

# MAO'S CULT OF PERSONALITY AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

To what extent did Mao Zedong's cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution help him to regain authority over China?

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## ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the question “to what extent did Mao Zedong’s cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution help him to regain authority over China?” In order to answer this question, the background of the Cultural Revolution was researched first. Then, historiographical analysis was used to find whether Mao used the Cultural Revolution to regain power using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including first-hand accounts and academic research. Official sources were contrasted to historians with opposing views to come to a conclusion. The third section of the investigation explored the various methods Mao used to regain authority, beginning with his Cult of Personality and then comparing this to the purging of Communist Party officials and the country.

The evidence found in the first two sections of this investigation led me to conclude that the Cultural Revolution was used by Mao Zedong to regain power after being shamed after the Great Leap Forward and ceding some of his authority to his comrades Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Regardless of the depth of the research, this conclusion is not completely certain, as there is a lack of unbiased official primary sources as the Chinese government discourages the research of the Cultural Revolution. The investigation is therefore restricted to possibly biased primary sources, subjective official documents, and limited research by historians.

Finally, it was concluded that the purging of the Communist Party and the country was the main reason why Mao managed to regain authority during the Cultural Revolution. Even though Mao obtained public support with his cult of personality, this did not help him to reclaim his power and in the end it was the elimination of his enemies through purges conducted by the Red Guards that allowed Mao to make his rule unchallengeable once again.



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## INTRODUCTION

Mao Zedong was the leader, spokesperson and symbol of the Communist revolution in China. After achieving victory against the Nationalists, he founded the People's Republic of China and became its chairman and leader. When Mao came to power in 1949, immediate land reforms brought a temporary end to millennia of unproductive farming methods, poor harvests and famines. But, his revolutionary spirit did not end there, and thus Mao undertook the greatest economical reform since Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. The Great Leap Forward started as a life-changing movement, as the sole event that would bring China onto the world stage and get peasants the life they deserved. It proved to be an utter failure, killing millions and leaving the countryside devastated. As a result of this, his authority within the communist party diminished significantly, and Mao was soon detached from leading the country he liberated. Seeing his authority within the party lessen, the great leader sought to regain his power by purging not only the party, but the whole country and establishing a personality cult to make his rule unchallengeable.

Karl Marx, the creator of the ideology on which communism is based, first used the term 'cult of the individual' when criticising his own public image in a letter to a fellow politician (Marx, 1908). The cult of personality that we know nowadays can be described as the glorious, heroic and sacred public image of an individual created through the use of mass media and propaganda. Even though it went against the basic principles of Marxism, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, amongst other leaders, created a cult of personality for themselves to legitimise their rule and gain absolute control of the masses. Their manipulation of society allowed for terrible crimes to be committed under the protection of their cults.

In this essay, the question 'To what extent did Mao Zedong's cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution helped him to regain authority over China?' will be analysed. The Cultural Revolution is a significant historical event because it completely changed the culture and society of the country from its core in only a few of years of armed conflict and a decade of political struggle. It is worthy of investigation since it is Mao's most important legacy and still affects China. It completely erased previous societal norms and traditions, led to the creation of new customs, and changed the values of the people -the core of Chinese society.

There are numerous views on the causes of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's aims -particularly on whether he wanted to regain authority-, its duration and the responsibility for the launch of this massive campaign. Most historians agree that Mao started it, but they provide different explanations for this. Jung Chang (1992) writes in *Wild Swans* that the Cultural Revolution was "a bloody purge to increase Mao's personal power", a view that is partly shared by Zhisui Li (1994) who states that the main aim was to "destroy" Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Michael Lynch (2004) supports the view that the principal objective during the Cultural Revolution was to cleanse the party, yet he states that it was pushed farther than Mao had intended. Some even suggest that it was truly meant to help Mao achieve his revolutionary ideals, as Roderick MacFarquhar (2008) proposes, writing that the true purpose of the movement was to reduce corruption and bureaucracy in the Communist Party.

It is without doubt that the Cultural Revolution completely transformed Chinese culture and was one of the greatest socio-political movements that the world has seen. Mao's cult of personality earned him adoration and worship from the Chinese people, but was not as crucial as the purging of party officials in his attempt to regain control over the Communist Party and the country as a whole.



## THE ELIMINATION OF THE OPPOSITION AND MAO'S LOSS OF POWER

The techniques Mao used to regain power during the Cultural Revolution were first used during the Korean War, and were perfected during the Three and Five-Anti campaigns. A mere year after winning the civil war against the Nationalists, the Chinese government launched a propaganda campaign to raise money and increase popular support for the war. People were mobilised to do fundraising events for the soldiers, and big posters depicting the army's heroic acts were used to raise the morale at home. These same techniques to garner support for the Korean War were used during the "Three Anti's" and "Five Anti's" campaigns near the end of 1951 to eliminate corruption, bureaucracy and fraud among industrialists and the government itself. In reality Mao targeted his political opponents with the purpose of consolidating his power.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Anti-Rightist campaign perfected the techniques used previously to purge the country of so-called criminals, but differed from previous campaigns for Mao now harnessed China's 'people power' to eliminate his enemies. When the government collectivised agriculture in 1953, many intellectuals began to denounce the government's faulty economic policies (Chang, 1992). Increasingly worried about intellectuals and the new elite, Mao started the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956 and encouraged people to constructively criticise the government in a speech. But, the campaign quickly became larger than Mao wanted and criticisms turned more aggressive, so it was halted and replaced by its opposite: the Anti-Rightist Campaign, in which all rightists intellectuals were to be denounced. This campaign demonstrated the same characteristics as the Cultural Revolution: personal scores were settled, intellectuals were punished, and afterwards people were afraid to speak up against the government. The Hundred Flowers Campaign encouraged Mao to purge the country of the opposition and was a preamble of what was to come later on.



*'Start the movement to increase production and practise thrift, with foodstuffs and steel at the centre, with great force!'* (Chongqing People's Publishing House, 1960)

The Great Leap Forward was Mao's attempt to transform China into a world superpower, and its failure would lessen the power Mao had on the communist party and China and motivate him to plot to regain authority with the Cultural Revolution. When July 1955 came, Mao called for a speeding up of the collectivisation of agriculture, and nationalised all industry and commerce. This was the start of the Great Leap Forward. People were encouraged to produce steel in small-scale operations by collecting scrap steel and melting it together in backyard furnaces; this would supposedly make China a superpower in 15 years. This massive campaign was accompanied by the usual propaganda drive, with uplifting music and banners encouraging people to make steel. Instead of producing industrial-grade steel, inexperienced peasants ended up with useless 'pig' steel. When harvest time came in 1959, there were few people in the fields, and farming experiments, combined with corruption in the reporting of figures to the government, led to the worst famine in history. The famine hit the country so badly that a special conference was called at Lushan, during which Defence Secretary Marshal Peng Dehuai expressed his doubts of the Great Leap Forward in a letter to Mao. Instead of listening to his recommendations, Mao replaced Peng with Marshall Lin Biao and kept the Great Leap Forward going. From 1958 until 1962, tens of millions of people died all across China, until pressure from Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, two of the top political leaders in China, made Mao take on a path of stability and reform. Mao then lost the title of Chairman of the People's Republic of China, ceding it to Liu Shaoqi.<sup>1</sup> He retired from one of his top leadership posts with his reputation damaged while maintaining an enormous following over China- but his mistakes had diminished his authority within the Communist Party. The Great Leap Forward ultimately led Mao to plot to regain authority through the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Mao was the 'Paramount Leader' of China from his rise to power in 1949 until his death in 1976. The Paramount Leader is usually the one who holds the highest government posts, though this has varied throughout the years. However, his authority was sometimes symbolic, and diminished significantly after the Great Leap Forward, when he was forced to do a 'self-criticism' and lost his title of Chairman of the People's Republic of China.

## SHORT-TERM CAUSES AND AIMS OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The Cultural Revolution can trace its immediate causes to a series of reactions caused by a provocative play, particularly an article written by Mao calling for the elimination of his enemies and outlining his public aims for the Cultural Revolution. The play 'The Dismissal of Hai Rui from Office' by Wu Han was first published in 1959, and narrated the story of an honest official who was dismissed after exposing corruption. Mao initially ignored it, but he later discovered it related strongly to Peng Dehuai's dismissal when he read an article written by a newspaper editor in Shanghai called Peng Zhen. Mao retaliated by forcing Peng Zhen to publicly denounce Wu Han. On May 16th 1966 the Politburo released a report called 'The May 16th circular' in which a Cultural Revolution Group was created. This document formally marks the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and explains Mao's key aims -or at least those made public: to rid the Communist party from 'capitalist roaders', criticize and reactionary bourgeois academics, and transform culture to consolidate the socialist system (Roberts, 1996). As the public began to find out, protests lighted up at universities against 'revisionists' and were exacerbated by Mao's support to the rioters. Work teams led by Liu Shaoqi were sent to the major universities to try and calm down students, but were stopped by Mao himself- he wanted the students to continue. Mao used this incident to appoint Lin Biao as the second in power in the Politburo, substituting Liu. This way, Chairman Mao set up an apparatus of control independent of the Communist Party that would allow him to create a cult of personality, and regain control over China.

Mao's motives for the Cultural Revolution and his responsibility for the mass movement are subjects of intense historical debate. Though many historians support the theory that Mao's key motive for initiation the Cultural Revolution was to regain the power he had lost years before in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, there are some who support the official Communist Party view: that Mao intended for the Cultural Revolution to reform the Communist Party for the good of the people. This view is held by the Chinese government, and was made public in a document called 'Resolutions on Party History' in 1981, when thousands of party officials and Chinese historians collaborated under the command of Deng Xiaoping to create an official explanation for the Cultural Revolution. The 'Resolution' did state that the Cultural Revolution was initiated and led by Mao Zedong, but it stated that its purpose was to eradicate the representatives of the bourgeois and

‘counterrevolutionary revisionists’ that had sneaked into the party by mobilizing the masses (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2008). Even though this document acknowledges some of Mao’s mistakes during the Cultural Revolution, it absolved him of most of his responsibility. Roderick MacFarquhar, Michael Schoenhals and Harry Harding, who have written extensively on China and the Communist regime, offer a balanced perspective on Mao’s aims and responsibility. The authors state that while the responsibility for the Cultural Revolution is solely Mao’s (MacFarquhar, et al.,



*‘Forging ahead courageously while following the great leader Chairman Mao!’ (Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1969)*

1993), he sincerely wanted to eliminate increasing corruption and bureaucracy in the party, but interpreted them as signs of revisionism and ‘bourgeois elements’ in the party leadership (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2008). According to this view, Mao had a noble aim in the Cultural Revolution, yet he chose to interpret decadence in the party as a struggle between true revolutionaries and revisionists.

However, there are several authors that offer the non-orthodox view of the Cultural Revolution that Mao purged the country of his enemies during the Cultural Revolution. Still, these are limited as academic research on the Cultural Revolution has been strongly discouraged by the Chinese government ever since the ‘Resolution’ was published (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Michael Lynch, a historian specialized in Far Eastern History, has written a number of books on China and often offers an objective argument. Lynch writes in his book ‘Mao’ how Mao's response to Wu Han's play revealed that the Cultural Revolution was not an improvised reaction against ‘counterrevolutionaries’, but that its main purpose was to reassert his authority over China and the CCP to preserve himself in power. More importantly, this was a pretext for undermining Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, leaving the Cultural Revolution as “another stage in the long-running power struggle within the Chinese Communist Party” (Lynch, 1998). It is important to remember that the Hai Rui affair had started with the publication of an article analysing the original play, which was released four years earlier. If criticism against the party during the Hundred Flowers Campaign had angered Mao and led him to put the Anti-Rightist

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<sup>2</sup> The Communist Party has tried to keep secret the destructive events that occurred during Mao’s rule. For example, there are very few photos of the famine during the Great Leap Forward (Dikotter, 2010).

movement in its place, then why didn't Mao react so aggressively when the play was released in 1961? This reveals how Mao's actions prior to the Cultural Revolution not mere reactions to a newspaper article- the Chairman was only looking for an excuse to implement his plan to regain authority. Jung Chang makes the strongest statement in favour of this theory. She offers a valuable perspective on the Cultural Revolution, as she was a first-hand witness to the cult of personality and purges. However, being a primary source also makes her biased, as she uses passionate arguments to criticize Mao as a leader and as an individual. In her book 'Wild Swans', Chang argues how Mao used his cult of personality to regain power. According to Chang (1992), the Cultural Revolution was a "bloody purge" to increase Mao's personal power and a way of destroying Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Lastly, another first hand witness of the Cultural Revolution was Zhisui Li, Mao's personal physician, who wrote 'The Private Life Of Chairman Mao' in 1994. Considering that historical evidence for the Cultural Revolution is limited, it is an extremely valuable source as it shows the perspective of a man who knew and was trusted by Mao. According to Zhisui (1994), the ultimate targets were the 'counterrevolutionaries' Liu and Deng, and the Cultural Revolution was a campaign to destroy them as he despised the 'capitalist road' they had taken during the years following the Great Leap Forward when they skilfully implemented economic reforms and ended the famine.

The economic policies led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping immediately after the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1961 set China on the course of recovery, but strayed from the path Mao had set for the country. The official, Party-approved analysis of the Cultural Revolution concludes that even though Mao was responsible for initiating it, he had good objectives that were corrupted by party members. Recognized historian Roderick MacFarquhar supports this point, yet Mao's actions during the beginning of the Cultural Revolution show otherwise. Mao mercilessly purged Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, long time friends and supporters, during the initial havoc of the 'Great Purge'. Even though Mao Zedong was still the supreme leader of China after the Great Leap Forward and remained idolised throughout the country, he had lost power over the government, and wanted to re-establish his authority over China and the CCP. Hence, Mao Zedong embarked on a decade-long campaign in which he terrorized his country in his quest to regain authority, while destroying what was left of ancient Chinese culture.

## MAO'S CULT OF PERSONALITY AND RETURN TO POWER

Mao's cult of personality helped him regain power during the Cultural Revolution, but the purging of officials and 'capitalist roaders' was more important in helping him return to power. Before going on, it is important to explain first what the Cultural Revolution was. From the beginning, the revolution had little to do with 'culture' - this wasn't even mentioned in the May 16<sup>th</sup> Circular that stated its aims. When this document was published, a group of students from a university in Beijing formed a group called 'The Red Guards of Chairman Mao' and vowed to follow devotedly Mao's instructions and to defend the revolution. Mao wrote a public letter offering them his support, and groups of red guards immediately formed all over the country. Lin Biao, defence minister, gave a series of speeches to the Red Guards in August 1966, including one in which he called the young revolutionaries to 'smash the four olds': old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits; all of these were deemed bourgeois and capitalistic. This destruction of cultural relics combined with the hunt for counterrevolutionaries came to be known as the Cultural Revolution.



*The sunlight of Mao Zedong Thought illuminates the road of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. (Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House Propaganda Group, 1966)*

In order to determine to what extent Mao's cult of personality helped him to take over control of China, the methods he used to regain power have to be analysed. Mao employed a variety of techniques to take his cult to all of China: he created a sacred image for himself by handing out "The Little Red Book" to hundreds of millions, instituting strict guidelines for social interaction based on his cult and made people revere him by mass-producing propaganda that promoted his glorious acts. On the other side, he

incited Red Guards to destroy past culture so he could have complete control over China's culture and spread fear of his authority by purging rightists and enemies of state.

Mao's cult of personality was successful due to the propaganda drive behind it, and helped him regain public support. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, every time the Communist Party launched a new policy, it was accompanied with a propaganda campaign to spread

word of the policy and be able to enforce it. At the centre of these propaganda campaigns was always Chairman Mao. When Mao started the Cultural Revolution, he was not in control of the state propaganda machine. In order to take his cult of personality to new heights and regain power, Mao needed to use alternative venues to circumvent official media -radio, newspapers and magazines. (Schrift, 2001). The main method he used was big-character posters, which were simple white canvases with black revolutionary slogans. These were used by Mao to convey his political messages and helped expand his cult. Another method used was the use of Mao badges, which were powerful, accessible and portable signs of devotion (Schrift, 2001). Thanks to this, Mao took his cult to the poorest areas of China, raising public support for his cause and sending a clear message to his adversaries- that he was still in power.

Another way Mao developed his Cult of Personality was through the book Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, otherwise known as 'The Little Red Book'. This book was the product of an intense propaganda campaign started by Lin Biao years before the Cultural Revolution began. The Little Red Book, initially published in 1964 for the army, helped indoctrinate the population and gave the Red Guards a guideline for their activities during the Cultural Revolution. Tightly linked to this were the daily rituals that were revolved around Mao's image and became a symbol of his influence on the country. By 1968, only a year and a half after the start of the Cultural Revolution, the ritualization of Mao's image had reached its height with “grotesque” forms of worshipping, as Jung Chang (1992) describes. Rituals that had previously started in the PLA were made public through two key propaganda campaigns: the 'Three Loyalties' and the 'Four Boundless Loves', which instructed people on what their thoughts should be focused on. These were complemented by daily rituals such as 'asking for instructions in the morning and reporting back in the evening', in which people would ask the Great Helmsman for guidance and then report back on their progress under the watchful eye of Mao's portrait (MacFarquhar, 2008). Mao's god-like image was also reinforced by his public appearances, which were not often and were usually in the form of speeches to millions of young 'revolutionaries'. An example of this was when Mao had a very publicized swim in the Yangtze River in 16 July 1966, a month after the start of the Cultural Revolution. This was very symbolic as it showed the people that Mao was still in good health, and it also sent the message to his enemies that he still had the will to fight (Chang, 2005). Having the



widespread support of the population allowed Mao to purge his enemies without any opposition from the public and regain power by the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Although Mao's cult of personality allowed him to rise to power without any public opposition, he could not have conquered the Party without destroying culture, and purging the party and the country with the help of the Red Guards. Lin Biao instructed millions of Red Guards to destroy old China in a massive rally in 1966. This was in line with Mao's idea of replacing China's culture with Marxist values and traditions. China lost most of its cultural relics during the time, as only

historical monuments of major importance such as the Forbidden City were protected. Going against the 'four olds' served another objective: to terrify Mao's opponents, the 'bourgeois' and 'capitalists' and 'reactionaries' who identified with old traditions. Hence Red Guards often struggled against those who owned traditional art pieces. This purge of 'bourgeois' influence paled in comparison to the purging of normal citizens and party officials.

During the Cultural Revolution Mao never relied on a secret police to silence his opponents. Instead, he relied on the Red Guards to take charge of the punishment, making the mechanism subjective but extremely effective (Chang, 1992). Violent 'struggle sessions' were held against those considered counterrevolutionaries. Red Guards forced confessions by torturing the accused, and were even responsible for leaving Deng Xiaoping's son paralysed after a particularly violent struggle session against him. This proved to be Mao's most effective method to regain power, as it could be used on peasants as well as on Politburo members. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping had to attend 'denunciation meetings', where they would be accused of their crimes and would evolve into struggle sessions. Mao managed to purge them through a combination of both. After encouraging the masses to speak out against 'revisionist' Liu, Liu was dismissed from all his posts in the CCP. Sick with diabetes, his health had been deteriorating for months, and when he was sent to a safe house outside Beijing in 1969, he was denied his medications and died neglected. Deng, following a series of



*'Warriors love reading Chairman Mao's books most.'*  
(People's Liberation Army Daily Agency Collective Work, 1966)



denunciations and struggle sessions, was also dismissed from all posts and forced to write a confession, and was exiled to a tractor repair shop in a rural province (MacFarquhar, 2008). The purging of opponents proved to be the main way Mao regained authority during the Cultural Revolution, but his death cut short his dream of becoming China's supreme leader once again.

## CONCLUSION

This investigation sought to find to what extent Mao Zedong's cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution helped him to regain authority over China. This question makes the assumption that Mao's main aim during the Cultural Revolution was to regain authority, so this investigation focused first on finding what were Mao's true aims during this movement. Several perspectives of the topic were analysed in order to determine whether this campaign was a genuine attempt at reducing bureaucracy and corruption in the government or was a purge to destroy Mao's enemies. The evidence presented, which dates back to the early years of the People's Republic of China, and historical debate has led me to conclude that the Cultural Revolution was a planned strike of Mao against his enemies in order to regain power.

Nevertheless, this is an uncertain conclusion due to the incongruence between the government's official stance and research by historians and primary evidence. This is accentuated by the weaknesses of the source material available, for research on the Cultural Revolution remains taboo in China and is discouraged by the government, so foreign authors do not have full access to historical archives and rely on interviews and official accounts of the subject.

If it can be asserted that Mao used the Cultural Revolution to regain power, then it can be concluded that purging the Communist Party was to a great extent the reason why Mao managed to regain the power he had lost during the Great Leap Forward. The evidence demonstrates that while Mao established a personality cult and successfully garnered public support for the Cultural Revolution, it did not help Mao directly in eliminating his enemies to return to power. Yet it is possible that the truth about Mao's aims shall never be known, for as Deng Xiaoping stated in 1980:

*“Discrediting Comrade Mao Zedong... would mean discrediting our Party and state”.*

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