

The Successful Cultural Revolution (Part 1)

Successful for the ninety percent, anyway

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Godfree Roberts
Godfree's Newsletter



Mao, the incorruptible colossus that kicked off the Cultural Revolution.

There were two Reigns of Terror if we would but remember and consider them: the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions. But our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak. But what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heartbreak?
—Mark Twain.



Godfree Roberts

Earlier, I **claimed** that Mao did more good and less harm than anyone in history and, in an **essay** on the 'great famine,' we saw how he saved millions from death by starvation, despite the US grain embargo. This two-part essay focuses on Mao's last decade and on his Cultural Revolution, which taught everyone to read, write, argue and vote and ended Mark Twains' 'deaths from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heartbreak' for five hundred million forgotten people.

Birth of a Revolution

The French murdered (or "executed"?) 38,000¹ nobles during the French Revolution and still celebrate the occasion annually. Yet though the Chinese killed no elite² (they were all back in office by 1975) during the Cultural Revolution, they nevertheless achieved their goals and staged the first top-down, peaceful revolution in history and the only successful one of the 1960s.

As I continued reading the old romances and tales of Chinese literature it occurred to me that there was something peculiar about such stories: the absence of peasants who tilled the land. All the characters were warriors, officials or scholars; there was never a peasant hero. I wondered about this for two years and then I analyzed the content of the stories. I found that they all glorified men of arms, rulers of the people, who did not have to work the land because they owned and controlled it and, evidently, forced the peasants work it for them. —**Mao Zedong**.

In 1957, eight years after the revolution ended, **Mao warned** colleagues that mere socialist transformation would not end China's social contradictions: "There are people who seem to think that, as state power has been won, they can sleep soundly, unworried, and play the tyrant at will. But the masses will oppose such persons, throw stones at them and beat them with their hoes, which will, I think, serve them right and please me immensely. Moreover, sometimes fighting is the only way to solve a problem. The people have good reason to remove bureaucrats from office.. I say it is fine to remove them, they ought to be removed, the Communist Party needs to learn a lesson. If students and workers take to the streets you comrades should regard it as a good thing.. Workers should be allowed to strike and the masses to hold demonstrations. Processions and demonstrations are provided for in our Constitution and, when the Constitution is revised, I suggest the freedom to strike be added so that the workers are explicitly permitted to strike". Critics had made the same observation about Russia's revolution but, for Mao, the revolution was only the first step, "We began a new Long March in 1949 and we are still only on the first lap," he told **André Malraux**. "Victory is the mother of all illusions.. Humanity left to its own devices does not necessarily re-establish capitalism, but it does re-establish inequality. The forces tending towards the creation of a new class are powerful".

The danger

The greatest danger, he said, was a political leadership that turned its back on socialism, bourgeois elements who produced a new bureaucratic class that he attributed to China's Stalinist bureaucratic hierarchy, a new exploiting class fashioned from a 'bourgeois bureaucratic class sucking the workers' blood'.

He reminded colleagues of 'peasant rebellions, when frustrations burst forth in emotional storms in which hatreds, resentments and a sense of hopeless desperation break through social restraints in an overwhelming surge'.

But no-one listened, nothing changed so he concluded that the problem was *cultural*: the ancient tradition of privileged officials and submissive, deferential peasants was to blame and this *status quo* needed changing—a job for which Mao was uniquely qualified.

Robert Payne, who knew him, explained in 1948, "Mao holds all the arts of China in his hands. Lenin had neither the learning nor the inclination to assume the role of transformer of culture. Mao, far more widely read and with a comparative subtlety of mind, has clearly determined to accept the position thrust on him and no one can foresee the changes in the basic structure of Chinese culture which will derive ultimately from his will."

Guilty Secret

By 1966, the Communist Party had been in power for sixteen years but, behind its successes lurked a guilty secret: eighty percent of rural Chinese – who had fought and won the war while the urbanites went on with their lives – were still illiterate, diseased and semi-destitute. Says **Chungwu Kung**,

China was a people's democratic dictatorship in theory only; in practice, political and cultural power was held by scholarly and bureaucratic intellectuals who commanded vast influence and prestige.

The Revolution had changed little beyond ownership of farmers' tiny plots, which in any case remained subject to the vicissitudes of weather and fortune.

Luan time

Mao proposed giving five hundred million peasants education, democracy, justice and dignity. He would direct their frustration 'outward, through the force of ideology expressed in a political slogan, breaking the shackles of repression through study and converting their thought into creative action'. Then one Spring morning in 1966 he became the only national leader in history to overthrow his own government when he told startled colleagues, "I firmly believe that a few months of chaos, *luan*, will be mostly for the good".



A discussion rally.

Since the Party controlled the means of production and everyone owned their land, he said, violence would be unnecessary. He proposed an exclusively *cultural* revolution and encouraged students to stir things up and Shanghai university students founded the Red Guard movement in response. After a few months of chaos, Mao met with Red Guard leaders and told them factional conflicts had to stop. "The masses don't like civil wars.. The people are unhappy, the workers are unhappy, the peasants are unhappy. The Beijing residents are unhappy, the students in most schools are unhappy."

But, as he had anticipated, the fat was in the fire: urban workers needed little stirring and, by late October, activism had spread from school to factory and from factory to factory. According to [Maurice Meisner](#), "The old bureaucracy, in a desperate effort to save itself, expended its last financial resources bribing workers into political passivity, appeasing them and buying time for political maneuvering". The Central Intelligence Agency [reported](#):

While it would be too much to say that the cultural revolution has followed a precise master plan—there have been too many tactical adjustments and shifts along the way—it is clear that Mao envisaged two distinct phases from the start: destructive and constructive.

The Red Guards were Mao's vanguard during the destructive phase but proved to be a woefully defective instrument during the constructive phase. Mao's disillusionment with the Red Guards became apparent after their dismal, self-seeking performance during the initial 'power-seizures' of early 1967 and was intensified by their indiscriminate internecine warfare during the following summer. Time and again, Mao ordered the young students to rectify themselves voluntarily. They did not do so, thereby confirming in Mao's mind his assessment of the negative qualities of China's intellectuals.

As early as 1939, Mao had written that the sole criterion by which to judge whether or not a youth is revolutionary is if he is 'willing to integrate himself with the broad masses of workers and peasants and does so in practice'. The Red Guards had not been willing to do so. Thus, Mao replaced them with a new vanguard—the working class—when he decided that the time had come to start building and consolidating his new revolutionary order, and he forcibly dispatched the young intellectuals [China's current president and prime minister among them] to rural areas by the hundreds of thousands for further 'revolutionary purification'".

After reading posters denouncing his parents, [Yang Xiguang](#), son of a senior cadre, sought sympathy from his family's housekeeper. The woman, who had behaved submissively towards them for many years, told him that she completely approved of their downfall, said her submission had been feigned, that Yang's parents had exploited her all along, and that the city's housekeepers were organizing their own rebel group. "I felt my world turned upside down. Lots of common people had smiled at me before the Cultural Revolution for being the son of a big shot but I now felt it had only been pretense.. I suddenly recognized the keenness of the contradiction, that those at the bottom actually hated those at the top".

A Program of Revolutionary Rebellion



Social discontent – rooted in workers' material lives – was real. Workers' productivity had increased by 250% since 1957 and the cost of living had increased by 10% but their incomes were 5% lower. Their protests about wages, benefits and work conditions expressed a yearning for human dignity and democratic control over socioeconomic life. One temporary worker recalled, "We were simply inferior. In the factory, if people didn't know your name, they would just call you *linshi gong* [temporary worker], which sounded contemptuous. Therefore the word *linshi gong* was a taboo among us. We would rather call one another *lin xiong* or 'temporary brothers'".

A Program of Revolutionary Rebellion, by the Mao Zedong Thought Association of Hundreds of Millions of Peasants in Dong'an (in rural Hunan, Mao's ancestral home) complained about heavy tax burdens and excessive labor levies and listed their demands

- Peasants must enjoy genuine political and economic freedom.
- Their rights should not be violated, and illegal and abusive practices, such as tying up, beating, denunciation, and deception, must be abolished.
- Peasants should receive the same political treatment as workers, cadres, and technical professionals.
- As long as peasants have done a good job in collective production, their income derived from sideline production (such as cultivating private plots, raising pigs, chickens, and ducks, and embroidery) should not be vilified as capitalist.
- Insofar as provision of goods is concerned, peasants should be treated in the same way as people from other occupations and should not be treated unequally. For example, the system of providing beans and tofu based on ration coupons must be abolished; and cloth coupons should be distributed equally among workers, cadres, city residents, and the rural population, regardless of status distinctions.
- Peasants who become ill must be covered by the public health-care system in the same way in which cadres and state workers are. No matter how seriously ill a state worker becomes, all possible means will be tried to bring him back, and all expenses will be covered by the government. When a peasant gets seriously ill, however, if the treatment would cost several hundred yuan, then the patient's fate would be to wait for death. The peasants' well-being enjoys no guarantee. Such a system is patently unjust.
- A nationwide movement that would "lessen burdens of the peasants, enhance their economic and political status, thoroughly lift them out of poverty, . . . overthrow the unjust social system, turn an inverted history on its own head, and struggle for the complete victory of hundreds of millions of peasants.

In the Country

With the youngsters now back in the classroom or sent down to a farm, Mao placed his faith in his own class. "The peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not, who is the worst and who is not quite so vicious, who deserves severe punishment and who deserves to be let off lightly: the peasants keep clear accounts and very seldom has the punishment exceeded the crime". He charged them to narrow the 'three differences' between mental and manual work workers and peasants, city and countryside – and establish 'three-in-one production teams' of workers, technicians and specialists to raise productivity through participative innovation. **Donping Han** tells what happened next:

I grew up in Jimo, a Chinese village. In 1966, there were many illiterate people in my village. The Cultural Revolution weakened professionals' control of education and allowed workers and peasants to have more say in their children's education. Peasants were allowed to run their own village schools. A village would build its own primary school with local materials, hire its own teachers and provide free access to all children in the village. Several villages would pool their resources to build a free middle school for all peasant children, then the local commune would open free high schools for them. There were 1,050 villages in Jimo County and every village set up a primary school. All the rural children were able to go to school free.

Before the Cultural Revolution there were only seven middle schools in Jimo County, which had a population of 750,000. Now the number of middle schools increased to 249 and all primary school graduates could attend them free of charge, without passing tests. In the previous seventeen years 1,500 people graduated from the only high school in Jimo County and half went to college and never came back and Jimo was unable to train a single high school graduate for each village in the County. Now, every commune had three high schools. When I graduated from middle school in 1972, only 70 per cent of my classmates could enter high school. When my younger sister graduated in 1973, all her classmates could go to high school. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976, there were 100 high school graduates in my village and 12,000 in my commune.

The expansion of education during the Cultural Revolution years was unprecedented in Chinese history. It profoundly transformed the Chinese people and society. As the people became more educated, they became more empowered in both political and economic activities. In response to peasants' demands, Mao next suspended college entrance examinations and called for high school graduates to work at least two years in a factory, the countryside, or the army to become eligible for college entrance. In 1973 the academic test was dropped and students were selected by fellow workers and peasants based on their work performance and, later, graduates were required to return to serve the communities that had sent them.

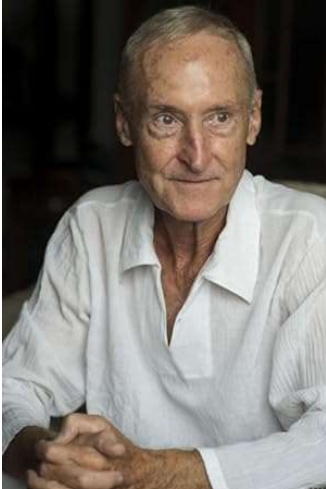
If you've subscribed, this time next week you'll automatically receive the conclusion, including Mao's own assessments of the Cultural Revolution – and Xi Jinping's.

Notes

1 The names of 'notables' executed are on file in French archives.

2 There are references to firefights between Red Guard factions who got their hands on PLA rifles but, if they happened, they were small scale and incidental to the Cultural Revolution.

ABOUT GODFREE ROBERTS



I've been visiting China since 1967 and following its rising fortunes ever since. After receiving my doctorate from UMass, Amherst, I moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand, an hour from the Chinese border, and began trying to understand the country's phenomenal success. The result is a book, "Why China Leads the World: Talent at the Top, Data in the Middle, Democracy at the Bottom," the only book in English that explains why China works so well, and why 95% of Chinese think it's heading in the right direction. 'Talent at the Top' means that only the brightest, most honest and idealistic people are admitted to politics—a policy they have not changed in 2200 years. 'Data in the Middle' means that every policy is tested, implemented, tracked, and optimized based on terabytes of data. The PRC is the world's largest consumer of public surveys. 'Democracy at the Bottom' means that ordinary people have the last say on everything. 3,000 honest amateurs from across the country assemble twice a year to check the stats and sign off on new legislation. Policies need a minimum of 66% popular support to become law. That's why 95% of Chinese say the country is on the right track.

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