




The Cultural Revolution:

Mao's Last Attempt to Revive Revolution

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What we are going to cover in this lecture

- The Event: What happened?
- The Causes: Why did it happen?
- The Aftermaths: What consequences did it have?
- The Assessment: What's the nature of this mass campaign? How is it assessed?



The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

- The Cultural Revolution can be roughly divided into three major phases.
 - First phase 1966-69: the mass mobilization (Red Guards) phase
 - Second phase 1969-1971: Military-in-charge phase
 - Third phase 1972-76: Succession phase

The First Phase: Education and Arts

- ▶ 1966-69: More than 20 million high-school and college students (the red guards") responded to Mao's call to "make revolution," and their often-vicious efforts to ferret out "class enemies" wherever they were suspected to lurk. During this phase, most of Mao's rivals in the top leadership were deposed, including China's president, Liu Shaoqi.

The Red Guards

- Young Chinese (many were in school) were mobilized first to take part in the mass campaign. They called themselves the red guards of the revolution.
- Initially, many leaders opposed it. But Mao supported them.
- Urban youths from a variety of backgrounds: fragmented from the onset, mainly those of children of vested interests and those of have-nots, resulting in some in-flighting.
- They were the most radical participants of the early phase and resorted to physical abuse and violence.
- Later in 1968, they were replaced by urban workers in the movement and sent to the countryside to be reeducated by farmers.





Mao met the Red Guards eight times in Tiananmen Square in 1966



The “Grand Connecting”

The red guards went to places to mobilize mass campaign.





Big-character posters

Government workers and other urban employees were mobilized to express their criticism of high-ranking officials through posters. It is new way of expressing opinions by the public. It was banned in 1980.





The Break

From the academia to arts, to carry out revolution was to “break away with the Four Olds”—

old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits

— by physically breaking icons and symbols.

The Purge

- From anti-intellectuals to anti-officials, anti-party elites: mass rallies to attack on “revisionists” led by Liu Shaoqi, Mao’s would-be successor.
- Besides verbal denunciations, physical abuse was common.
- Many officials committed suicide.



Expansion and violence

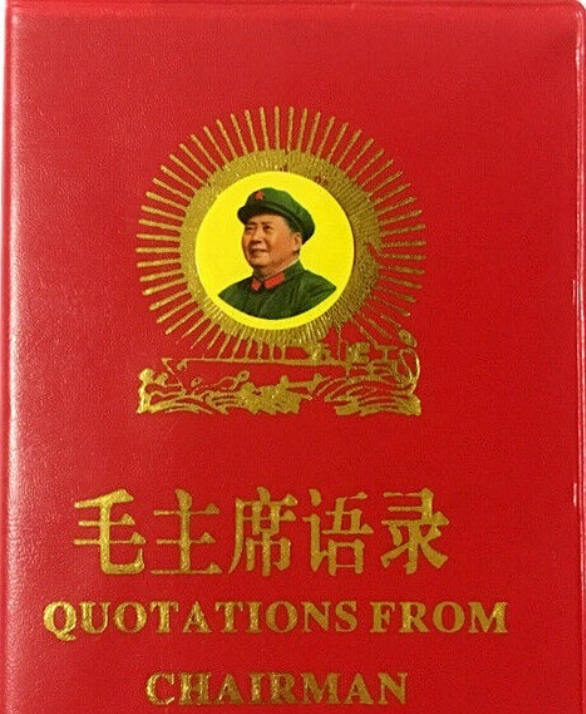
- Urban workers were also mobilized later in the CR, in 1968-69, joining and replacing the students in “rebellion”.
- They joined the movement to take over a paralyzed government.
- Factional fighting during this period, violence intensified after the non-students joined in, near state of a civil war.



前期，戴柳冠斗，持棍棒。示威游行。

The Military and the restoration

- **The second phase 1969-71:** The chaos began to take a toll on the economy and society. The government almost ceased to function. Even Mao saw the danger of losing control.
- Mao called on the military to restore order (not by force).
- A new form of government “*the revolutionary committee*” with representatives from factory workers and the military officers began to emerge at subnational levels.
- Some of the government officials were back to routine work in the re-established government institutions, life gradually got back to normal.



The red sun

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's personal appeal reached unprecedented height. A red-covered booklet of his quotations became a must-have for Chinese.



The Succession

- **The third phase 1972-76:**
- Mao was getting weaker physically despite that his personal authority remained ever high.
- He was struggling to find successors that he could trust. He lost one (Lin Biao) in 1972 and later tried to cultivate both the radicals (“the Gang of Four” led by his wife), and moderates (led by Deng Xiaoping) in the last years of his life. Yet, he had to settle on someone with little credential as radical or moderate (Hua Guofeng) who eventually led a bloodless coup to purge the radicals a month after Mao’s death .



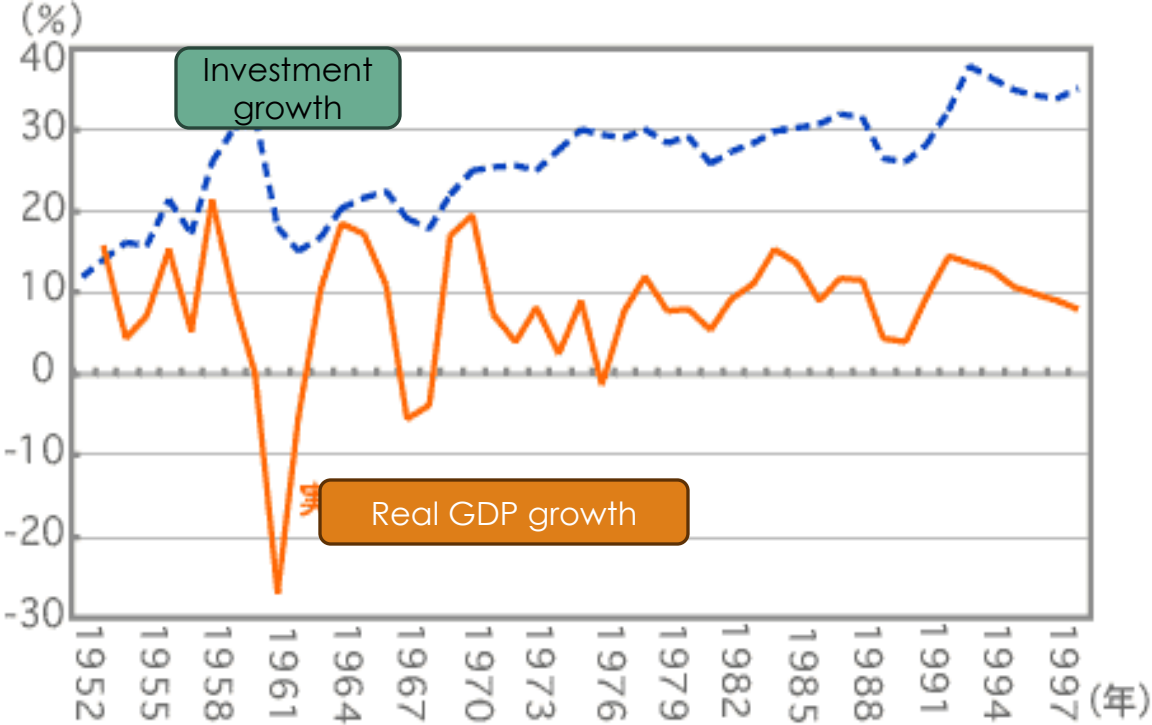
What caused the Cultural Revolution

- Mao reluctant to accept the blame (his radicalism) for the failure of the Great Leap Forward.
- He saw growing moderate wing among top CCP leaders as threatening to his current leadership and future succession.
- It was the last attempt by Mao to revive the Communist revolution which he saw as in danger of losing steam. He blamed the rank-and-file officials for becoming too detached from reality and the masses.
- The Great Leap Forward was mainly a radical economic attempt, Mao now turned to ideological and values system which he saw a key to prevent revisionism in the CCP.

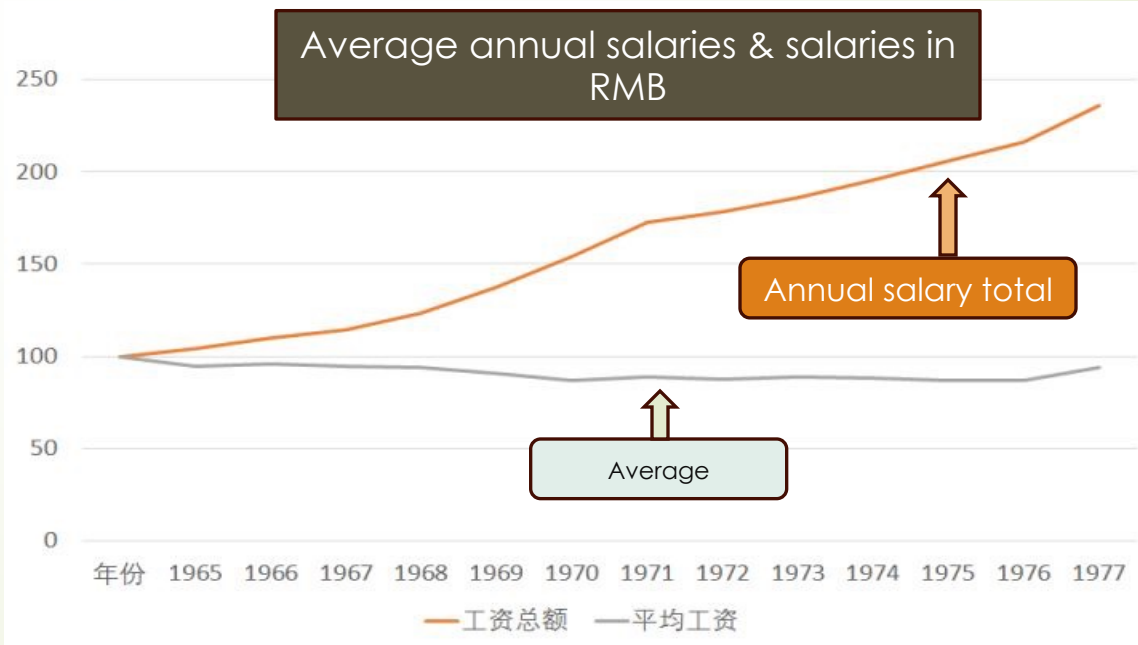


The Aftermaths

- As the last mass mobilization by Mao, he was able to get rid off those he saw as traitors of the revolution and set the course of CCP back to his radical line. But the costs were chaos, damages, and long-lasting trauma.
- There were heavy human costs: estimates from 1.5 million to 2 million deaths, and many suffered from psychological trauma and mental illness. A large portion of the victims were elites.
- More visible was the economic problems: slow growth, unbalanced development, shortages of consumer goods and gaps between urban and rural areas.



Economic consequences of the cultural revolution: disruptions and slow growth






The Aftermaths

- Government institutions were damaged. It took years to normalize and repair.
- Official rank and file became disillusioned, fragmented, and distrusting of others.
- More invisible but long-traumas in society. Broken families and relationships due to more politicized and repressive social life. Very low social trust.
- Damage to cultural heritage. Hundreds of thousands of historical relics, religious buildings, traditional culture items, etc were damaged or lost.
- Unlike GLF, the targets and victims in CR were mostly educated elites. China lost a generation of talent to the decade. No normal college education during the CR.




What's the nature of CR?

1. Unlike many other revolutions or revolts, the Cultural Revolution was mobilized by Mao and his radical associates. The ***target of the revolution was within the regime***-- its own officials. Mao went outside of the Party mobilizing the public particularly the young to attack certain elements in the Party. Mao was anti-establishment and highly suspicious of “deep state”.



2. CR was in part a spontaneous mass movement against social inequality caused by years of political and economic policies. When Mao urged the public to revolt, to attack the establishments and ruling elites, they responded enthusiastically and participated with zeal. When they threatened the fundamental social order, Mao decided to put a stop to it. In this sense, it is **a left-wing radical populist movement** led by a strongman who manipulated the masses with his personal appeal.



3. It was ***a radical attempt to reconstruct human consciousness through mass mobilization*** based on Mao's conviction of "ideas and values matter" and true revolution can only be achieved by changing people's values. Mao attempted such drastic change by mass mobilization, by destructing the old and establishing the new. History has proved that it failed with very high costs.

Its assessments remain controversial

- Some historians also noted that CR
 - Was anti-establishment, anti-bureaucratic populist outcry.
 - Tried some open and democratic methods (banned in the post-Mao era) like posters, cross-unit communication and mobilization.
 - Nurtured a generation of grassroots politically savvy organizers and leaders including Xi.
- Despite the early post-Mao official CCP history calling it a “decade of chaos and destruction”, CCP under different leaders since Deng have avoided open discussions. It remains a sensitive subject in the official Chinese discourse.