

China's Perpetual Revolution

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Abstract

This case study about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China depicts an argument between the four major actors who participated in the events between 1966 and 1968: Students, peasants, urban workers, and military personnel. These characters and their ensuing confrontation highlight the ideological, political, economic, and domestic and international security issues that shaped the nature and scope of the conflict. The case requires students to adopt the political perspective of a student, urban worker, or military personnel so as to convince the peasant to adopt their character's view of the revolution. By doing so, the students are required to move from the micro level 'every-day life' experience of Chinese citizens to the macro level political and ideological issues that defined the broader perspectives of these three population groups. The ultimate goal of the case study is to provide students with a better understanding of how and why the Cultural Revolution developed as it did and how it is similar to, and different from other revolutionary cases.

Political Backdrop

As China moved forward in its development plans after the 1949 communist revolution, a basic division developed between the Party elite, who enjoyed influence in local communist cadres, and Chairman Mao, who remained leader of the Party and figurehead for the proletarian dictatorship. Whereas Mao believed that only the "transformation of human consciousness" could evoke material progress, the party leaders argued that only "material progress could transform human consciousness".¹ Like Trotsky during Stalin's regime, Mao argued that "representatives of the landlord class and the bourgeoisie" had infiltrated the upper echelons of the Party.² Like Stalin, Mao used his entrenched power and personality cult to mobilize forces against these enemies. Unlike Stalin, Mao was motivated by the higher ideal of evoking a purer form of communism through a revolution that would "touch people to their very souls"³.

Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution by appealing to students to form 'Red Guard' units that sought to undermine and remove 'bourgeois' or 'revisionist' members and allies of the Party from power. By evoking the powerfully divisive bourgeois/ proletarian class distinction to describe political orientation, the revolution acquired a rhetorical element that helped polarize the two factions and perpetuate violence. In order to mobilize a broad cross section of the population, students were sent to rural areas to promote revolutionary ideals and develop a better understanding of, and appreciation for peasant life. Through out the early stages of the revolution in 1966 and into 1967, Party elites and their supporters publicly supported the new revolutionaries (not doing so would amount to political heresy) while working to maintain power by mobilizing citizens under their control against the Red Guard, and by sacrificing low ranking officials to Maoist purges. By early 1967, Red Guard conflicts

¹ Karnow, Stanley. Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution.
The Viking Press; New York. 1972. Pg. 77.

² Starr, John Bryan. Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao.
Princeton University Press; Princeton. 1979. Pg. 89.

³Karnow, 199

with more conservative, Party-backed citizens escalated to a point of unrest where Mao was compelled to send in the army to quell the upheaval.

Characters

Lu En-lai: A 65 year-old rural farmer, Lu has lived in the same village his entire life. Lu supported Mao's forces during the communist revolution as a guerilla fighter. When the communists gained power in 1949, Sian Tsai-tao, a staunch Party supporter, became the village's local cadre leader. Lu fell into favor with Sian, who often provided Lu with extra pain relievers to help alleviate his arthritic hands. As the new decade dawned, Lu, although still poor, was hopeful for the future. By 1958, however, the Great Leap Forward left Lu nearly destitute. His crops failed due to incorrect planting guidelines provided by the state. In desperation, Lu sent his eldest son, Chu, to Shanghai to seek employment. Since then, Lu has slowly recovered his crop, but depends on a portion of Chu's wages to subsidize his income.

Chu En-lai: Lu's 30 year-old son, Chu is an ironworker in Shanghai. Growing up under the hardships of rural life, Chu was skeptical of Mao's plans for progress from an early age. He has witnessed his father struggle to the point near of collapse, only to see Chairman Mao focus his concern on issues of ideological reform rather than economic aid. After moving to the city to work in a smelting factory, Chu established himself as a hard worker and team player. Appreciating his consistent effort, Chu's shift foreman befriended him and has recently mentioned that he might request a promotion for Chu to a managerial position. In recent months, this has all been jeopardized by sporadic work stoppages as a result of conflict between the Red Guard and PLA units stationed in and around the factory. These stoppages have prevented the factory from meeting its production quotas for the last two months. Chu is concerned that if the stoppages continue, the foreman could be blamed for the problems and fired, thus ruining Chu's chances for a promotion.

Yang P'ei-fu: A recent graduate of Shanghai University, Yang was assigned to help the En-lai family as part of the Socialist Education Movement⁴. Yang studied anthropology at University, but could not find a job after graduating, which made him a natural choice for relocation. As a student, Yang was involved in the first persecutions of professors and administrators accused of harboring capitalist tendencies. Yang's older brother, who was a Red Guard leader in Peking, was killed recently by a group of angry steel workers who took a wrecking ball to their factory as Red Guard members protested inside. Yang's brother, along with 120 others, was buried in the wreckage. This incident has only added to Yang's anger for the Party leaders and their supporters, and has made him even more anxious to rejoin the struggle in the city.

Ho Tse: A 27 year-old lieutenant in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Ho is stationed in the rural town to help ensure stability. Ho comes from a poor family who lives just outside

⁴ Baum, Richard. "Cultural Revolution in the Countryside". Found in: The Cultural Revolution in China.

Edited by Thomas Robinson. University of California Press; California. 1971. Pg. 373. The Socialist Education Movement should not be confused with the Hsia-Hsiang ('down to the countryside') program, which began in 1968. The SEM took 'politically reliable' citizens and placed them in rural areas so that they could investigate, expose, and clean-up the economic, political, ideological, and organizational impurities of rural peasants.

of Peking. Without many options available to him after middle school, Ho worked in the fields with his parents until he was old enough to join the army. Ho is eager to rise in the army ranks, and is careful to faithfully obey his superiors. This respect has made Ho one of his unit's best soldiers. A great admirer of Mao, Ho often reads Mao's work in the evening. Ho believes Mao is a great patriot and leader, but is careful not to allow Mao's teachings to effect the execution of his commander's orders.

The Setting

By April of 1967, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was raging throughout China. In a rural hamlet 100 km outside of Shanghai, Lu welcomes the arrival of his son, Chu, whose iron-smelting factory in the city was shut down for several days due to tensions between Red Guard and PLA units occupying the factory. Hoping to escape the turmoil of the city, Chu has returned home to see his elderly father. Upon his arrival, Chu finds Yang lazing about. Angered by Yang's brazen uncooperativeness, Chu confronts him.

"... To their very souls"

Chu: Boy, why are you sitting about when there is so much work to be done? Can't you see that my poor father is old and frail? The Party assigned you to rural work so that you could help people like him.

Lu: [Coming inside from his morning chores] It's no use reasoning with him. He's been here for two months and all he does is mope around, saying how he wants to return to the city.

Yang: That's right, I want to return to Shanghai. There is a revolution going on, and I'm missing it. I'm trapped in this village while the bourgeois revisionist leaders subvert our efforts to 'wash away all the sludge and filth left over from the old society'⁵. I'm stuck rotting away to the monotony of peasant life [waves his hand around the room, finally pointing to Lu] when I should be answering Chairman Mao's call to knock down the anti-socialist rightists who threaten the proletarian dictatorship⁶!

Chu: How dare you insult my father with your urban intellectual high-mindedness! The trouble with all of you Red Guard troublemakers is that you only hear what is most convenient. How easily you forget Chairman Mao's call to go among the peasant and become re-educated by their purity⁷. All you want to do it cause mindless chaos! You wear Mao's revolutionary language like a badge of honor, but you don't understand what it really means. My father is a true revolutionary. He fought against the nationalist devils; he knows what it is to suffer; to go without food or shelter; to see friends die!

Lu: Yes, I have seen and done much in my life-time, but this new struggle is troubling. I just don't know... Chairman Mao is a wise man, but Sian Tsai-tao says I must not listen to his mad rants. He says that the Party's call to maintain order is most important, that if I join

⁵ Karnow, 218

⁶ *Ibid*, 200

⁷ *Notification Concerning Work Assignments for University Graduates in 1968*.

Found in: *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969*. Edited by Michael Scholenhals. M.E. Sharpe; New York. 1996. Pg. 77.

the Red Guards he won't be able to get my pain relievers. I have fought and suffered for China, for the end of the royalist's exploitation of the rural folk, but I don't know if I can endure more hardship. I am a Communist, but I am also a tired old man. I just don't know...

Yang: Sian Tsai- tao is a member of the capitalist bourgeoisie! He is trying to use the 'old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the exploiting class'⁸ to corrupt you! Chairman Mao is right: We must transform every citizen's consciousness⁹ by purging the revisionist Party leaders who hold your mind hostage. Chairman Mao is your only leader; he speaks the truth; he is the original revolutionary. [Nearing Lu] As for you, you accuse me of not being a true revolutionary, but I have heard what the ironworkers did to the Red Guard unit in Peking last month. I know that they buried those students alive¹⁰! We are fighting to fully realize the great proletarian crusade, but you and your Party- backed allies only make our struggle more difficult. Revolution cannot be gentle or refined. We must not fear chaos!¹¹

[Hearing all of the shouting, Lieutenant Ho enters the house. The three men quickly glance over at Ho-- acknowledging his arrival with a nervous nod, but continue with their argument. Ho leans against the door frame, listening]

Chu: I don't know anything about what happened in Peking, but I do know that my smelting plant has stopped production because of your interference. You invade our factories, chanting Mao's rhetoric like blind soldiers, but you only stop production and hurt China's development. How are we to improve our way of life? With words? No! The Party is right: Material progress is paramount!¹²

Mao sends Red Guard units to our factories to promote leftist thinking, but all they do is fight amongst themselves over who is more dedicated to the revolution. They do nothing but slow down production. Then Mao sends in the army to oversee Red Guard activity [nodding to Ho], but they interfere just as much. The result: My plant is closed, and China suffers. This is what Mao and his Cultural Revolution has brought us!

Ho: Now wait just a minute. Mao sent the army to ensure peace and stability; to mediate the conflict between the Red Guard and the revisionist power holders. Without us, China would be lost in anarchy. Our presence strengthens the proletarian dictatorship and insures the establishment of revolutionary order.¹³ I doubt that the army personnel in your factory are really interfering.

Yang: Oh, please! The army is anything but impartial. Chairman Mao has called for the military to help the proletarian left¹⁴, but all they do is detain Red Guard members so that

⁸ Yuan, Gao. *Born Red*. Stanford University Press; California. 1987. Pg. 82.

Taken from the sixteen-point resolution of the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee in August, 1966.

⁹ Karnow, 77

¹⁰ Based on an account of the 1968 massacre of a Red Guard unit occupying a paper- mill.

¹¹ Karnow, 200. One of Mao's famous aphorisms

¹² *Ibid*, 77.

¹³ *Ibid*, 289.

¹⁴ *Decision to Provide the Revolutionary Masses of the Left with the Firm Support of the People's Liberation Army*. Schoenhals, 52.

they can torture and kill us¹⁵! [Pointing to Ho and Lu] You cannot suppress the revolution under the pretext of securing production or order.¹⁶ The revolution must be put in command of production¹⁷; it must become the new order!

Ho: We must maintain stability. China cannot afford to fall into civil war when the Russians are trying to incite rebellions within our own borders, or when the American imperialists are only a few hundred kilometers away¹⁸. You speak of the army 'supporting the left', but how can we do so when we don't even know who represents the left? The Red Guard is so badly fractured that it is impossible to know who holds the true communist line¹⁹. Should we just give up? Wash our hands of a conflict that threatens the very existence of our nation? Of course not. The army must ensure order no matter what the price.

Yang: What would you have us do then? Should we fall into the revisionist thinking that has poisoned the Russians? Should we betray the goal of our great revolutionary leader and accepted a corrupted state? We will have no Chinese Krushchevs!

[Shaking his head in wearily, Lu gets up from his seat, picks up his pail, and walks toward the door]

Chu: Where are you going father? Don't you want to add anything else?

Lu: There has been enough talk for today, I think. Besides, I don't know what more I could say. I just don't know...

Teaching Notes

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is a unique revolutionary case. On one level it is an example of the break-up of coalitional forces in post-revolutionary societies. The post-revolutionary political climate of Mexico and Nicaragua help expose the salient features of the factional conflict in China. While France and, to a some extent, Russia are two other good examples, Mexico and Nicaragua provide more interesting contrasts to the Chinese case that better advance an analysis of the causes of the Cultural Revolution. In Mexico, Villa and Zapata broke from Angeles and Obregon over their divergent military strategies, which were informed by the regionalist and nationalist perspectives of their respective camps. This division in the capital was paralleled by the national dichotomy of power between the Conventionists in the North and Constitutionalists in the South. Thus, the revolutionaries in Mexico were unable to express a comprehensive and cohesive agenda for change immediately following their seizure of power. Instead, they deferred the responsibility of running and reforming the state apparatus to the inept Conventional government. Without substantive control of the government, the revolutionary coalition fell

¹⁵ Karnow, 252. Starting in January of 1967, the army set up detention camps to subdue the more militant factions of the Red Guard. Reports of torture and murder from these camps were common.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 235.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 321. Another of Mao's aphorisms

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 302. During the mid- 1960's, Russia repeatedly attempted to instigate riots in Inner Mongolia. Ethnic conflict in the Sinkian province and Tibet provided the military with further reason to be concerned for China's internal stability.

¹⁹ Baum, 424.

apart. In contrast, under the charismatic leadership of Mao, the communists developed a clear set of objectives that strengthened their coalition and allowed them to successfully co-opt and reform the state apparatus. From this more unified and stable political position, factional conflict developed over seventeen years into two divergent and fully articulated political and economic strategies.

In Nicaragua, the post-revolutionary situation was more fractured than the simple bifurcation of the Chinese and Mexican revolutionary victors. Although the FSLN enjoyed wide spread support during its campaign against Somoza, factions developed after the revolution along a number of lines. Businesspeople revoked support after FSLN sponsored industrial nationalization and land redistribution plans threatened their economic interests. The Nicaraguan Catholic church split over the FSLN's attempt to infuse Christian teachings with Marxist ideology while news media factions came to denounce the course of reform under the Sandinistas. Factions within the news media came to denounce the course of reform under the Sandinistas. These conflicting class interests and differing conceptions of a post-revolutionary government prompted many Nicaraguans to leave the coalition. The FSLN perpetuated this factionalism by seeking a plural government that granted proportional representation to competing groups. The ultimate result of this factionalism was the ousting of the FSLN from power in 1990. In China, what might have become factional conflict between many groups was channeled into the conflict between Party leaders and Maoists. Again, we can understand the differences in China as arising from the authoritarian control the communists enjoyed. Because economic and ideological issues existed under the aegis of the state, state leaders—whether Party officials or Maoists—were able to focus the passions and interests generated by these issues through their own political agendas.

The Cultural Revolution is more than just another example of post-revolutionary conflict. Although the causes of the revolution do not fit within the framework of John Foran's five-factor model, it would be an oversimplification to label a conflict that killed over one million people the result of infighting among political elite. The Cultural Revolution is difficult to apply to Foran's model because it was made from above. On the macro level, Mao's instigation and attempted orchestration of the revolution provides compelling evidence that individual agency from above was the catalyzing influence for the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, agency fulfills Foran's "political cultures of opposition" requirement. Yet, Foran's model is designed to describe revolutions from below-- revolutions originating from the exploited masses. We must look elsewhere to understand how a revolution started by the political elite was able to mobilize large groups of the population to fight out their political battle on the micro level.

The four major population groups involved in the Cultural Revolution embrace or rejected the movement for different reasons. The student population heeded Mao's call to revolution because it allowed them to express their unvoiced frustrations toward the rigid control authority had on their lives. The fact that the Cultural Revolution did not rise from below, despite the exploitation of the peasant and working classes in China's industrial and agricultural development, illustrates the extent to which the communists controlled the nation through the local cadre system. Lynn White argues that the patron-client networks

between local cadre leaders and the population of peasants and workers under their administration compelled these two groups to support their local leaders.²⁰ Because the Party dominated the cadre network, most of these local officials supported the Party elite. Thus, the structural constraints of the cadre system hampered the Red Guard's efforts to develop a more pluralistic mass line. Without this mass support, the Maoists were unable to compel the army to deviate from their policing role. To maintain order, the army often suppressed the Red Guard, which only hampered the student's revolutionary efforts further. While the agency of Mao and other top leaders on the macro level was essential for starting the revolution, the structural restraints imposed by the cadre system effectively stifled the Cultural Revolution on the micro level. Without this mass support, the realization of the Cultural Revolution was impossible.

Role Play

The class should be broken into three groups, each taking on the role of Yang, Chu, or Ho. The teacher will take the role of Lu. Each group must argue their character's position so as to convince Lu of the stance he should take on the Cultural Revolution. Each group will make an opening statement to Lu and then engage in a debate over their respective arguments. At the end of the debate, Lu will decide which perspective is more convincing according to how the arguments coincided with his own concerns and issues.

Questions

1. What are the positive and negative results of fully realizing the Cultural Revolution? Include both political and economic issues.
2. What is your character's relationship to the Party Leaders? To Mao and his personality cult?
3. What vision of China is your character offering Lu? What factors influence your character's vision?
4. How does Lu's relationship with the local party structure help shape your argument?
5. How does your character's personal experience reflect Lu's own life experience? How can you use those similarities to convince Lu of your position?

²⁰ White, Lynn. Policies of Chaos: The Organization Causes of Violence in China's Cultural Revolution. Princeton University Press; Princeton. 1989. Pg. 318.