

The Nature of Chinese People's Communes During the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976

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THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION (1966-1976) was the most disastrous period we endured after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, but it had nothing to do with "culture." It was a power struggle among our leaders. It was a man-made catastrophe imposed on the Chinese people by their own beloved leader Chairman Mao. It covered the entire nation, involved the whole people.

In China the name Liu Shaochi was not as well known as Mao Tsetung. In the year 1958 it was Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward and the concept of people's commune which brought famine and disaster to China. I can never forget the years 1959 to 1961. Shopping became a burden. Things were so scarce that people could not even find the most basic goods needed for everyday living. I remember one day my sister and I went shopping. We paced the busiest section in Shanghai for the whole morning and could not find a single bottle of fresh milk, nor any other refreshments. The whole nation was suffering from a shortage of food. Eventually it caused Mao to lose the Chairmanship of the state to Liu in 1958. Prior to that, Liu's men started campaigns to establish and amplify Liu's prestige. Within a few years, the phrase "Comrade Shaochi," a mode of address so different from the venerable "Chairman Mao," was heard frequently. Mao's ambition and vanity would never tolerate this rising star. Personally, I think that this was the precise cause of the unprecedented Cultural Revolution.

Actually when Chairman Mao started the Cultural Revolution, he did not intend to have the peasants involved. He wanted only to

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topple Liu Shaochi and Liu's clique—the powerful underground organization which played an important role in the Civil War. In this way Mao himself could become supreme ruler over China. Contrary to his wish, things just went out of control. The whole population was involved in this struggle. Naturally, the people's communes were deep in the mire of the power struggle. The miserable ex-landlords (those who had been landlords before 1949) were persecuted during the Great Land Reform Movement in 1951-1953. The survivors were again persecuted in the Cultural Revolution. This time, however, they were even more brutally abused, more ruthlessly beaten; not even their children could be spared punishment and discrimination.

The first step in the Cultural Revolution was to denounce the existing Party organs, because all the Party secretaries were under suspicion and were forced to leave their posts. The radical, young "poor" and "lower-middle" peasants took over the Party leadership and became the heads of the revolutionary groups. Since all the Party organs were suspended, these new revolutionary groups soon became the "administrative machines."

The whole nation was in a state of turmoil. Leadership rose and fell over night. The concepts of "revolutionary" and "counterrevolutionary" became confused and blurred. For example, the same person who was praised one day as the most revolutionary might be denounced as a traitor or a reactionary the next day. Unbelievably, the same slogan could, at the same time, be both extremely right and wrong. We were so puzzled that we were at a total loss. Slogans of absolutely contradictory nature were used by one group to slander and repudiate opposition groups. Ironically, all these slogans were picked from Chairman Mao's Quotations—the little "red book" that all of us were always required to carry. On many occasions leaders of opposing revolutionary groups had open controversies with one another. Each group would recite Chairman Mao's Quotations, state their revolutionary ideas, and call the other dirty names. As a result, mass fighting, violence, and bloodshed inevitably came about. Collective farming activity and food production were neglected. After some time, the Central Cultural Revolutionary Group, a committee headed by Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, announced that revolutionary committees must be established to replace the old Party organs in every facet. Those who were now leaders of these revolutionary committees were of course the most confident, the most proletarian by birth, and the most radical by nature, and all of them unmistakably Party members.¹

1. A large number of the new leaders were, in fact, not Party members. Indeed, this was one of the features of the Cultural Revolution.

As the revolution developed, China was running out of control.² All kinds of revolutionary groups were established and then liquidated. Fights and quarrels were common. The political evaluation of a person was based solely on his or her birth (family background). People were thus, according to their birth, divided into "red" and "black." Additionally, the children in the "black" categories were labeled "son-of-a-dog" or "son-of-a-rabbit" as a means of humiliation. In China, calling a person a "dog" or a "rabbit" is the worst possible insult. I myself was labeled as one of these "sons." Meetings devoted to criticizing were forcibly held nearly every day, in the universities, colleges, factories as well as in the people's communes. Sometimes, rallies were held to criticize the university presidents or even famous scientists. All intellectuals, professors, experts, scientists, and teachers were under great oppression. They were subjected to torture and endured extreme humiliation and fear. I still remember the night when the president of our college was publicly criticized. It was a meeting attended by over ten thousand teachers and students. The president was made to stand on the top of two piled up benches. Then his tormentors repeatedly forced him to bend forward. We, the audience, were expected to shout and yell at him. It was a stormy night. And there we were, unprotected, exposed to the pouring rain while our feet were bogged inches deep into the mud. We were terribly scared. We really did not know what to do or what to expect. Many of our dear old professors were tortured and humiliated to such an extent that they dropped dead on the spot. Some killed themselves afterwards, and some went mad. Very few survived, spiritually broken forever. Many of the young radical "poor" and "lower-middle" peasants rushed headlong into the cities to take part in the criticisms and torturing of the "reactionary intellectuals,"³ forgetting all about their farm work at home. This was another reason for the bad economic conditions which hit the countryside and which partly led to the horrible food shortage.

Suddenly, in 1968, Chairman Mao announced that all intellectuals must be re-educated by the workers, peasants, and soldiers. This one instruction compelled millions of intellectuals sadly to leave their families and to be sent to hard labor in the countryside. The people's communes were full of teachers and students. I was sent to a very remote, mountainous area in the northeastern part of Peking, close to Inner Mongolia. We were told to live, eat, and work with the local

2. Although the material in this paragraph is not directly related to the commune movement, it should be retained as evidence for the atmosphere of the time.

3. Some feel that this was extremely rare—there was not a headlong rush.

commune members. In fact, our living standard was much lower than theirs. The room I shared with another teacher and two students was a mere shed for the farmer's sheep. There was no windowglass and no door. We had to put white paper over the window frame and hang a piece of cloth on the door frame so as to have the least privacy. The walls were only of piled rocks without even bare earth to mortar them together and keep out the cutting wind. The weather was bitterly cold on the mountains; temperatures would reach -30°C (-21°F) outside, while inside our room it would be about -20°C (-4°F). Just imagine how cold it was. As soon as a wet towel was hung on the rope to dry, it was frozen. Steamed bread, fresh from the bamboo steamer, turned icy long before we could have time to swallow the last bite.⁴

We could never be their equals—we were not trusted. For instance, to spread seed at spring sowing was a very important task. Because the intellectuals were regarded as next to class enemies, we were never allowed to spread the seed else we might spoil the whole production by spreading the seed purposely in the wrong way.

It was also not possible to eat with them. At first we were made to eat with one family for two days then change to another family, so as to mix with them and be "re-educated." But the shortage of food made it impossible for the peasants to extend their traditional hospitality to us. The numerous teachers and students soon exhausted the peasants' limited stores of food. It ended up that we were living and working together with the poor and lower-middle peasants but eating separately. So my college had to appoint a group of teachers and students to build our own kitchen and send for some cooks. In this way, ironically, our food standard was raised markedly higher than that of the farmers.

Life was not easy. Every morning in that autumn, we walked up a huge and steep mountain for at least an hour to reach a tree where we picked persimmons. When we finished one tree, we might walk or climb up another mountain to reach the second tree and continue our labor. So when the sun at last set, we were tired and exhausted. Then the hard labor really began—we were required to carry a basketful of persimmons tied to our back and to march home from a spot much farther away from where we started. This was one of the re-education lessons. Instantly, to be an uneducated person became something to be proud of. Whenever a worker or a peasant made a speech, the first remark they would make was: "I am a tough guy. I never had any education." This became a qualification for being a revolutionary.⁵

4. Though the details given in this paragraph seem extreme, such situations were common in the communes of that time.

5. Commentators on this paper have pointed out that it was consistent with Mao's thinking that "intellectuals should identify themselves with workers and peasants."

Chairman Mao's newest and latest sayings were announced frequently. Each time a new saying was released to the public, immense parades were held immediately to celebrate the happy event. Then we were required to spend weeks studying it and carrying it into action. As soon as the slogan, "The more you work for money, the more you are breaking the wall of socialism," was released, all the hard-working people were accused of "taking the capitalist road." They were criticized and slighted. To be a lazybones seemed to make one extra revolutionary. Lazy persons were proud, too, to the dismay and agony of many really patriotic citizens.

Chairman Mao's saying, "Take grain as the main crop," caused many obedient commune leaders to order their fellow commune members to chop down their fruit trees and turn the orchards into fields. This terrible deed was committed as a symbolic revolutionary action of "severing the tail of capitalism." Some stupid leaders who were too eager to please and much too selfish to consider the welfare of the people, were so unpardonably foolish as to order their men to fill in the fish ponds and lakes to make fields for crop-growing. Thus vast stretches of beautiful lakes and ponds disappeared and weather turned bad as a result. People keep grinding their teeth whenever such unforgivable crimes are mentioned. However, the stupidity of these uneducated young leaders actually frustrated and ruined the rural economy. Commune members' income decreased, as did the already insufficient food supply. They consoled themselves by saying "rather eat corn in socialism than to have a feast in capitalism." You see, in China corn bread is the lowest food, sometimes fit only for pigs.

The bad economic situation led to the enforcement of a rationing system. All kinds of coupons were issued. I remember, when I went out to shop, I had to take along lots of coupons besides my money, because without those coupons I could buy nothing. We city people usually had surplus coupons while the peasants were always short of them. So whenever we stayed in the countryside, we gave them our extra coupons, and we always kept it a secret for fear that we might be accused of corrupting the ranks of the proletariat by so brotherly an act.

The income of the communes varied; some made more, others less. It all depended on the total income of the brigade. The more conservative the leadership was, the higher the pay the commune members would receive. Unfortunately, their poorer and more radical neighboring brigades would criticize them for taking Liu Shaochi's reactionary line. Thus the fearful leaders would be forced to change their ways by imposing more rules for studying Chairman Mao's works and by cutting down the hours of labor in the fields. But the trouble was that the majority of the peasants were not educated enough to understand the

lines they were supposed to memorize. During the compulsory study periods the older folks simply sat by themselves in a corner and snored while the young people whispered and giggled. The miserable team leader half-heartedly read the lines over and over again until the appointed meeting time had expired. Then, suddenly, like a gust of wind, people rushed home with a great sense of relief.

The personal cult of Chairman Mao reached a new high during the time of the Ninth Party Congress in 1969. People began to make all kinds of symbols to show their love and respect for him, including numerous badges, embroideries, and portraits of Chairman Mao. Throughout the meeting of the Ninth Party Congress the mania for badges continued.⁶ Some people spent much time making them, others a good deal of money buying them. A kind of swapping market soon appeared. Revolutionary zest turned into commercial lust. Every time there was a parade, various portraits of Chairman Mao were on display. There were exhibitions of "Chairman Mao badges." No song was sung without praising the "Red Sun in Our Hearts." The loyalty dance was composed and it went so far as to become a kind of holy rite. When you needed a haircut, the barber would see to it, first and foremost, that a group of waiting customers do the loyalty dance. This occurred mostly in the Northeast (Liaoning Province), where Mao's nephew was the leader of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee. A hotel room key would not be given unless the loyalty dance⁷ was performed by the guest then and there. Finally, in 1966 and early 1967 you would get no reply from a phone call had you forgotten to first say "Long live Chairman Mao!"

Almost as suddenly as it started, orders came that all those activities of badge making, dancing, and reciting of Chairman Mao's Quotations be stopped at once. Now many people still have boxes of badges and do not know how to dispose of them carefully.⁸

One word of disrespect about Chairman Mao or about his wife would bring catastrophe to a whole family or even a whole clan. People became cautious and suspicious. One dared not even trust one's own wife or husband, not to mention one's children. More often than not, when grownups were talking, the presence of a child would spontaneously stop the conversation or change the subject for the simple

6. After having begun in 1966, it continued and declined after the Ninth Party Congress.

7. These dances, says one commentator, were extremely rare. "I've never seen such a thing myself."

8. But even before Mao's death in 1976, the central government issued an edict urging the provincial government to collect them and destroy them (recycling the aluminum).

reason that innocent conversations could be overheard and reported, subsequently leading to the destruction of individuals or families.⁹

Chairman Mao said, "The countryside is a vast universe for the young people to contribute themselves to the country." As a result, millions of high school graduates were sent to the communes to settle, to the panic of all parties concerned—the parents and students, as well as the commune members. Many of the young students were so desperate that they turned into a semblance of what the West called hippies. They grew long hair and beards. They took to smoking and drinking; they slept long hours by day and gambled at night. Some sneaked back to the city; some fell so low as to steal and rob. Their brokenhearted parents were subjected to kinds of dilemmas that could not be solved. Being government employees, they were supposed to follow Chairman Mao's call; yet, being parents, they hated to be separated from their children. Besides, they were financially burdened with extra expenses. To prepare a child's luggage might cost them half a year's income. As for the commune members, there were already serious problems with their own food supply and income; naturally, they were reluctant to share their meager fare with the city youths. The complaint was nationwide, and the harm quite serious. Even the already busy railroad system suddenly became impossibly overloaded as young people and their parents now occupied so many of the seats.¹⁰

Rule after rule was issued to strengthen the movement of sending the young to the countryside; order after order was issued to persuade parents to let their children go. Yet a kind of fear and uncertainty prevailed. It was a headache to the government as well as to the people. Only after the fall of the "Gang of Four" could this problem be solved. Young people returned home to their parents; new graduates could now find jobs in the cities. But many of them felt they were cheated; ten years of their precious lives had been wasted. What happened during those ten long years has become a nightmare in the history of China. Those who were lucky enough to survive always shudder to think that it should ever happen again.

I am glad to say policies are now changing for the better. Our living standard has improved. A new horizon is rising from China. We see hope for a glorious future for the "Giant Dragon of the East."

9. This atmosphere of suspicion and fear was far less strong in the countryside, because they all knew one another and were related by blood. Moreover work in the fields had to go on.

10. Commentator: All this is very true. In fact, special train service had to be arranged for taking the young people to the countryside. One school of one thousand students would make up one train. If a city had two hundred such schools, there would be two hundred such trains. They went mostly to the border areas and expected to stay indefinitely.