purge Deng. When Mao died in September, 1976, a coalition of the police, civil leadership and the military overcame and pushed out the Gang of Four.

This event, along with Mao's death marked the end of the Cultural Revolution. Deng did regain power in 1977. He controlled the Chinese government for the next 20 years.

What Was the Impact On China?

An estimated 1.5 million people were killed during the Cultural Revolution. Millions were put in prison, lost their property, were tortured and suffered grave public shame and humiliation. China was left with few intellectuals; many lost their lives or fled the country. School closings led to extremely high rates of illiteracy. Both industrial and agricultural output fell. And works of art and culture were lost forever. Mao's actions led many Chinese to lose faith in their government and their country. This legacy would prevail in Chinese society for decades into the future.



Faces of ancient Buddhas were destroyed

Resources

- ["China's Cultural Revolution,"](#) an online curriculum by Amy Freedman. Franklin and Marshall College, Department of Government. Excellent resource for teachers.
- [New York Times resource](#) includes a summary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and a slide show of photographs.
- [Slide Share](#): A PowerPoint sharing site has several PowerPoints on multiple aspects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and additional print resources.
- [History.com](#) site with wide range of historical topics and resources: slides, videos, print resources, etc.
- [Chinese Posters: Propaganda, Politics, History, Art.](#) Dozens of posters featuring the Up to the Mountain theme as well as an essay on the movement.
- [Down to the Countryside Movement](#) information on Wikipedia.