


# Cultural Revolution—China

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The Chinese Cultural Revolution (CR), the full title of which was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was the largest and most important of the ideological campaigns of Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Because of the political movement's length, scale, and destabilizing effects, its significance for the history of China under Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) he led was enormous. There is general agreement that Mao was by far the single most important figure in the campaign and that the Cultural Revolution gave rise to a massive personality cult surrounding him. Yet it was also a mass movement, involving many millions of people and considerable struggle between different sectors of Chinese society over the movement's control and direction. There was consequently much violence and even periods of localized civil war. However, Mao and his followers presented the CR to the people in Marxist ideological terms, the central feature being an extreme emphasis on class struggle, dubbed "the key link."

## What Caused the Cultural Revolution?

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Mao, the CCP chairman from the early 1940s until his death, had both ideological and political reasons for initiating the CR. He opposed the moderate economic policies that his former comrades in the CCP leadership had implemented following the failure of his own radical Great Leap Forward economic campaign, begun in 1958. He regarded the CCP as beginning to display the characteristics of a new ruling class and feared that the growing elitism and bureaucratization of the CCP would, if left unchecked, spell the end of his radical notions of revolution and result in a "capitalist restoration." The CR was thus both an ideological campaign and a struggle for power. Mao was supported by Lin Biao (1908–1971), Mao's chief deputy until 1971, and by his own wife, Jiang Qing (1913–1991). Their opponents in the CCP hierarchy were led by Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969), who in April 1959 had replaced Mao as China's president, and by Liu's chief supporter, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997).

For Mao, the outcome of the CR would determine fundamental questions of policy regarding China's



economic and political direction. He believed in the need for an increasing socialization of China's economy and society and for continual revitalization of the revolution through a campaign-style of politics that both mobilized the masses and prevented the party and its cadres from becoming elitist. Liu, conversely, believed in the importance of careful economic planning under the control of the CCP. He also believed a retreat from the radical economic policies of the Great Leap Forward was necessary, and he reintroduced measures, such as rural markets and private farm plots for the peasants, which encouraged production through offering material incentives to the Chinese people. Mao believed Liu's policies facilitated the emergence of a new bourgeoisie, and it was consequently those "persons in authority taking the capitalist road" such as Liu and his supporters who were to become the main targets during the CR.

## The Early Stages of the Cultural Revolution

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Opposed by most of the party leadership, Mao turned to China's students and the People's Liberation Army under the control of Lin Biao for support in his struggle against the "capitalist roaders" within the CCP. Frustrated by attempts by the mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen (1902–1997), to limit the CR's scope to strictly cultural affairs (Peng was initially put in charge of the movement), Mao had Peng purged and established a Cultural Revolution Group under the control of Jiang Qing and Chen Boda (1904–1989). This group encouraged and directed much of the radical activity over the next few years. In late May 1966, secondary and university students began to organize themselves into groups called Red Guards, which were central to the mass struggles and violence that characterized the CR. The first official party document on the CR was the sixteen-point "Decision" adopted by the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee (August 1966). The "Decision," which set the intensely ideological tone of the CR and provided guidelines to run it, declared the CR to be a new stage in China's revolution, one that "touches people to their very souls." It emphasized the need to struggle against and overthrow those in authority taking the capitalist road and

endorsed the struggle in education against "bourgeois" academic authorities. The "Decision" did, however, caution against violence as a means of resolving contradictions or differences among the people. It also declared that the "great majority" of cadres—party administrators and professionals—were "good" or "comparatively good," suggesting that Red Guards should not attack them without good reason. In the event, the commands against both violence and attacking "good" cadres were frequently disregarded, as Red Guard factions attempted to outdo one another in demonstrating their devotion to Chairman Mao.

On 18 August 1966, Mao, Lin Biao, and other CR leaders reviewed a mass rally of over 1 million Red Guards in Tiananmen Square in central Beijing. Some half-dozen such mass rallies were held in the square from then until late November. Rallies were also held in other cities. These helped to spawn a one-sided revolutionary atmosphere that brooked no view on any topic but the one supposedly authorized by Mao, with the result that fanaticism became commonplace.

The Red Guard organizations spread through society and across China, believing they had a duty to destroy old culture and habits, including anything traditional, and to establish new, supposedly socialist, things in their place. The Red Guards subjected teachers to often-violent criticism and effectively closed down the education system. They frequently spear-headed the attack against the "capitalist roaders" within the CCP, ransacking party offices, parading cadres through the streets wearing dunce hats, and subjecting these persons to humiliating criticism sessions that often ended in violence. The ideological orientation of the Red Guard organizations was variable, and in the hothouse atmosphere of the CR, fueled by the cult of personality surrounding Mao, these ideological differences often ended in pitched battles between rival Red Guards, resulting in numerous casualties. From August 1966, Red Guards also destroyed or damaged religious buildings and attacked and humiliated their clergy.

In September 1966, *Mao zhuxi yulu* (Sayings of Chairman Mao Zedong), usually described as The Little Red Book, was published. This book, which became an icon for Mao's followers, especially the Red Guards, contained the nucleus of his thought. According to official figures, 350 million copies had been printed by the end of 1967. The obsession with following Mao's thought saw an emphasis on class struggle and "serving the people" (the title of Mao's most popular article) rather than on oneself or one's family, and on demanding sacrifices from ordinary people on behalf of socialism and the revolution. Meanwhile, the attacks on "old culture" created an extraordinarily narrow and restrictive cultural environment. Very few books were published other than those expressing Mao's thought or the CCP or revolutionary history. Many literary figures were humiliated and even persecuted to death, notably the famous fiction writer and playwright Lao She, who died 24 August 1966. All traditional theater was banned, and Jiang Qing imposed a theory of "model" dramas, based on a forum held in February 1966, which insisted that all literature and art should reflect and propagate the class struggle and revolutionary heroism.

## Developments to the Ninth CCP Congress

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The Red Guards' failure to observe the injunction against violence as well as the heightened radicalism and fanaticism of late 1966 and early 1967 led the CR leaders, in January 1967, to command the People's Liberation Army to restore order, extending its control to many civilian institutions. "Revolutionary committees" were then set up in the whole country from every province down to every factory, school, and people's commune to take over the power of old administrative authorities. These committees were a new administrative model regarded as appropriate for a mass revolutionary movement like the CR. They contained representatives of the military, the Red Guards (the masses), and experienced cadres who had

survived the CR relatively unscathed. However, the military soon occupied a prominent leadership role in these revolutionary committees.

A mid-1967 resurgence of radical Red Guard activity led to violent conflict between the Red Guards and the military in several areas. The most serious was a three-week civil war in July and early August in and around Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province central China. Fanned by Jiang Qing, this war ended in a victory for Mao and the Red Guard forces when the commander of the Wuhan military region, Chen Zaidao, was dismissed. In the international arena, Red Guard–inspired disturbances flared in Hong Kong, and there was a savage attack on the British chargé d'affaires office in Beijing on 22 August.

After another period of relative order, a further resurgence of fighting occurred from April to July 1968, with many small-scale civil wars in southern China, especially in the Guangxi Autonomous Region, bordering Vietnam. A war in April and early May in Wuzhou, in far-eastern Guangxi, brought about large-scale destruction in the city and the torture and deaths of several thousand Red Guards. Ultra-leftist groups plundered trains taking weapons to Vietnam, where the Vietnam War was raging.

Seeing that a continuation of this situation would throw the country into civil war, Mao moved to end the chaos. Early in the morning of 28 July 1968, Mao, Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, and other leaders interviewed several Red Guard leaders, condemned them, and began the process of sending large numbers of Red Guards to the countryside. This was carried out supposedly to broaden the revolutionary experience of the Red Guards, but the real motive was to get them out of the cities, thereby reducing the level of conflict and violence.

In October 1968, a CCP Central Committee plenum condemned Liu Shaoqi as a traitor and sent him to prison, where he died on 12 November 1969. Not until February 1980 was his death revealed to the world. After this revelation, he was rehabilitated by the post-Mao leadership of Deng Xiaoping, which adopted an extremely hostile view of the CR.

The Ninth Party Congress, held in April 1969, ended the most important and radical phase of the CR and stressed unity and the need to rebuild the CCP. Appearing as a total victory for Mao, it even declared Lin Biao his "close comrade-in-arms and successor" as well as the sole CCP vice-chairman. However, challenges to the CR's line were far from over.

## The Lin Biao Affair and the Later Stages of the Cultural Revolution

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The years from the Ninth Party Congress to Mao's death were characterized by a retreat from the radicalism of the early years of the CR, as the party rebuilt itself and reasserted its authority. Victims of this process were often those who had most ardently supported Mao's radical line. A campaign against Mao's erstwhile ally Chen Boda was initiated in September 1970, and the following year saw the Lin Biao affair, probably the most unusual example of intra-elite political conflict during the CR. According to official accounts, Lin and his main followers, including his son and wife, had concocted a plot to assassinate Mao but were killed in an air crash in September 1971 while fleeing from China after their attempt was exposed. Lin's death in the air crash is not in doubt, but there have been many explanations of his fate, and Western scholars are generally skeptical that he had tried to assassinate Mao. What is clear is that to have Mao's "close

comrade-in-arms and successor" condemned as the chairman's would-be assassin severely undercut the power of the Left. It also raised serious doubts among many Chinese about the validity of the CR and whether Mao's judgment was as reliable as the almost godlike status accorded him implied.

At the same time as the Lin Biao affair, enormous changes were taking shape in the field of China's foreign relations. Following the largely self-imposed isolation of the early phase of the CR, China moved to rejoin the international community. In October 1971, China was admitted into the United Nations, and in February 1972, the U.S. president Richard Nixon visited China. The first half of the 1970s saw China establish full diplomatic relations with numerous countries, including several major Western countries.

Signs of the relatively relaxed atmosphere continued in 1973, although factional struggles within the CCP leadership persisted. Deng Xiaoping was again referred to as vice-premier in April, after seven years in disgrace. The Tenth CCP Congress of August 1973 saw the trusted premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) replace Lin Biao as Mao's first deputy and CCP vicechairman. On the other hand, Wang Hongwen, a radical young worker (and later a member of the Gang of Four) from Shanghai, emerged among the other vice-chairmen, showing that the influence of the CR was still alive. A series of ideological campaigns, initiated by either Mao or his radical supporters, followed. These were aimed at keeping alive enthusiasm for the CR. The last of these, beginning in February 1976, saw Deng Xiaoping condemned as an "arch unrepentant capitalist roader still on the capitalist road" and ousted once again from his leadership positions.

With Mao's death in September 1976, the CR lost its major source of inspiration. According to the Resolution of the 1981 Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, the arrest the next month of the Gang of Four (Mao's widow Jiang Qing and three of her influential radical supporters, including Wang Hongwen) signaled the end of the CR.

## The Cultural Revolution Assessed as a Setback to Development

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The 1981 Resolution was unequivocal in its judgment, roundly condemning the CR and claiming that the CR had "led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe to the Party, the state, and the whole people." However, despite the authoritative status of the Resolution, there are numerous divergent views, from both Western scholars and Chinese commentators, of the causes, course and consequences, and even the dates, of the CR. Yet most agree that the CR caused much suffering to millions of people and set back China's development for several years.

Deng Xiaoping returned to power in July 1977 and, from December 1978, was able to dictate an economic policy that was hostile to the spirit of the CR in nearly all respects. The condemnation of "old culture" gave way to a major revival of traditional arts. The revolutionary committees were dismantled, along with almost every other idea and practice spawned by the CR. It is thus evident that the CR failed to achieve the radical socialist objectives Mao had set for it. The CR nevertheless provided one of the most important chapters in the political and economic history of contemporary China, and it is only against its backdrop that the increasingly pro-market economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping after 1978 can be understood.

*Nick Knight and Colin Mackerras*

See also: [Deng Xiaoping](#) ; [Gang of Four](#) ; [Great Leap Forward](#) ; [Lin Biao](#) ; [Liu Shaoqi](#) ; [Mao Zedong](#) ; [Red Guard Organizations](#) ; [Zhou Enlai](#)

## Further Reading

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