

The Chinese Great Cultural Revolution and China's Loss of Faith

Written by Kerry Brown

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KERRY BROWN, MAY 24 2016

The *Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (CR) was issued on 16th May 1966. It is taken by historians as marking the formal start of the CR, even if there are good arguments to show that the event had already started, and indeed that it had roots deep into the previous decade.[i]

Reading the Circular today is to be reminded of the oddness of this era – its mixture of paranoia, vicious attacking rhetoric, and powerful demagoguery. People are called 'scholar tyrants', 'demons' and 'monsters', peddling 'poisonous weeds.' Across everything, there runs the conviction in class struggle on Marxist terms, with the primary battle between the working class and the capitalists, revisionists and bourgeoisie. Like Eskimos are meant to have dozens of words for snow, in the CR there were endless labels for enemies. Enemies were everywhere. As the Circular declares, sourcing it straight back to Mao, 'with no destruction there can be no creation.' Rebellion and destroying were ipso facto good in the logic of this extraordinary and turbulent time.

Reading articles and pamphlets from the CR era period today is like peering into texts in a dying or dead language – the style, vocabulary and content are very alien. For most young Chinese, they are as bewildering as for Europeans trying to make sense of texts in old versions of their language. Only of course, the CR was not so long ago, and for anyone over the age of 60 in China it would figure as part of their living memory.

The default for the last few decades in China has been to respond to any worrying trend in domestic politics by warning that if things carry on this way then the Cultural Revolution will return. It is widely acknowledged as a catastrophic period for Chinese people and for China as a country. For the Communist Party too it visited upon it terrible problems, and almost decimated a generation of cadres. The toxic negativity of the CR remains potent even today. Speaking in 2012 during the fall of former Politburo member Bo Xilai after his disgrace that year because of the link of his wife with the murder of a British businessman and claims of corruption, the then Premier Wen Jiabao explicitly referred to the CR decade, saying that Bo's dabbling in leftist style politics risked returning China to this nightmare past. This attack was regarded by many as being the moment when Bo's fate was sealed, and his political career over.

For the *People's Daily*, the official state newspaper, the sole mention of the CR and its half centenary was a coruscating editorial in which it castigated the colossal mistakes and cost of that era. Once more the solemn promise was given – that China should never return to this horrific kind of past, but should move on.

Labeling something as leftist, Maoist, or reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution has always been, at least in the period after 1980, a good way of burying it. One of the claims by current President Xi Jinping's critics is that he too is dabbling in Maoist style megalomania, last seen in the CR decade, and that his mass campaigning and propaganda style harks back to them.

What is forgotten in these critiques is just how wholly different China now is to the country that existed then, and how, even were a politician to be mad enough to want to turn the clock back, it would prove impossible. The China of 1966

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was a backward, largely rural economy, where 90 per cent of people lived in the rural areas. China today is over half urban, with probably another quarter of its population living in areas that could be characterized as peri-urban. China in 1966 was a place where the Communist Party was dominated by former guerilla fighters, where only a tiny percentage had even had education beyond middle school. The Party today has a top level leadership in which every single member of the current politburo has a university degree, and some have masters and doctorates.

In 1966, China had only one ambassador abroad by the end of the year. Its trading links with the outside world consisted almost wholly of small amounts going via Hong Kong, still under British rule. It was at loggerheads with the USSR, which it feared enough that throughout the 1960s it was moving key industry outside the coastal, urban areas, such as they existed then, inland, into more remote places to protect them against attack. It did not have membership of the United Nations (until 1971) and was still in the midst of a cold war with the US. In 2016, China is the largest trading partner of more than 130 countries, has a permanent seat on the UN security council, and with the world's second largest economy has links that spread through investment, politics, logistics and finance across the planet.

There are many more ways to illustrate how the China of 1966 and the China of today are vastly different. Tourist numbers have increased significantly, with 120 million Chinese travelling outside of the country in 2015; between 1949 and 1978 for the whole of this period, the figure was just 750 thousand. Of these travelers, over 3.5 million students have travelled abroad since 1980. In 1966, the figure was negligible, perhaps even zero, except to places like North Korea or Albania, although there are no official statistics available for this period. The only real link between China in 1966 and China in 2016 is that the Communist Party of China still enjoys a monopoly on power. Everything else seems to have changed.

There is a final, very profound difference, between the China of 1966 and that of 2016. And this is about the nature of public belief and political behaviour. The CR is such an unusual event in China because it saw, for the first and only time, a period of almost religious adoration and fervour for Mao. For a society that had historically been religiously diverse (a mixture of Muslims, Confucianists, Buddhists), this level of ecstatic devotion to one figure was extremely unusual, perhaps even unique. Perhaps only the Taiping rebellion of a century before, from 1850 to 1864, had seen battles over religion play a role in public life. But in the CR, love and adoration of Mao was real, palpable, something that spread across society and created the most extreme behaviour. The CR was, in many ways, a spiritual movement – something deeply anomalous in a society whose rulers embraced atheism and dialectic materialism.

In the final era of the CR, from the fall of Mao's chosen successor Lin Biao in 1971 onwards, public fervour declined precipitously. People grew weary of the endless campaigns. Some even famously dared to protest after the death of the respected Zhou Enlai in early 1976. Mao's death came in September 1976 more as a relief than a source of grief. Chinese people, having given their hearts and minds to Mao, had every reason to feel scarred by the experience. From the death of Mao onwards, the most striking feature of Chinese political life is the pragmatism, the restriction of politics to a set zone, with whole areas of life opening up for Chinese people to do as they pleased and the Party simply dominated the restricted political power space.

The CR, at least in this context, figures more as an end – the end of a faith, as it were, in Mao and his style of politics. Fifty years after the CR started, Chinese people are extremely unlikely to surrender their unequivocal belief and support to a political leader. Under Mao they learned their lesson. It was a huge experiment that left a searing imprint on people's minds, and to that extent, it shaped, and continues to shape, the China that exists today. No matter whether anyone dares, or wants, to talk about the events five decades ago.

[i] See Roderick Macfarquhar, 'The Origins of the Cultural Revolution', Volumes 1 to 3, Oxford University Press for details of this.

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