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# Reassessing the Cultural Revolution

Lucian W. Pye

Two decades after Mao Zedong ignited the Great Proletarian Revolution there is still no satisfactory accounting for the upheaval which Beijing now says caused millions of deaths and left some 100 million people scarred victims.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary imagination cannot grasp what took place during those “10 bad years of great disaster” (*shinian haojie*) as the Chinese now call them. Since so much at that time defied conventional theories of politics, outsiders quickly put the phenomenon out of mind once the turmoil ceased. For the Chinese, however, it has not been so simple. Those who personally suffered have tended to summarize the story according to their individual tragedies. Chinese seeking a larger perspective are caught between the inexplicableness of its causes and the incalculability of its consequences.

Time has not made it easier to assess the Cultural Revolution. Partly because it was such a multi-dimensional event, touching people in so many different ways, no established form of analysis is capable of embracing its totality. There was not one institution in the country, from the family and the school to the Party and the government, which was not profoundly affected. Authorities today can attribute to those horrendous events the woes and failings of China, and they will suggest, whenever convenient, the frightful thought that without their leadership there could be another Cultural Revolution.

In looking back now and reassessing the Cultural Revolution, scholars must acknowledge that even as they strived for historical objectivity, they have been decisively, then and now, influenced by what the Chinese have had to say about the event. Twenty years ago pictures of impassioned Red Guards marching across Tienanmen Square, waving their Little Red Books to the Chairman-author, were taken as proof that Mao's dream of an ideologically purer generation of revolutionaries might be in the making. Contradictory testimony of violence in offices, schools and work-places, and evidence of the suffering of people sent to the countryside were not entirely ignored, but they were frequently downplayed and treated, as the Chinese said they should be, as merely a part of the inevitable cost of revolutionary progress. Many scholars of China were not taken in by Beijing's claims of technological innovation by uneducated workers or of miraculous economic achievements, but there were not many either who publicly repudiated such claims or pointed to the disaster that

1. The impossibility of establishing exact casualty figures for such a disaster results in ritualistic numbers becoming the standardized ones, based at best on remarks by officials who may or may not have much statistical evidence. (See, for example, Li Huo-cheng, “Chinese Communists reveal for the first time the number 20 million deaths for the Cultural Revolution,” *Ming Bao (Daily News)*, 26 October 1981, p. 3, and cited in Alan P.L. Liu, *How China is Ruled* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1986, p. 56). Other great tragedies of modern China—like the Taiping Rebellion, land reform, the Great Leap—have also been dehumanized by the debatable quality of their casualty figures.

was the Chinese economy. Even more inexcusable was the number of supposedly sophisticated analysts who were as gullible as the naïve Red Guards in believing that Mao's dictums in practice would actually work to the advantage of the peasants and reduce inequalities in Chinese society. Simon Leys, along with other critics, has reminded us of the foolish views of some foreign observers. Intellectuals, whose obligation it is to be sceptical, should have seen through Mao's equalitarian rhetoric and recognized the inevitable consequences of his policies.

Therefore, in the light of what happened before, we should be cautious in accepting the official Chinese view that there are no redeeming features of that period. Any serious reassessment must try to get behind the political rhetoric of the day – even if it means having to be sceptical about one's own best wishes for China.

With this qualification in mind, let us turn to three subjects that belong at the centre of any systematic reassessment of the Cultural Revolution. The first is the question of causes and origins. What have we learned that is new about how it all began? And at a deeper level of analysis, what can we now say in trying to explain how Chinese society could possibly have produced such a convulsion?

Next we need to reassess how individuals experienced the Cultural Revolution. What do we now know about their personal crises that can help us re-evaluate the Cultural Revolution? What has been the lasting state of mind and spirit of the survivors, both victims and victimizers? Finally, there is the summarizing question of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the major institutions of Chinese society. What can we now say are the likely lasting effects of that period of turmoil on the key institutions that will determine the future shape of China's government, economy and society?

*High Marks on Immediate Causes, Low Ones on Fundamental Causes*

From the perspective of 20 years after the events it seems that western scholarship, guided in no small measure by Chinese pronouncements and analyses, deserves high marks for understanding the immediate political and ideological causes of the Cultural Revolution. The meeting ground of journalists, government analysts and academics defined an arena of Chinese political action which comfortably encompassed the motives and calculations of the day-to-day political interactions of the Chinese leaders. We seemed to be able to penetrate quickly the confusion and to sort out who was doing what to whom. Missing (and still largely unexplored) were examinations of the deeper cultural and societal forces that made possible such a unique phenomenon. Speculation about fundamental causes of the Cultural Revolution has not gone much beyond the rather superficial interpretations by the Chinese themselves.

Chinese officials have not been reticent to speak out about the troubles they trace to the Cultural Revolution; indeed they generally lump together all the mistakes of Mao's rule and say they were a part of that terrible time when reckless attacks were mounted against the "capitalist roaders in the Party" who were the supposed champions of "revisionism." There have, however, been very few official revelations about either the causes or the motivations behind these evil episodes. The most authoritative statement from Beijing was the resolution of the Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of 27 June 1981 entitled on "On questions of Party history." That resolution went far in pointing the finger at Mao, sacred figure that he was, saying that the Cultural Revolution was "... initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong." Moreover, the indictment holds that, "Comrade Mao Zedong's prestige reached a peak and he began to get arrogant. . . . He gradually divorced himself from practice and from the masses, acted more and more arbitrarily and subjectively, and increasingly put himself above the Central Committee of the Party." Mao's "Left errors" opened the way for "Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, Zhang Chunqiao and others . . . to exploit the situation" so that "The Ninth Congress of the Party legitimized the erroneous theories and practices of the 'cultural revolution.'"

Although the resolution surprised the Chinese public for bluntly criticizing Mao, it also sought to protect his memory by saying that, "Comrade Mao Zedong was a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist." In spite of making "gross mistakes" during the Cultural Revolution "his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary." On the other hand, the official formula that the failings of the late Mao were more than offset by the accomplishments of the early Mao is not particularly convincing because China today follows very few of the early Mao's policies. No explanations are given for why the government has abandoned everything associated with what it claims were the positive contributions of the early, or good, Mao and why it follows instead, at least in foreign affairs, policies introduced in the very last years of Mao's rule.

In terms of reassessing the immediate political causes of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese have provided only a few revelations which will result in some adjustments to our earlier conventional interpretations. No doubt, some mysteries of detail will be cleared up in time and we may achieve a better understanding of, say, Peng Zhen and Kang Sheng's roles in the early group of five, Lo Ruiqing's disappearance, and whether Deng was "waving a red flag to oppose the red flag" when he made his militant pro-Mao speeches. And, of course, there is still much to be learned about the Lin Biao affair. Titbits of information may clear up some points, but also produce new debates. Roderick MacFarquhar has, for example, argued in the second volume of his planned trilogy, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, that the conventional view that Mao ignited the

Cultural Revolution by urging Yao Wenyan to criticize Wu Han's play, Hai Rui's *Dismissal from Office*, is probably a "red herring" because he had unearthed evidence that Mao himself had made an off-hand remark about Hai Rui's virtues. So far most historians uphold the conventional judgement. MacFarquhar seems to be on solid ground, however, in suspecting that the interpretation of the Cultural Revolution as essentially a struggle between "two lines" is probably incorrect because at the beginning both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were still obedient followers of the Chairman. However, until MacFarquhar completes the third volume of his trilogy we are not likely to have explanations that go much beyond those offered in the shelf of books that came out soon after the event.

These works in varying degrees attributed the Cultural Revolution to such factors as Mao's personality, factional conflicts over policies, succession power struggles, the appeals of revolutionary utopianism, and the organizational problems inherent in governing a country of China's size and stage of development. Thus, for example, Lifton found motivations for the Cultural Revolution in Mao's personality, while Solomon singled out the tensions between Mao's motivations and Chinese traditional political culture.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent biographers who have had the advantages of greater access to Chinese sources – such as Bloodworth, Hollingworth and Terrill – have been able to enrich their accounts with anecdotes and gossip, but they have added little that explains Mao's behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the early works of Bridgham, Karnow and Rice clearly identified issues in the elite conflicts, while later works, such as Liu's, have added details but not enough significantly to alter the basic interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Early works which stressed policy issues, such as those by Ahn, Chang, Dittmer, Domes, and Lee have stood the test of time.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, China specialists deserve congratulations for their early interpretations of the immediate causes of the Cultural Revolution. Of course, scholarly debates will continue over such questions as the relative importance of policy choices and Mao's personal arrogance,

2. Robert J. Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vantage Books, 1968); Richard Solomon, *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

3. Dennis Bloodworth, *The Messiah and the Mandarins* (New York: Atheneum, 1982); Clare Hollingworth, *Mao and the Men Against Him* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985); Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

4. Philip Bridgham, "Mao's Cultural Revolution: origin and development," *The China Quarterly* (CQ), No. 19 (January 1967), pp. 1–35; Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China* (Viking: New York, 1972); Edward E. Rice, *Mao's Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Alan P. L. Liu, *Political Culture and Group Conflict in Communist China* (Santa Barbara: California: Clio Press, 1976).

5. Byung-Joon Ahn, *Chinese Politics and the Cultural Revolution* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); Parris H. Chang, *Power and Policy in China* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shao-ch'i and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Jurgen Domes, *The Internal Politics of China: 1949–1972* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1973).

or the significance of this or that action, and precisely where different actors stood at different stages of the upheaval. Interestingly, the strength of that early research was its empirical substance and not its methodological sophistication. This is paradoxical because in the confusion of the times solid facts were hard to come by while loose speculation would have been easier. The intense effort at the time to get the story straight, in the tradition of sound journalism or government reporting, produced two interesting contradictions.

First, there was a tendency to take seriously all that was said and done by the leaders with the result that rhetoric about goals or purposes were treated as the real motivations of the major actors. Presumed subjective differences became automatically objective differences in policy preferences. Thus, any distinctions between the suspected wishes or preferences of Chinese leaders became automatically the motives of their actions, and hence the “causes” of the Cultural Revolution. This was a striking reversal of the normal academic practice of giving priority to objective rather than subjective considerations in explaining historical events. The thought that we accurately knew the motives and desires of Mao and all the others may have come from the fact that the Cultural Revolution was such a manifestly emotional event that subjective considerations seemed properly to deserve considerable legitimacy in explaining what was taking place. Yet, at the same time, most scholars shied away from explicit psychological interpretations of the presumed motives. Instead, they practised a questionable methodological legerdemain: they transformed their speculations about motives into statements about policy preferences, which they then treated as having all the qualities of objective reality. What was subjective and psychological was thus dramatically reified and thereby transported to the more comfortable domain of presumed hard data, appropriate for objective analysis. Largely ignored was the basic truth that politics is a process infused with deception, especially about motives and preferences. As dubious as this practice would seem to be methodologically, nevertheless, it did produce surprisingly solid works of scholarship.

The second striking characteristic of the literature on the causes of the Cultural Revolution is that it focused narrowly on immediate considerations and very little on more profound questions about social and political causation. Explanations remained largely at the level of trying to determine the wishes and personal politics of the leaders and the passions of young people in particular. Few scholars asked deeper questions about why Chinese society as a whole reacted in such extreme ways to the initiatives of a small group of leaders. The Chinese have not helped to explore deeper social and cultural considerations, for Chinese are not generally given to soul searching or introspection. When the Sixth Plenum Resolution went beyond blaming Mao and the “gang of four,” it only suggested that the Party lacked experience in applying “the scientific works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin” to the “swift advent of the newborn socialist society

and for socialist construction on a national scale.” Beyond that, the Resolution could only note that, “Feudalism in China has had a long history,” and that “it remains difficult to eliminate the evil ideology and political influence of centuries of feudal autocracy.” There have however, been no deeper examinations of such traditional Chinese cultural traits – possibly because it would be awkward given the current goal of building “socialism with *Chinese* characteristics,” since it would force people to ask whether “Chineseness” constitutes good or bad traits in the minds of the leadership. Instead, the Beijing authorities prefer to assert over and over again their pledge of “never again,” a formula that has the dual advantages of increasing their popularity while also stifling criticism of their current policies. Both explicitly and implicitly they have suggested that the most likely alternative to their current programmes would be another Cultural Revolution. The nightmare memories of that experience are enough to make most of the population thankful for the current reforms and disinclined to think about any further, and possibly more radical, alternatives. Needless to say, the Chinese leaders are following the conventional political practices of many ruling groups who enjoy caricaturing any opposition as being potentially disastrous for the country.

For our purposes in reassessing scholarship on the Cultural Revolution it remains puzzling that in analysing causes western scholars have not explored more profound social and cultural considerations. Western studies of, say, Nazism have generally made more over the character of German culture and the state of German society than the motivations of Hitler and his associates. It almost seems as though there is a strange reversal in the index of respectability in the interpretation of history according to continents: in Europe it is seen as trivializing history to suggest that profound events were no more than the interplay of individual personalities, while in analysing Chinese history it is considered offensive to suggest that traditional cultural factors might have been decisive.

Yet clearly, any ultimate explanation of the causes or origins of the Cultural Revolution must get at the question of how was it possible for so many Chinese to behave as they did. What was it in the nature of Chinese culture and society that not only permitted but encouraged the extremism of that period? Why was it that the Chinese, in their frustration over sacrificing so much to gain so little in their obsession with “wealth and power,” could explode with hatred towards all forms of authority while idealizing the pristine virtues they thought they saw in Mao Zedong? What was the connection between their faith in the miraculous powers of rebellion and the heterodox traditions of populist Taoism–Buddhism mysticism? Was the Cultural Revolution the latest playing out of the profound tensions between the two Chinese cultures which Joseph Levenson and Franz Schurmann have vividly described as the dynamic behind the periodic peasant turbulences that China has had from Han times to

those of the Yellow Turbans, the Taipings and the Boxers during which rationality gives way to a passionate trust in magic?<sup>6</sup>

It would, of course, be too simplistic to say that the Maoism of the Cultural Revolution was a resurfacing of the traditional rebel culture and that Deng's pragmatism is no more than a modernized version of the elitist culture. It is probably more accurate to argue, as I have done elsewhere, that in modern Chinese culture there are some profound psychological ambivalences which are responsive to themes in both Maoism and Dengism.<sup>7</sup> Serious reassessments of the Cultural Revolution will eventually have to explore deeper levels of Chinese political behaviour in order to explain the ease with which Chinese society was able to go to the extreme of Maoism and then just as suddenly could abandon it for Deng's "pragmatism." The Chinese themselves will probably not provide sophisticated guidance for understanding their propensity for extremes. The leaders have their own simplistic explanations of the causes of the Cultural Revolution, and Chinese intellectuals have at best a weak tradition of critical introspection. They are prisoners of the idea that patriotism prohibits criticism of the state for many reasons, not the least being, as Jerome Ch'en has pointed out, that in the Chinese language the same word, *guojia*, is used for both state and country, and therefore, "When one criticizes the state one is suspected of criticizing the country, hence treacherously to no good."<sup>8</sup>

It is true that a few Chinese writers have tentatively asked questions about the relationship of Chinese society and the causes of the Cultural Revolution. Ba Jin, for example, has written: "It has taken me a long time but I am now able to admit to myself that the responsibility (for the Cultural Revolution) does not lie solely with Lin Biao and the "gang of four". . . . They could not have done it, if we had not let ourselves be taken in."<sup>9</sup> Although a remarkable confession for a Chinese political activist intellectual, it is still not a very perceptive explanation for what happened. This attempt at a personal statement does, however, bring us to our second area of reassessment, the Cultural Revolution as experienced at the individual level.

### *Reassessing the Personal Experience*

In contrast to the near silence about the deeper causes of the Cultural Revolution, there has been a flood of literature from China telling about individual sufferings during the "10 years of great

6. *China: An Interpretive History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 14–20.

7. "Chinese cultural dualism," Alexander Eckstein Memorial Lecture, Center of Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, April 1985 (forthcoming).

8. Jerome Ch'en in review of Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy*, *CQ*, No. 105 (March 1986), p. 144.

9. Ba Jin, *Random Thoughts*, transl. by Geremie Barme (Hong Kong: Joint Publications Co., 1964), p. 76. I am indebted to Merle Goldman for bringing to my attention Ba Jin's views.

disaster.” Some of the writers are disillusioned Red Guards, others were stigmatized with “bad class” backgrounds and had to endure cruel humiliations and violent physical torture, including spending many years in the countryside and in labour camps. These accounts, called by the Chinese the “wounded literature” (*shanghen wenxue*) after a Lu Xinhua story, have personalized the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution in ways that went well beyond the description by western writers at the time. Although Karnow and Rice, among others, reported on conflicts in organizations and the mistreatment of Party leaders accused of being “capitalist roaders,” the extent of the human suffering and deaths did not dominate the initial western assessments of the Cultural Revolution. The inclination to cling to the image of a benign, if somewhat misguided, Mao Zedong endured long after the evidence of his sordid treatment of old comrades had surfaced. Indeed, the most serious failure of western scholarship in its early analysis of the Cultural Revolution was unquestionably its refusal to acknowledge human rights violations. Self-professed liberals seemingly turned a deaf ear to reports of victims driven to suicide and of tens of thousands being dispatched to labour camps and prison.

It was not that information was lacking because almost immediately after the mass demonstrations in Tienanmen Square China-watchers received reports about disillusioned former Red Guards, many of whom escaped to Hong Kong and elsewhere. We had, for example, the detailed account by Ken Ling in his *Revenge of Heaven*,<sup>10</sup> and those of people interviewed by Frolic,<sup>11</sup> Raddock,<sup>12</sup> Bennett and Montaperto,<sup>13</sup> among others. In retrospect it seems that the horror of what was taking place in China was minimized because it was incorrectly assumed that refugees were biased. In fact, the biasing was in the other direction, because first the refugees sought credibility by modestly understating their personal troubles, and then the analysts deemed it appropriate further to tone down their descriptions. Just as westerners intellectually knew of the existence of Soviet labour camps but required a Solzhenitsyn to give a human dimension to the horrors of the Gulag, so it took Liang Heng’s and Judith Shapiro’s *Son of Revolution*<sup>14</sup> to make the same point about the Cultural Revolution. Reassessment of the personal dimensions of the trauma was also facilitated by the present official sanctions by Beijing for speaking “bitterness” about all aspects of the Cultural Revolution. Sceptics, indeed, have noted that since the authorities today approve of complaining about the evils of the Cultural Revolution, such complaints should probably be treated with some of the caution with

10. Published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1972.

11. B. Michael Frolic, *Mao’s People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

12. David Raddock, *Political Behavior of Adolescents in China: The Cultural Revolution in Kwangchow* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).

13. Gordon A. Bennett and Ronald N. Montaperto, *Red Guard: The Political Biography of Dai Hsiao-ai* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1982).

14. Published by Random House, New York, 1983.

which Mao's "achievements" should have been greeted. However, even though it is true that Chinese culture does give considerable licence to public complaining about mistreatment, still the volume of the stories of suffering is so great that there can be little doubt that the times were bad for large numbers of people.

In reassessing the individual effects of the Cultural Revolution, it is still hard to judge the likely lasting psychological consequences of the experience. Apart from the works of a few major writers, most of the "wounded literature" contains little introspection, but many slogans, and places blame on "Lin Biao and the 'gang of four'" and their followers. Indeed, reading through these stories one is left unsure as to whether the Cultural Revolution will have any lasting effects on the collective Chinese psyche at all. Most of the stories document physical hardships, but the descriptions are limited mainly to objective descriptions and are virtually devoid of deep subjective probings. It is therefore not surprising that there are mixed judgements as to the most significant lasting consequences of the Cultural Revolution. Merle Goldman has observed that these may not be entirely negative because the experience has instilled in many Chinese a readiness to challenge authority and a healthy scepticism about the promises and motives of political leaders.<sup>15</sup> Having been taken in once and led down a disastrous path, the victims do not intend to be so gullible again. They are even treating with circumspection the appeals and promises of Deng Xiaoping and his designated successors. Liang Heng has confirmed such a view by saying that while others have called the victims China's "lost generation" they are also China's "thoughtful generation."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, on his return visit to China he found a variety of responses to the "nightmare," including victimizers who needed to expiate their guilt. He also found people who in spite of great suffering were now enthusiastically adapting to the new era.

Against such constructive judgements stands the evidence gathered by Anne F. Thurston, who through skilful interviewing has brought to light the degree to which significant numbers of victims were, according to her judgement, psychologically traumatized.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing that the Cultural Revolution was comparable neither to a sudden disaster nor a holocaust, she calls it an "extreme situation," characterized by a profound sense of loss – "loss of culture and of spiritual values; loss of hope and ideals; loss of time, truth, and of life; loss, in short, of nearly everything that gives meaning to life."<sup>18</sup> She is

15. Merle Goldman, "Wenhua dageming de fei xiaoji yingsheng," ("The non-negative influence of the Cultural Revolution"), in *Zhishi fenzi (The Chinese Intellectual)*, Spring 1986, pp. 47–49.

16. Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *After the Nightmare* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986), p. 5.

17. Thurston's book length study will appear in the winter of 1986/87, but she has produced two instalment articles, "Victims of China's Cultural Revolution: the invisible wounds," Pt I, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Winter 1984–85), pp. 599–620; and Pt II, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 5–27.

18. *Ibid.* Vol. 57, pp. 605–606.

convinced that many, if not most, of her informants have manifested “post-traumatic stress disorders.” Above all, they express, in varying degrees, feelings of “survivor’s guilt” – why should they have been so fortunate when others were not? None was able to account for what happened in large part because all tended to rely upon denial as a defence mechanism in order to gain the resilience necessary to carry on living. “No Chinese with whom I have spoken has ever pretended to be able to explain the Cultural Revolution – or in any case not fully, not completely. No one has yet been able fully to integrate that experience into his or her life.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, by noting the tremendous hold that patriotism has on all the Chinese she spoke with, Thurston is able to explain the apparent contradiction of the Cultural Revolution as being a soul-searing experience yet something they describe in only shallow clichés. Patriotism makes it impossible for them to analyse Chinese society or to criticize their political system for fear of appearing disloyal.

Different victims (and different victimizers) have had their quite individual reactions. Individuals will interpret what happens in a collectivity in unique ways, depending upon their own distinctive personalities. Hence, in the years to come, researchers will be able to collect, as Harold Isaacs has done, a rich variety of accounts even among people in similar situations.<sup>20</sup> Yet there is also the reality of a collective memory. What is likely to be the collective consensus of the Chinese people as to the human meaning of the Cultural Revolution? Will it incorporate the spirit of scepticism hypothesized by Merle Goldman? Will it come closer to Liang Heng’s concern that Chinese should never forget the lesson of the Cultural Revolution, including the dangers of their tradition of obedience to authority and their thirst for revenge because so much must be “bottled up inside”?<sup>21</sup> Or will the ultimate consequences be closer to Anne Thurston’s judgement that the psychic damage was so great that it can only be overcome by the passions of patriotism, which could produce a virulent form of nationalism?

These questions are of significance for two reasons. First, there is the fundamental issue of how capable the survivors will be in reviving and making effective the institutions essential for realizing the current goals of modernization. Secondly, will the cumulative effects of the Cultural Revolution on the individual produce a basic change in the collective character of Chinese, with respect in particular to what they expect of their political system? Will they have learned the folly of trusting the state so completely, which linguistically they so easily confuse with the idea of a nurturing national family? Since the issue of the consequences of the Cultural Revolution for the individual is thus so closely related to the effects of that experience on Chinese institutions, I will defer judgement until I have examined the third

19. *Ibid.* Vol. 58, p. 20.

20. Harold R. Isaacs, *Re-Encounters in China* (Armok, NY: M. E. Sharp, 1985).

21. Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *After the Nightmare*, pp. 238–39.

area for reassessment, that of the consequences of the Cultural Revolution on China's public institutions.

### *The Astonishing Revival of Institutions*

Second only to the suffering of individuals was the damage the Cultural Revolution did to all types of institutions. Not only was the Party decimated, but government ministries and bureaus and, above all, universities and schools were left in disarray. After the storm of violence had passed, most such organizations remained in a pitiful state because they were run by "revolutionary committees" consisting of the "three-way alliance" of representatives of the People's Liberation Army, veteran cadres, and "revolutionary mass organizations."<sup>22</sup> The stage had been set for what seemed likely to be a prolonged period of factional strife with everyone out to settle scores and seek revenge.

Yet, possibly the most astonishing aftermath of the Cultural Revolution was the speed with which institutional chaos was replaced by orderly hierarchies and regularized bureaucracies once the "left" had been defeated. In a matter of only a few years the skeleton organizations, which existed barely in name after the turmoil, were miraculously staffed with disciplined participants. From the national research academies to provincial and local government headquarters, all were rapidly manned by people who dutifully carried on their respective assignments of the day. It is true that talent was often in short supply, but no more than would be expected in any economically under-developed country.

The facility with which the Chinese re-created their institutions suggests some limits to the degree to which they were psychologically traumatized. They clearly had not lost their traditional readiness to array themselves in hierarchical structures of authority nor their capacity to carry out expected role relationships. Historically, the Chinese have on repeated occasions miraculously transformed social and economic chaos into disciplined organizational behaviour. Just as soon as peace and order was established in the land, social and economic life would almost instantly revive as everyone rejoiced at the arrival of better times. The accomplishments of the Deng reforms in the wake of the disorders during the last years of Mao's rule are in fact reminiscent of the successes of the first years of the communist regime after the confusion during the interregnum caused by the Japanese invasion and the civil war. In fact, if one compares the before and after statistics produced by the Chinese for the two periods, it seems that progress was more dramatic in the early 1950s

22. The failure of western analysts, including tour guided visitors, to appreciate how bad the "revolutionary committees" actually were resulted in a general tendency to assume that the Cultural Revolution had ended around 1969. For the Chinese, however, the troubles continued until Mao's death.

than in the early 1980s – a reminder that percentage growth figures are as much, if not more easily, governed by inflating accomplishments.

The speed with which Chinese institutions again became effective after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution is, however, especially impressive. This was true, first, because the Cultural Revolution was destructive above all of the elite, in contrast to, say, the Great Leap during which it was the masses who suffered most; and, secondly, because the restaffing of organizations brought together face to face people who had just years before been engaging in violent struggles with each other. Mortal enemies of just a few years past, both victims and victimizers, have been able somehow to repress whatever feelings of revenge and hatred they may still harbour, and peacefully work side by side. What has taken place is a dramatic demonstration of the continuity of the Chinese cultural trait of separating emotions from actions by containing personal feelings and behaving according to established community norms.

The irony, of course, is that Mao had been driven to the Cultural Revolution precisely because he knew that his people found it easy to give lip service to the “Thoughts of Mao Zedong” but it was hard for him to know what they really believed. He therefore sought to bring together thought and action, but in the end the Cultural Revolution probably worked to widen the gap between public statements and inner convictions. The result has been that people who now share offices and work in the same organizations have had to postpone settling scores and instead work together as they fall in step with the new policies. As long as their behaviour is correct in carrying out their prescribed roles, it does not matter what their inner thoughts may be.

Moreover, for the public at large the new conditions created by Deng’s reforms call for new norms of behaviour. Conformism to ideological cues and political calculations have been replaced by conformity to consumerism and by the desire to keep up with successful neighbours – apparently to the great relief of the Chinese masses.

What does all this mean in reassessing the effects of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese personality and culture? The only thing that is absolutely certain is that Mao’s ambition to create a “reign of virtue,” in Benjamin Schwartz’s felicitous phrase, was a total failure.<sup>23</sup> Does China’s quick revival of institutions suggest a flaw in Thurston’s view of the survivors as psychic cripples? Or is Goldman’s notion of a generation of sceptics more consistent with the institutional after-effects? The answer seems to be that both may be correct. The thesis of the extreme shock and the hypothesis of distrust are both compatible with an instinctive withdrawal to more traditional cultural patterns of behaviour, but with norms that are now infused with greater emotional intensity than in the past. The products of the

23. “The reign of virtue: some broad perspectives on leader and party in the Cultural Revolution,” *CQ*, No. 35 (July-September 1968), pp. 1–17.

Cultural Revolution, by adapting to obligations of hierarchy and by seeking self-improvement, have in effect reverted to historical patterns of Chinese cultural behaviour, even as they have followed Deng's demand that China must in the realms of technology and economics learn from the west.

The late Chairman's vision of making a "new Chinese man," paradoxically, ended by reinforcing traditional Chinese tendencies to seek security by rediscovering the advantages of inequality. The reversion to traditional practices went further than just readopting the discipline of institutional roles, for it included re-emphasizing particularistic personal relationships. Thomas Gold has perceptively noted that the Cultural Revolution strengthened the traditional Chinese practices of *guanxi* and shattered the communist ideals of comradeship.<sup>24</sup> Gold argues that the economic disarray and the breakdown of the social order caused by the Cultural Revolution, when combined with the arbitrary authority of "leftist" cadres who sought to dominate all spheres of life, forced the Chinese to revert more than ever to *guanxi* practices. "Through practice, young people learned that *guanxi* was supreme law."<sup>25</sup>

Gold's observations help to resolve the contradiction between Thurston's hypothesis about post-trauma syndrome and the speed with which Chinese institutions regained a high degree of normalcy. What seems to have happened is that Chinese behaviour has been modified through personal stress, but the outcome, beyond reliance upon denial, has been the energizing of personal ties. Consequently the post-Cultural Revolution institutions may be stronger than before because personal relationships within them are now strongly invigorated by the power of *guanxi* considerations that have a new dimension and intensity because they have been reinforced by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution experience. The Chinese seemingly are returning to their practices of *guanxi*, but they are making those relationships more emotionally charged than ever before. Scepticism about the words used by political leaders is a part of this pattern of privatizing their concerns and maximizing personal considerations.

In the peculiar blend of institutional reality which Deng Xiaoping has created, that is neither disciplined communism nor a genuine free market system, the psychic effect of the Cultural Revolution has been to legitimize self concern, whether it be peasants rejoicing over the liberalization of the responsibility system or sons and daughters of high cadres, the *gaoganzidi*, exploiting the pay-offs of traditional Chinese respect for hierarchy.<sup>26</sup>

24. Thomas B. Gold, "After comradeship: personal relations in China since the Cultural Revolution," *CQ*, No. 104 (December 1985) pp. 657-75.

25. *Ibid.* p. 669.

26. The irony of the post-Cultural Revolution mood in China is that the very responses which have energized the "reforms" have also made it possible for children of high officials to exploit, for material benefit, their situation. Similarly, a-political but ambitious college graduates now routinely join the Party in order to get ahead. On the frustrating ambivalences of go-getting Chinese towards the shameless ways of

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If we combine the results of our three levels of observation about the effects of the Cultural Revolution, the summation would seem to be a formula for a political system that is the antithesis of the one Mao set out to create. The pledge of “never again” has opened an escape valve for dramatic systemic change. The results can be masked by the term “socialism with Chinese characteristics” – especially when the meaning of “Chinese” is left as vague as that for “socialism.”

The personal shock of the Cultural Revolution for leaders and potential leaders has had two fundamental effects. First, it has opened Chinese eyes to the reality of their failures, not only during the Cultural Revolution but also during most of the earlier years of the regime. Secondly, the shock has jarred their traditional sense of cultural and racial superiority which once made it hard for earlier Chinese leaders fully to understand foreign ways and effectively take advantage of them. Those who suffered most, such as Deng Xiaoping, are the most aware that even the “early Mao’s” policies were flawed; while those who got off more lightly, such as Chen Yun, can still see some virtues in elements of the pre-Cultural Revolution version of “socialism.” There are, of course, significant variations among individual Chinese in the degree to which they have been able to learn from the “open door policy.” Many, especially those now studying abroad, are enthusiastically seeking to immerse themselves in the thoughts and ways of the modern world. Most people within China, however, are probably still caught up in the dilemma of Chinese patriotism: does love of country require blind adherence to the political currents of the day, or can the imperative of patriotism be met by achieving personal excellence as judged by international standards?

As for our task, of reassessing the Cultural Revolution, the inescapable fact is that without the horrendous events of that period it is inconceivable that post-Mao China could have deviated as much as it has not only from the Soviet model of communism but also from any known concept of communism. If China had not been scarred by the violent turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the most likely alternative to Mao’s revolutionary utopianism would have been little more than the dreary prospect of an orderly, bureaucratic form of communism. It seems unthinkable that China would or could have adopted the bold modernizing policies of the post-Mao era if the society had not experienced the shock of the Cultural Revolution.

Yet, paradoxically, the haunting memories of that chaotic period may also intimidate the current Chinese leaders and prevent them from allowing the degree of liberalization and decentralization essential for the success of the reforms in the economic realm. Chinese

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*gaoganzidi* in lording it over the common herd, see: Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *After the Nightmare*, pp. 130–48.

officials remain hypersensitive to perceived dangers in genuinely relaxing administrative controls. Memories of the disaster that followed when the government lost control during the Cultural Revolution explain in part official timidity in adjusting the price structure, in allowing the *yuan* to find its worth in currency markets, in abandoning numerous subsidies, or in permitting foreign exchange reserves to decline. The great danger for China is that the current attempt to rely upon the “market” for guidance could be a disaster if the prices are too irrational and too grossly distorted by subsidies.<sup>27</sup>

This legacy of timidity clouds more than just economic policies. As Goldman has pointed out, China’s leaders today are also haunted by the memory of how the Cultural Revolution taught people to distrust authority. The knowledge that a whole generation of young Chinese rose up and attacked all institutions of authority, including the presumably sacred Communist Party, has left the current leaders sensitive to the dangers of allowing too much political or cultural free thinking. Deng and his appointed successors want to modernize China, turn China away from the path that Mao set the country on, but they are possibly even more concerned than Mao was about the danger that political liberalization might produce anarchy and uncontrolled change. Having seen the near reality of anarchy, they are not prepared to take chances. The extraordinary lengths they have gone to in designating the particular individuals who they want to succeed them as assigned members of the “second” and “third echelons” is telling proof of the current leaders’ distrust of any spontaneous flow of politics. This need to try to control the selection of talent for future generations is a manifestation of anxieties about the future that surely reflects fears inspired by the “nightmare” that was the Cultural Revolution.

Thus, there is in the last analysis a contradictory legacy of the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand the current reforms and the open-door policies could never have come about except for the trauma of that event; yet, at the same time anxieties instilled by the experience of near anarchy may make it impossible to realize fully the potential of those reforms. The result is a peculiar blend of desiring to execute the bold move but being timid about any uncertainties. The survivors of the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, having overcome their guilt for not having had it worse, and inspired by the added confidence that they are somehow a pre-destined people, are now prepared to take bold gambles and deviate more from the orthodox communist model than Mao was ever prepared to do. The so-called “reforms” of Deng have indeed gone beyond any reasonable definition of reform. They constitute substantial innovation. Yet the Chinese leaders generally feel the need to cling to the structure of controls they inherited from Mao’s version of bureaucratic “commu-

27. For a summary of the problems inherent in a modified market economy which protects inefficiencies, see: Yeung Wai Hong, “China’s troubling mercantilist bent,” *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 1986, p. 12.

nism.” Their fear of uncertainty makes them want to put in place right now the next two generations of leaders, leaving nothing to chance or to the normal flow of dynamic political processes. In designating who belongs to the second and third “echelons” of successors, Deng seems to have forgotten the first rule of patronage politics which is that for every job promised 10 disappointed enemies are created – and therefore postpone as long as possible publicizing appointments.

Given these two conflicting legacies, it is, thus, still premature to assume that we can foresee all the lasting consequences of the Cultural Revolution, for we cannot make out any better than the Chinese can the outlines of what “socialism with Chinese characteristics” will ultimately be. What we can be certain of as we reassess the Cultural Revolution 20 years later is that the psycho-cultural dynamics of Chinese politics, then as now, rest tenuously upon layers of latent and contradictory sentiments that are far more decisive in the flow of events than public rationalizations of political economy policies.