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文化大革命
Cultural Revolution

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Few episodes in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) remain as politically sensitive as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wuchanjieji wenhua da geming*, hereafter referred to as 'Cultural Revolution'). Its significance is so bitterly contested that only days before the Party's sixtieth anniversary in 1981, the Sixth Plenary Session of the Party's Eleventh Central Committee saw fit to adopt a lengthy and carefully-worded resolution in hopes of sealing the book on the Cultural Revolution and Mao's role in it. To that end, the 1981 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC' unequivocally declared the entire decade from 1966 to 1976 to be 'an extraordinary leftist error' initiated and led by Mao Zedong. As to his motives, the Resolution asserted that the Party Chairman had been 'labouring under a misapprehension' in his later years that propelled him into action that 'led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe to the Party, the state, and the whole people.'

This vehement denunciation was quickly followed by a thoroughgoing three-year campaign to not merely repudiate, but to 'totally negate' (*chedi fouding*) the Cultural Revolution as an aberration standing apart from, and outside of, the 'normal' course of PRC history. Individuals and collectives at every level of Chinese society were called upon to study the Resolution and related official documents, to engage in criticism and self-criticism, and, finally, to root out the 'three kinds of persons' (*san zhong ren*) in their workplaces and communities—those 'followers of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, those seriously affected by factional ideas, and the "smashers and grabbers" of the Cultural Revolution.'[1] The chief result of these strenuous collective efforts to obliterate the late Maoist past, as Alessandro Russo observed, produced 'an almost total intellectual block' that made it utterly impossible to comprehend the Cultural Revolution both inside and outside of China 'beyond the familiar "horrors of totalitarianism."'[2]

But cultural revolution (*wenhua geming*) as a form of political practice has a history in the PRC that extends beyond the final decade of Mao's life. The term appeared frequently in Party documents and Party-run newspapers well before 1949 to denote the Party's core pedagogical mission, when the term was used interchangeably with 'cultural construction' (*wenhua jianshe*) to refer to the regime's efforts to eliminate illiteracy with the goal of widening political participation through reading, writing, and debating about matters of civic interest. Such references continued throughout the 1950s and mid-1960s, with the vast majority drawing parallels either between Party activists and the literati standard-bearers of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, or with the Soviet cultural revolution that had been carried out from 1928–31 under Stalin's leadership.

It was during the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) that cultural revolution emerged as a set of practices in the realm of mass politics. The previous decade of education work was roundly criticised for having neglected politics and ordinary workers, and a vast effort to eliminate illiteracy within five years was undertaken nationwide. Overtaken by the extreme deprivations of the Great Leap period, these efforts were largely abandoned and many reversed, along with the raft of equally ambitious plans for which the Great Leap is known. Yet it was to this earlier project of mass empowerment through educational reform to which activists initially returned in May 1966, with Mao's support. Despite the tumultuous political upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s, a series of grassroots experiments were nonetheless carried out in a strenuous attempt to recentre education work around the mass line (see Chun Lin's essay in the present volume), at every level of Chinese society.

Although cultural revolution has not disappeared entirely from contemporary Chinese discourse, it has been largely superseded and supplanted by 'cultural development' (*wenhua fazhan*), 'cultural creation' (*wenhua chuangzao*), and 'cultural construction' (*wenhua jianshe*). At the same time, the broader normative context within which the practice was undertaken has altered dramatically. Whereas cultural revolution during the Mao era aimed to transform illiterate workers and peasants into revolutionary political subjects capable of exercising the 'four great freedoms' (*sida ziyou*)—speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big character posters—the post-Mao project of cultural construction seems designed chiefly to refashion ordinary Chinese citizens into the compliant subjects and refined citizen-consumers of a consolidated and stable CCP-led regime. The abandonment of the term in post-Tiananmen Chinese political discourse represents another manifestation of how the post-Mao Party-state has successfully appropriated and transformed Mao-era methods of mobilisation in order to generate a new politics that disarticulates the Leninist power of the Party-state from a positive vision of the future based on revolutionary transformation.

Culture Revolution before the Cultural Revolution

In April 1933, following the collapse of the First United Front with the Nationalist Party, the CCP's provisional central government promulgated a set of guidelines on education policy. Party committees at all levels were enjoined to focus on cultural education, and raising the class consciousness of workers and peasants so as to

enable mass mobilisation and the deepening of class struggle throughout Chinese society. Cultural revolution, as it was envisaged by the early CCP leadership, entailed the dismantling of traditional Han Chinese cultural norms informed by Confucian paternalism that instilled obedience to authority. In a cultural context in which literacy had always been inextricably intertwined with political power, the project of mass education was inherently revolutionary, reversing long established patterns of authority in Han Chinese society. Grassroots Party committees at the district and township levels were tasked with designing and implementing anti-illiteracy campaigns to not only educate, but also to empower, ordinary Chinese workers and peasants by challenging traditional beliefs and assumptions. In January 1934, Mao reported that cultural revolution was successfully being carried out throughout the Communist-controlled revolutionary base areas as a key means of increasing the levels of popular mobilisation in revolutionary struggle.[3]

The initial appearance of the term in the *People's Daily* came in a 1947 editorial celebrating the May Fourth Movement of 1919 for having launched China's first cultural revolution.[4] Within the span of a few months, this was followed by an article translated from Russian in which the author invoked the term cultural revolution to describe the transformation of education and leisure activities that attended collectivisation. Soviet peasants in the 1920s, the author asserted, 'began to live rich and cultured lives.'[5] For the next several years, the *People's Daily* published several dozen articles each year either detailing the ongoing cultural revolution in China that was said to have begun with the May Fourth Movement, or extolling the Soviet socialist civilisational project as a model. In some cases the two themes were conjoined, as in a November 1957 editorial by Kang Sheng proposing that, following from the success of the May Fourth Movement, China's success in emulating the Soviet experience of cultural revolution depended in the first instance on the elimination of illiteracy as quickly as possible, and the cultivation of intellectuals from within the ranks of the proletariat.[6] The concept, if not the actualised practice, of cultural revolution would therefore have been abundantly familiar to the readers of the *People's Daily* during the period of the first Five-year Plan (1952–57).

Yet, as the decade of the 1950s came to a close, the concept of cultural revolution underwent a significant shift. In his 27 February 1957 speech 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,' Mao made two assertions important to the practice of cultural revolution moving forward. The first was that although the ideological struggle between the forces supporting socialism and those supporting capitalism would persist in China for some time, the use of 'crude coercion' to resolve such struggles would be counterproductive: it was only through 'the method of discussion, criticism, and reasoning that we can really foster correct ideas and overcome wrong ones' (see also Rojas' essay in the present volume). The second was that, in the handling of contradictions among the people, ideological and political work must be strengthened sufficiently to support the CCP's policy of educating the labouring classes within the context of both socialist consciousness and culture, so that they would be empowered to participate in that struggle in the ideological field. Both dictums quickly came to inform the Party's work of carrying out cultural revolution, which began to diverge from both past practice and the Soviet model. At a national conference convened by the Education Ministry in March and April 1958, specific

guidelines for carrying out cultural revolution were drawn up, which included five 'great tasks:' a sweeping nationwide literacy campaign, an expansion of elementary education, the establishment of agricultural middle schools, improvement of teacher training, and a complete overhaul of the educational system to meet the needs of socialist construction. The outline determined that, moving forward, a fundamental aim of all schools would be to demolish capitalism and establish socialism while relying on the Party's leadership and following the mass line.[7]

One month later, at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress in May 1958, Liu Shaoqi asserted that in carrying out the simultaneous development of political, economic, and thought 'lines' in accordance with implementing socialist revolution, it was also essential to further advance a technological revolution alongside a revolution in culture. Several days later, on 9 June, the *People's Daily* announced 'the cultural revolution has begun,' and proclaimed that 'cultural revolution is a movement to totally transform the culture of all labouring people.'[8] The movement immediately shifted into high gear.

The familiar rallying cries of the Great Leap Forward included ambitious plans to not only boost both agricultural and industrial production to the extent that China would be able to catch up with Great Britain in five years, but also make equally impressive gains in the areas of education, cultural production, and the technological and scientific enskilment, particularly for workers and peasants (see Callahan's essay in the present volume). In preparation for the nationwide literacy drive, in February 1958, the National People's Congress promulgated the 'Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabetic System,' thereby reorienting the national curriculum around the use of *pinyin* to facilitate basic literacy. A few months later, with the Great Leap's production drive underway, groups of university students and teachers, as well as literate cadres and employees of state bureaucracies, were organised into anti-illiteracy teams and dispatched to the countryside. The teams organised intensive adult literacy and cultural enrichment classes, often directly in the fields, in order to take maximum advantage of the brief rest and meal periods taken by commune members. Communes in Guangdong's Yangjiang county pioneered a 'four cultures goes to the fields' effort that involved leading peasants in singing and acting, playing musical instruments, singing folk tunes and mountain ballads, and taking books and newspapers into the fields where they were tending crops.[9] Guangdong's model Lechang county organised an all-out effort to saturate the lives of county residents with printed texts. Transcripts of morning radio broadcasts were affixed to bulletin boards alongside newspapers, and in two of the market towns in the county, anti-illiteracy activists patrolled the markets to make certain that signs were affixed to all items of produce for sale, and that all sellers produced written bills of goods, so that consumers could familiarise themselves with the characters for items of produce that they normally consumed.[10]

Beyond remaking ordinary workers and peasants into literate subjects, the movement further aimed to transform them into politically-active and engaged agents capable of sustaining democratic and participatory politics at the social grassroots. In August 1958, the Guangzhou Municipal Party Committee insisted that, once workers and peasants had attained basic literacy skills, they apply them in the exercise of their 'four great freedoms' in order to inspire mass enthusiasm, as well as to help 'everyone understand the responsibility of each individual during cultural revolution, so that all are happy to

teach and ready to learn.'[11] In July 1958, the *Southern Daily* reported that Guangdong's Xifu commune had become known as a 'big character poster village' because the community had taken to resolving its social conflicts through the composing and public posting of literally thousands of handwritten texts.[12] In addition, the formation of civic associations and social organisations that would enliven exchange and debate was encouraged. For example, in 1959, the Guangzhou municipal Culture Department called for an associational revolution to enrich worker's lives beyond the confines of the factory floor. The Culture Department subsequently reported a five-fold increase in the number of clubs established over the previous year—a total of 2,885 opera clubs, singing groups, dance troupes, and intellectual salons had formed in Guangzhou in 1958, and the Department anticipated that the number might increase five-fold again before the end of 1959.[13]

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

This burst of grassroots activity was relatively short-lived: as the disastrous economic consequences of the Great Leap programme set in, cadres at all levels refocussed their attention and resources on the more pressing goal of economic recovery. At China's elite universities, the Great Leap educational reforms had involved efforts to increase student and staff participation in administrative decision-making, to favor students from worker-peasant-soldier backgrounds in the admissions process, and to strengthen the role of the Party and politics in schools (see also Schmalzer's essay in the present volume). However, beginning in 1961, universities began rolling back these efforts. Political viewpoint and class background were downplayed, both in university admissions and in faculty hiring and promotion, and the Great Leap's egalitarian aims were replaced with meritocratic policies. Beneficiaries and supporters of the Great Leap reforms were sidelined; despite their bitter disappointment, many of them continued to agitate for the reinstatement of the Great Leap's educational reforms on university campuses across the country.[14]

These left-leaning students and young lecturers, many of whom had participated in and benefited from the 'education revolution' (*jiaoyu geming*) of the Great Leap Forward, welcomed the first salvos of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The 16 May Notification issued by the Party Central Committee called once again to 'open wide' (*fang*) a process of radical educational reform that would allow 'all people [to] express their opinions freely, so that they dare to speak, dare to criticise, and dare to debate.'[15] Familiar themes and slogans raised during the Great Leap returned: calls to revolutionise both the content and delivery of education, allow the formation of new groups at the social grassroots, and the waging of great debates and public discussions, often through the vehicle of the big character poster. Yet, the locus of power quickly shifted away from the orderly mobilisation of social forces by the Party in 1958 to a complete usurpation of that leading role and agenda by self-proclaimed rebel activists only eight years later. The driver behind this change was Mao himself. In 1961–62, in his reading notes on the Soviet text *Political Economy*, Mao noted the stubborn persistence of 'conservative strata' and 'something like vested interest groups' in socialist society—groups that had benefitted from certain institutions and would therefore resist alterations to existing arrangements.[16] By 1966, Mao had determined that these

forces formed 'a bunch of counterrevolutionary revisionists' that had 'sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and various cultural circles,' and called for them to be criticised, repudiated, and expelled; the Party's Central Committee acquiesced, and the call went out to the grassroots to allow 'all people express their opinions freely,' and for all to dare to speak, criticise, and debate, and hopefully to expose the revisionists from within their midst.[17]

Unsurprisingly, many of the initial targets in May and June 1966 were the so-called 'bourgeois academic' and cultural authorities that were seen to have reversed the ambitious initiatives introduced during the Great Leap. The forms in which those criticisms were delivered followed the patterns of the earlier cultural revolution, including the rapid formation of grassroots associations, the staging of vast public debates in public squares and auditoriums, and the reappearance of big character posters to criticise ideological opponents. The critical difference, of course, was that in 1966 the Party had moved from the instigator of cultural revolution to one of its chief targets, firmly in the crosshairs of the revolutionary masses.

One brief but illustrative measure of how thoroughly the practice of making cultural revolution shifted out of the hands of the Party-state in 1966 is the number of official and unofficial publications during this period. In the mid-1960s, the number of official newspapers in publication fell from 343 in 1966 to 43 in 1967; the number of official journals likewise declined from 191 to a mere 27. At the same time, however, there was an explosion of new mass media produced by independent mass organisations: between 1966 and 1969, at least 5,000 new self-published broadsheets sprang into existence to disseminate news and the political views of various grassroots groups not managed by the normal channels of Party-state control.[18] Mass associations likewise flourished: although many Party-state offices and organisations had suspended their operations by early 1967, independent mass organisations of every shade and stripe flourished at the grassroots, including not only the grassroots Red Guard and rebel student groups, but also spontaneously formed poor peasant associations, workers' pickets, and Mao Zedong Thought study societies, to name a few. Enjoined by Party leaders to 'join up,' over time these myriad groups pledged their allegiance to various coalitions, dispatched delegates to meetings and assemblies, and participated in congresses organised at superordinate levels in a fevered flurry of associational activity.

Despite the tumultuous political struggles that subsequently came to define the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, elements of the pedagogical project endured not only in the form of the 'worker-peasant-soldier universities' (*gongnongbin daxue*) and the 'workers propaganda teams' (*gongxuandui*) of the 1970s (see also Russo's essay in the present volume), but also perhaps most significantly in the vast rustication campaign that dispatched 17 million urban Chinese youths into the countryside to be reeducated (*zai jiaoyu*) by the poor and lower-middle peasants beginning in 1968. Reversing the pattern of the 1958 cultural revolution in which teams of students and teachers brought literacy and cultural enrichment to workers and the peasantry, the purpose of the rustication campaign was instead to teach urban youths 'proletarian virtues,' instilling in them a love of hard labour and a Spartan way of life, and an interest in politics and class struggle—in short, to transform them into 'peasants with a socialist consciousness and culture.' Most would stay in the countryside for more than a decade.[19]

From Cultural Revolution to Cultural Construction

How are we to understand the transition from the sweeping upsurge from the social grassroots in 1966 to the Party-controlled modes of cultural governance that we see today? Interestingly, references to the practice of cultural revolution in official media did not cease with Mao's death, nor even with the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's control over the Party-state in 1978. Instead, references to the practice of cultural revolution appear in official media throughout the 1980s, albeit with far less frequency than during previous decades. This trend is even more salient after the suppression of the 1989 protests, when the term 'cultural revolution' in the sense of an ongoing process or practice all but disappears from official discourse in favor of more robustly managerial terms like 'cultural development,' 'cultural creation,' and 'cultural construction.' As Wang Hui has suggested, the suppression of the mass protest in 1989 can perhaps best be understood as the end of the political sequence that began with the 'Asian Sixties' in the PRC—a period during which people's movements across Asia challenged the Cold War and the Western-dominated capitalist world order.[20] The closing off of the sequence and its more radical possibilities with the brutal suppression of the 1989 demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and across China announced the inauguration of a new cycle characterised by a 'depoliticised or anti-political political ideology' that enervates popular political participation and forms of mass activism. The transition from mass practices and discourses of cultural revolution to the Party-managed processes of 'cultural construction' mirrors the Party's own transformation from a revolutionary to an administrative party that is absorbed into the state apparatus.

The intent of the post-Mao Party-state's project of cultural construction is detailed in the *China Youth Daily* Ideology and Theory Department's pivotal 1992 manifesto, 'Realistic Responses and Strategic Options for China after the Soviet Upheaval,' which laid the responsibility of creating 'a brand new, sufficiently ecumenical culture resting on Chinese traditional culture' in the hands of the Party.[21] This signal document, composed by high-ranking and influential Party technocrats in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis, urged central Party strategists to regard 'creative transformation of traditional Chinese culture [as] a rich spiritual resource for safeguarding the socialist system, protecting the interests of the state and nation, and promoting the cause of modernisation.'

Historically, one chief resource of the Mao-era Party-state was its considerable power to mobilise mass participation and enlist the resources and energies of social forces to achieve ideological and practical ends. Yet in its transition from a revolutionary to a ruling party, the CCP has replaced Mao-era practices of cultural transformation with a broader depoliticising project of cultural governance driven by the legitimation and perpetuation of the existing state system.[22] Whereas the mass mobilisations that took place under the banner of revolutionising culture during the Mao era aimed to enlist the power and creativity of the masses in the building of a revolutionary new socialist order, post-Mao efforts at cultural construction aim to maintain and consolidate the power of the contemporary Party-state, rather than to develop direct democratic and mass participatory politics.