MAO ZEDONG AND CHINA
IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORLD

A CONCISE HISTORY

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re-educating society about socialism. While the PLA’s role at this point was small at best, it was a harbinger of later army involvement in civilian affairs. Mao’s positioning outside the Party—his effective exile from it—allowed him to ally himself directly with the people in critique of Party practice. This contributed to one of the most dramatic developments on the domestic Maoist front in these years: the exponential growth of the Mao cult. Very soon, this was to have disastrous consequences. For the moment, what originally had been an organic reverence for a leader was becoming an orchestrated affair. The Party abetted the growth of the cult, to provide cover for the CCP’s extremely un-Maoist policies. Lin Biao, Minister of Defense, did his part to fuel the Mao cult in the army, by extolling the example of a soldier, Lei Feng, who had drowned in the course of his duties. Lei had kept a diary, published after his death, in which he had recorded his absolute devotion to Mao and to Mao’s Thought. Lei Feng became a model soldier, and in time, a model Maoist, whom all proper citizens were exhorted to emulate. Aside from promoting Lei Feng, Lin Biao also edited the first edition of what soon became a ubiquitous accessory for all Chinese citizens: the little red book. This contained a selection of Maoist sayings and aphorisms distilling the wisdom of Mao Zedong Thought into digestible nuggets of truth. Statues of Mao were erected everywhere. Mao was omnipresent. His cult was pervasive.

On this note, the last act of Maoism in China was about to begin.

**The Cultural Revolution**

**Politics in Command, 1966–1969**

Beginning in 1966, Mao launched a movement to seize back from the Communist Party what he saw as his right to be the master cultural and historical interpreter of the Chinese revolution and Chinese Marxism. Who would speak of and for the Chinese revolution? Who would speak of and for the culture of that revolution, Maoism? These were central issues animating what came to be known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—a movement as unpredictable and unintended in its scope as it was organic to Mao’s revolutionary philosophy and politics.

**What was the Cultural Revolution?**

It is said, the Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao to seize state power. This interpretation contains a good bit of truth, and the period certainly exhibits power struggles in abundance. Yet for Mao, state power was never a pursuit unto itself; state power was to be used in the waging of revolution. To explain the complexity of the Cultural Revolution, then, it is more appropriate to understand the movement not merely as a bid for state power, but as an attempt to seize politics—the power of mass culture and speech for revolution.

It is also said, the Cultural Revolution was an outgrowth of peculiarities in Mao’s personality: his desire to be immortalized, his basic tyrannical nature, and his fear of death. Mao clearly was a forceful and ruthless man; if not for this, he could never have risen to the heights of power amidst the historical circumstances
of twentieth-century China. In 1966, Mao was seventy-two years old, surely old enough to be thinking of his own demise. Yet, he was in generally good health. He was, it is true, increasingly concerned about a political successor. Whether this bespeaks a fear of death or an irrational desire for immortality is a stretch. What it does indicate is Mao’s concern about the potential longevity and future direction of the revolutionary endeavor to which he had devoted his life, and in which he still believed passionately. Since 1960, all signs pointed to the reversal of his revolutionary vision. To the extent that the Cultural Revolution was about ensuring his legacy, then, it was about securing the historical conditions for the continuation of the revolution.

Some say the Cultural Revolution was an expression of religiosity, and certainly much of the devotion it inspired appears very religious. Yet, Mao’s belief in the Chinese revolution was not a question of divine faith. It was a belief in the historically situated capacity of mass activity to change the circumstances of life. For Mao, the whole point of the revolution was the practical one of creating the conditions for the masses to transform their own lives. The Cultural Revolution was launched in part to restore to the people the revolutionary momentum seized from them by Party bureaucrats. Mao was intent on cleansing the Party of these usurpers. If this meant destroying the Party to save it, he was prepared to do so.

Many say the mass resonance and response to the Cultural Revolution are what can be expected from an ant-like, or sheep-like people such as the Chinese, who have no tradition of independence and freedom, and are hence easily tyrannized into blind obedience. To be sure, the scope of the popular response is one truly astonishing aspect of the movement, and it contradicts the view of the Chinese people as sheep-like. Rather, it suggests that six years into the post-Leap restoration, a good number of people were dismayed by the direction in which the country and Party were headed. They were apparently ready to do something about it, and, when given the chance, they acted.

The Cultural Revolutionary call to reconnect “culture” to “revolution” through mass politics sometimes was as straightforward as smashing temples to destroy the sites of old superstitious beliefs, deemed unsuited to the new culture of the revolutionary everyday. At other times, the connection between culture and revolution was as labyrinthine as the dizzying number of alleged intrigues, or as incomprehensible as the waxing and waning Red Guard factions fighting each other over the proper practical interpretation of an utterance.

However one sees it, the Cultural Revolution was a failure. It failed to achieve any of its lofty or base goals. Most prominent, it failed to secure the Maoist-style revolution. The quick reversal of Maoism after Mao’s death and the complete repudiation of the Cultural Revolution precisely indicate that Mao’s fears of the abandonment of revolutionary practice were in fact correct. The Cultural Revolution’s failure to break the back of the Party bureaucracy is also remarkable. All it did was bequeath to the CCP a new lease on life, as the savior of China from chaos. Not only was the Cultural Revolution a failure in its own terms, it was often a cruel and demoralizing movement that ruined the lives of many, took the lives of many others, and permanently altered the trajectories of several generations. Yet, the many memoirs published in retrospect also make clear that, within the cruelty and violence, the Cultural Revolution was at times also an exhilarating, liberating, and optimistic period—so optimistic in fact that its failure produced complete disillusionment.

The Cultural Revolution was not one movement but many, and it does not lend itself to one narrative line. It has many internally complex and overlapping stories. Narrowly defined, it lasted from 1966 to 1969 and, unlike previous peasant-centered movements, it was predominantly an urban phenomenon. The ensuing seven years were its aftermath. It is, however, now conventional to speak of the Cultural Revolution as spanning the decade of 1966–76, ending with Mao’s death.

The Prelude: Hai Rui

The prelude to what came to be known as the Cultural Revolution began in November 1965 on a literary note, with a critique of a play written in 1960 regarding Hai Rui. The play had been staged during the post-Leap restoration, although not since 1962; it was taken to be an allegory. Hai Rui was a fifteenth-century Ming dynasty official who was upright, honest, and spoke truth to power; he was for centuries a popular subject for local operas. In one famous episode from his life, Hai Rui was sent into exile after criticizing the emperor for land policies. He had been a favorite historical character of Mao’s, until Peng Dehuai had spoken truth to power at the Lushan conference in 1959. After this, Hai Rui’s fortunes dipped as quickly as did Peng’s.
The critique of the play in November 1965 was written by a Shanghai-based literary critic, Yao Wenyuan. Yao made up for his weak grasp of drama and of Ming dynastic history by his strong grasp of ideology. Yao’s critique, featured in a leading Shanghai newspaper, pointed to the counter-revolutionary message supposedly encoded in the Hai Rui play. This critique provoked first confusion (why would this play be a subject of review three years after its last staging?) and then a debate among literary and academic circles in Shanghai for the next six months. The evaluation of most of the participants in the debate was disdainful dismissal of Yao. The Beijing-based cultural oversight group chaired by Politbureau member and Beijing mayor Peng Zhen, weighed in on the topic in February 1966, commenting that Yao’s political treatment of academic and cultural matters was out of order. It all seemed quite insignificant.

Few knew the article had been commissioned and planted by Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, at his direction. This was an opening salvo against the Party establishment. And, it was fired from outside Beijing; Mao, keeping his distance, was traveling in the provinces.

**Mao’s Travels**

In 1965, Mao was rarely in the capital. After the Chinese New Year in February, he journeyed by train across the country. In May, he went to Jinggangshan, the base area where he had established himself as a revolutionary leader after 1927. In part nostalgic, this trip was also intended to remind everyone of where Mao’s revolution had begun. He arrived back in Beijing in June.

At the time, the rural areas were embroiled in a large-scale divisive campaign, called the “four clean-ups,” aimed at sweeping out corruption among rural cadres. Mao did not participate directly, but he sent his daughter Li Na, now twenty-four years old, and a student in the history department of Beijing University. Li Na went to the Jiangxi countryside with a group of Mao’s assistants from Zhongnanhai on a fact-finding trip. Li Na was not well liked. Reputedly quite temperamental, she was apparently not helpful in the Jiangxi endeavor, complained about the living conditions, and wished to be sent back to Beijing. Willful in her ways, she demanded special privileges. Mao consistently refused to have Li Na, Li Min, or his nephew Mao Yuanxin treated differently from others. In Li Na’s case, this provoked tension between Jiang Qing and Mao.

In November 1965, as the Hai Rui critique was getting under way, Mao went south to Hangzhou. Hangzhou is best known for its scenic West Lake (a topic and setting of China’s best-known classical poems), its Dragon’s Well tea, and its beautiful women. Mao stayed for a month in a retrofitted Qing-dynasty guesthouse on the banks of West Lake set aside for his use. December found him in Nanchang, the Jiangxi capital, where he celebrated his seventy-second birthday. He then moved on to Wuhan, a dusty industrial entrepot in the center of China, where he stayed in a former tea merchant’s estate on the East Lake.

By March 1966, Mao was back in Hangzhou presiding over an expanded meeting of the Party’s Central Committee, during which he took Peng Zhen and others to task for their timid cultural policies and failure to deal adequately with the Hai Rui critique. Pressing his charges against Peng Zhen occupied him for some time, and to do so he shuttled the short distance between Shanghai, where meetings were being held, and Hangzhou. Then he visited Shaozhan, his hometown in Hunan; when the heat got too much to bear, he returned to Wuhan. Restless, Mao let the Cultural Revolution develop, in his absence from Beijing.

**The May 16th Directive**

Literary debate was hardly all Mao had in mind by planting the Hai Rui article. The playwright, Wu Han, Beijing vice-mayor and Beijing University professor, was quickly disposed of. Mao then raised the stakes. As he later put it, he wished for a revolution that “touches people to their very souls.” With Lin Biao and the army on his side, Mao used an editorial in the PLA mouthpiece, Liberation Daily, to demand a purge of “bourgeois elements” from cultural circles and of “right opportunists” from within the Party. In this unsigned piece of early May 1966, the two major targets of the Cultural Revolution were announced. Intellectuals and Party cadres would have to be on their guard. The major location of the movement—the cities—was also indicated.

On May 16, Mao, still outside Beijing, followed up with a directive. In the name of the Party’s Central Committee, the directive attacked the Beijing Mayor, Peng Zhen, for dampening political enthusiasms, promoting bourgeois literary critical standards (art for art’s sake, rather than art subordinated to politics), and shielding “anti-socialist element.” Wu Han. Peng was removed from power. The Beijing Party structure was quickly reorganized, and the cultural oversight group Peng chaired was dissolved.

Even more dramatic, the directive announced that “representatives of
the bourgeoisie" had infiltrated the Party and were preparing to use it to restore bourgeois rule. It accused the Party of harboring a number of minor Krushchevians—revisionists and bourgeois traitors to socialism—under the protection of one big Krushchev, as yet unnamed. Few could guess who it was.

Things proceeded with lightning speed, as did the creation of ever more fanciful political language. Along with the Beijing Party organization, national organs of propaganda and communication were purged, including the editor of the Party mouthpiece, the People's Daily. Zhou Yang, the Hu Feng antagonist of 1955 and post-1949 cultural policy leader, was ousted. Mao's secretary, Chen Boda—who had been with him since Yan'an—along with Jiang Qing became the nucleus of a new “Central Cultural Revolution Group” (CCRG) that took over communication and culture policy. They handpicked a number of like-minded people to assist; among those was Yao Wenyuan, the Hai Rui critic from Shanghai, and his senior supervisor, Zhang Chunqiao, a friend of Jiang Qing's and Party Secretary of Shanghai. Jiang, Yao, and Zhang were the three original members of what later became known as the "Gang of Four."

From early on, Mao and the CCRG framed the movement—formally named the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—as a life and death struggle between capitalism and socialism, with capitalism residing in all forms of "bourgeois ideology" and socialism residing in Mao Zedong Thought, as interpreted by Mao and the CCRG. With this struggle on the agenda, Mao was not even close to finished in May, nor was the CCRG and its now-invigorated leader, Jiang Qing.

**Jiang Qing's Rise**

When Jiang married Mao in Yan'an, she was widely resented by Party leaders as a home wrecker. Unfair as this may have been—Mao's and He Zizhen's marriage was already shaky by then—she had for years bided her time, in enforced leisure and with much bile accumulating against those she considered her or Mao's enemies. Through the years, her relationship to Mao became increasingly attenuated, and they spent more time apart. Jiang's real and imagined illnesses had made her a paranoid hypochondriac, and Mao's dalliances with young women became more frequent and disrupted any possibility of a settled relationship with his wife.

As a former actress, Jiang had remained interested in, and connected to, the cultural world, particularly that in Shanghai, China's cultural capital.

She habitually watched movies in her custom-designed screening room at Zhongnanhai and she was an accomplished photographer. Jiang had long desired to get into the political and cultural fray, but had been forestalled by the opposition of Party leaders. Mao had agreed it was best for Jiang Qing to remain apart from politics.

In 1965, Mao changed his mind and commissioned Jiang Qing to do a number of secret jobs in the cultural sphere he could entrust to no one else. The Hai Rui incident was an example of Jiang's success in implementing Mao's directions. She soon moved into political position, publicly through the CCRG, and privately through a shadowy organization named the Central Case Examination Group. The latter took on the task of digging up damaging gossip against proposed targets of struggle or removal.

Ultimately, Jiang Qing became a scapegoat for the Cultural Revolution and for her role in the Gang of Four. At her public trial in 1981, she was accused of many specific crimes. She also was accused of being the female demon power behind the throne and of demonstrating all of the reasons why a woman with power was a bad woman. In such a context of vilification, it perhaps can never be known just how much she operated on her own, and how much only at the behest of Mao. She remains widely reviled in China.

**Big Character Posters**

Soon after the May 16th directive, when the Party's alleged infiltration by the bourgeoisie was announced, Mao issued a call to students. "Dare to rebel against authority," he told them. They soon responded in their millions.

On May 25, students at Beijing University (Beida)—the site of the May Fourth Movement in 1919—affixed a "big-character poster" to the campus walls. It denounced the university's highest authority, the president, for suppressing discussion of the Hai Rui play. The poster called for a battle to begin between revolutionary intellectuals and bourgeois school bureaucrats. Big-character posters were an important weapon in the ensuing struggles. They were a tool of popular political communication and warfare. They could be anonymous or signed; they could be posted anywhere on any surface, hence available to anyone with a brush, ink, and paper; they could be dashed off or laboriously; they could level accusations without proof, or they could adduce evidence at their leisure; their accusations were almost impossible to refute, other than through reactive posters,
which were never as dramatic as the originals; and they were ephemeral: if not read immediately, accusations could change, compounding the difficulty of responding fast enough to forestall the spread of reputation-destroying rumors.

The authors of big-character posters used all of these guerilla tactics to seize the right of speech away from those who normally controlled the organs of mass communication. They turned politics into a mass politics by making political voice available. Students and soon residents all over the urban and rural areas were bombarded with political posters, much as product advertisements now occupy the same walls that used to be public political not privatized space. For most in China, from this time on, there was no life without the posters and politics.

The Beida poster was torn down immediately by Party authorities. A few days later, Mao praised its content. A little later, he went on to note, "youth is the great army of the Great Cultural Revolution! It must be mobilized to the full." And, in a caution to his fellow leaders against dampening youth enthusiasm, he told them, "You must put politics in command, go among the masses and be at one with them, and carry on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution even better." A People's Daily editorial, assumed to have been written, or at least approved, by Mao, shortly thereafter proclaimed, "Revolutionary Big-Character Posters are 'Magic Mirrors' That Show Up All Monsters." Mao's support fueled the ensuing student revolution.

Attempts by Liu Shaoqi and other Party leaders to keep the students under control failed. The movement spiraled in its own momentum, taking professors, administrators, writers, and others down at will and without logic.

**Education, Authority, the Bourgeoisie, and the Red Guards**

Teachers, professors, and intellectuals in general were accused of being the primary harborers and spreaders of bourgeois thought. Education—in its guise as rote memory, exam taking, bookish knowledge, and abstract principle—was faulted for being divorced from the practical needs of the revolutionary masses. Schools were identified as the reproducers of the bourgeoisie. The urban and elite bias of institutions and instructors was blamed for producing a generation of apolitical careerist youth, who had no concept of revolutionary sacrifice or practice. Mao was intent on shaking all that up; he mobilized students—who he called “revolutionary successors”—to do it.

Teachers, professors, and school administrators were attacked in big-character posters and then arrested by students. They were detained and forced to write self-criticisms addressing the crimes of which they were accused. Some were harased or even beaten to death; some committed suicide rather than face the harshness of treatment. Others endured long days, weeks, months, and years of humiliation. They had dunce caps placed on their heads and were paraded around with their alleged crimes presented on sandwich boards hung around their necks. They were forced to attend struggle sessions. They had to stand in painful positions while being accused. They had to admit publicly their crimes. Even if they did all that was asked, they were usually not released. The point was to demonstrate the hollowness of all authority, whether bureaucratic-administrative or knowledge-based instructional. It was to impress physically upon those in positions of authority that they could be humbled. It was to demonstrate the power of the masses over the authority that oppressed them, and to give the masses a voice where it had previously been suppressed. Or that was the idea.

Observing from Wuhan, Mao wrote in a letter to Jiang Qing of July 8, 1966, that he wished to “create great disorder under heaven” so as finally to achieve “great order under heaven.”

The revolution spread from universities to senior and junior high schools, with the first Red Guard groups formed by high school students in Beijing. The movement became a tide of attacks, factions, allegations, and punishments. Youths as young as thirteen took their teachers, school principals, and parents to verbal and physical task. None of them dared fight back. Red Guard factions multiplied. Erstwhile friends became enemies; enemies became friends. Dorms were occupied and barricaded. Violence broke out. At ostensible issue were correct politics and interpretations of Mao's thought. The debates became exercises in arcane textual analysis, as big-character posters festooned every visible surface.

Summer came, and classes were suspended. Students did not disperse; they continued the struggle. Party work teams were sent into the schools to try to sort things out, but they merely contributed to further factionalizations and were driven away. In July, Mao criticized the work teams for obstructing the revolution. He ridiculed them for being afraid: "You people! If
you don’t make revolution, the revolution will be directed against you.” He went on, “After two months, you still haven’t got the slightest perceptual knowledge and you are still bureaucratic. . . . The first thing is struggle, the second is criticism, the third is transformation. Struggle means destruction, and transformation means establishing something new.”

**Mao Swims the Yangzi**

In a celebrated event on July 16, 1966, Mao went swimming in the Yangzi River near Wuhan. He swam many miles. It was claimed the seventy-two-year-old Chairman swam faster and more vigorously than any Olympic swimming champion. Numerous photographs, said to demonstrate Mao’s virility and vitality, were published in China and globally.

It seems clear that Mao was aided mightily in his swim by the strong river currents. Yet, since Mao had been out of the public eye for so very long, the photographs of him swimming and in good health served to bring him back to popular attention. Two days later—on July 18—Mao turned up in Beijing.

**Received by Mao**

By early August 1966, students sporting Red Guard armbands began roaming the streets of every city and town in the country. They chanted slogans and policed revolutionary practice, between themselves and among others. Mao wrote to the Red Guards at various locations to urge them to continue rebelling against “reactionaries”; at the same time, he encouraged them to unite with “all who can be united with.” He reminded the Red Guards of what Marx had said: “the proletariat must emancipate not only itself but all mankind.” Hence, rather than just destroy individuals, those who made mistakes should be offered a “way out.”

Mao received the Red Guards at an ecstatic dawn meeting on August 18 at Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square. A million students attended, each waving his or her little red book, now a mandatory revolutionary accessory. (The little red book is the second most published text in the world after the Bible.) As Mao stood on the reviewing stand overlooking the Square, he received a female Red Guard emissary, who offered him a red armband. He placed it on his left arm over his familiar army fatigues, symbolizing his command of, and solidarity with the Red Guards.

The ubiquitous uniform for Red Guards now became an army outfit, with a red armband attached on the left. The sartorial and gender ideal was masculine and military. Girls dressed to be less identifiably female, wearing clothing as baggy as possible. They cut their hair very short, or had it summarily shorn on the streets. Red Guard patrols routinely stopped those deemed too pretty, accusing them of harboring bourgeois ideas of beauty. The only real beauty, it was said, was revolutionary beauty, not a physical but a political manifestation. Femininity was bourgeois, and all personal adornment became politically suspect.

**Sixteen Articles and Four Olds**

In mid-August 1966, a Party Central Committee meeting formally proclaimed the Cultural Revolution a movement to overthrow “those within the Party who are in authority and taking the capitalist road.” Names were not named. A closely related purpose was the destruction of what was called the “four olds”—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. These were said to be the tools through which the bourgeoisie ensured its own reproduction as a class.

After the meeting of August 18 on Tian’anmen Square, the Red Guards began the destruction of the “four olds” with breathtaking violence and thoroughness. Obvious targets such as temples were first taken down. The destruction then moved into homes, the spaces where bourgeois reproduction happens at the level of quotidian practice. Flower gardens, planters, and even pet birds in their cages were destroyed as signs of bourgeois thought and habit; classical records, pianos, foreign-language books, and anything smacking of refinement or high culture was dragged out and destroyed, or at least confiscated. Nobody’s home was safe from Red Guard inspection and sacking. The residences of Party members were the first targets; soon the homes of former capitalists (whose productive properties had long since been nationalized but who had retained their private residences) became targets, as did former landlords (whose houses and possessions were more lavish than most), and anyone whose life was not the paragon of revolutionary class position. Various leaders tried to rein in the zeal with which the “four olds” were attacked and destroyed. They, in turn, became targets of verbal and physical assault for giving succor to the bourgeoisie.

In previous Maoist practice, if one had revolutionary consciousness and acted upon it, one could overcome background or actual class standing to become part of the “people.” This changed during the Cultural Revolution. Now, the only important marker was “bloodline” demonstrating the correct family class position—poor or middling peasant, proletariat, or sol-
dier. All others, no matter what their current position, were expelled from "the people" into the "black categories." This had the curious effect of casting suspicion on the vast majority of the old revolutionaries. After all, the nucleus of the CCP back in the 1920s and 1930s had been urban, educated youths along with some offspring of landlord or rich peasant families (for example, Mao himself). They were now suspected of secretly harboring bourgeois thoughts and actions.

The blackest of all categories, aside from counter-revolutionaries and traitors, was intellectuals, the progenitors and promoters par excellence of bourgeois ideas. They were called "the stinking ninth category" (of ten), and were specifically marked out for attack, re-education in proximity to the masses, and the confiscation of their belongings, all now tainted with a bourgeois odor. The works of venerable and celebrated leftist and Communist writers—stalwarts of the CCP and the Revolution included—were reinterpreted through new eyes. These writers were now declared "snakes" for hiding so well their bourgeois sympathies in the midst of ostensibly radical texts. They were masters of disguise, it was said, and it was the task of the Red Guards to strip their masks away to reveal the bourgeois essence underneath.

Red Guards carried portraits of Mao, of red suns (Mao was the "reddest sun in our heart"), of Mao peering over the red sun, of Mao as the red sun was rising, of Mao juxtaposed to the rising red sun, and so on. If Mao was depicted looking right instead of left in these portraits, the artist, as well as the person carrying it, could be accused of political crimes. The little red book became an object of devotion, to be memorized and cited by verse and page number. Revolutionary names were concocted for city streets and affixed over old signs (leading to much confusion at the post office). The location of the former American embassy was renamed "Anti-imperialism Street."

Chaos and violence flowed unabated through the end of 1966, when the CCER—Jiang Qing and her crowd—decided that the utility of the Red Guards was mostly spent. But before the students were dispersed, the "big Krushchev" had to be exposed and deposed.

The Fall of Liu Shaoqi (and Deng Xiaoping)
Liu Shaoqi, who had taken over from Mao after the Great Leap, was ill with tuberculosis. He nevertheless was in power, with loyalists staffing high Party positions. In the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, these loyalists were systematically labeled "little Krushchevs" and removed. It now became clear that the main Chinese Krushchev was Liu himself.

In the summer of 1966, Liu was identified within Party circles as the "leading person in authority taking the capitalist road." Deng Xiaoping was named along with him as a "capitalist roader." Liu vigorously defended himself, counting upon his strong Party alliances to bail him out of trouble. Soon, he found the cards stacked against him, as those loyal to him lost their own positions. He disappeared after November 1966 and was publicly identified and formally dismissed in disgrace in 1967. He was expelled from the Party in 1968, and died of pneumonia in 1969. This was the result of pure neglect, as he was denied medical treatment. His wife, Wang Guangmei, a veteran revolutionary, now under the same political cloud as her husband, had been sent to re-educated in prison; she had not seen Liu since 1967 and was not present for his final illness. Liu was left to die in obscurity. He was posthumously rehabilitated in 1980, whereupon his ashes, carefully preserved, were handed over to his wife.

By contrast, Deng Xiaoping wrote a self-criticism and was sent to repair tractors in rural Jiangxi. Through labor, he rehabilitated himself. Mao brought Deng back to Beijing in 1973.

"Bombard the Headquarters!!" and the Shanghai Commune
On August 5, 1966, Mao wrote a big-character poster with the message, "bombard the headquarters." It called upon the masses to dismantle the very Party of which he was Chairman, and to which he had devoted his life. This not only meant struggling against individuals, it also meant destroying the structures of power through which the Party oppressed the people. It meant replacing those structures with new ones.

As the Party was pervasive through all levels of society, the movement now expanded beyond students. Mass organizations were formed. Likened to those of the Paris Commune of 1871—the short-lived paragon of Marxist revolutionary practice; these new structures took over Party headquarters and functions. The CCP reeled from attacks and the gutting of its membership.

Meanwhile, the revolution was taken up in the factories. In the late autumn of 1966, the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee came under attack from a newly formed alliance, named the Headquarters of the Revolutionary Revolt of Shanghai Workers. The purpose of this organization, led by Wang Hongwen, a young textile worker, was to reintroduce the fac-
tory floor democracy discontinued after the Great Leap experiments. What the workers envisioned was a cooperative relationship between themselves and managers, to help transform the relations of production from commandism (bureaucratic rule) to genuine proletarian democracy.

The Shanghai Party Committee refused the Workers’ Headquarters demands. To press their case, workers commandeered a train to Beijing intending to go directly to Mao. The train was stopped by Party authorities not far from the Shanghai station. A siege ensued. From Beijing, Mao’s longtime secretary, Chen Boda, in his capacity as CCRG leader, ordered the workers back to work; a fellow member of the CCRG, Zhang Chunqiao, former Party Secretary in Shanghai, remanded the order. In Beijing, this spelled the demise of Chen Boda’s career. In Shanghai, it meant temporary victory for the proletariat.

The Shanghai Party Committee disintegrated. Red Guards along with worker groups proceeded to organize students and workers in the city. A number of different workers’ groups sprang up, most radical among them, the Workers’ Second Regiment, and most conservative, the Workers’ Scarlet Guards, comprised of technicians and skilled workers. By the end of 1966, the majority of the workers of Shanghai—the most industrialized of all Chinese cities, responsible for over half of all industrial production in the nation—were organized into one of these groups.

In December, the conservative Scarlet Guards provoked a violent competition with the Workers’ Headquarters for leadership of the proletariat. The remnants of the Shanghai Party Committee attempted to gain covert control of the Scarlet Guards, by buying off workers’ support. This was duly discovered by the Workers’ Headquarters, who managed to rally remaining workers to their side. The now compromised Scarlet Guards, along with the financially exhausted and politically disgraced Party, were overthrown.

In this “January Revolution” (1967) workers took over the major newspapers of Shanghai and immediately published a “Message to All the People of Shanghai.” It condemned the Scarlet Guards and the Party, while calling for all workers to return to their factories to resume production. In a mass meeting on January 6 sponsored by the Workers’ Headquarters, the Shanghai mayor, Party leaders, and Party functionaries were publicly excoriated, physically and verbally humiliated, and then summarily dismissed from their posts. On January 9, Mao affirmed what had happened in Shanghai, calling it a “great revolution” and confirming that the “up-
surge of revolutionary power in Shanghai has brought hope to the whole country.” He was especially pleased by the workers’ seizure of the organs of mass communication.

Suddenly, former Shanghai denizens Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wen-yuan, now leaders of the CCRG, arrived on the scene from Beijing. They struck an agreement with Wang Hongwen, the textile worker leader of the Workers’ Headquarters (who became the fourth member of the “Gang of Four”) and attempted to bring Shanghai to order. The triumvirate of Zhang, Yao, and Wen proclaimed the founding of the “Shanghai Commune.” Radical worker groups—such as the Second Regiment—contested this alliance for being imposed by Beijing rather than voted in by Shanghai workers. Violence broke out between the groups and lasted through the end of January. Zhang and Yao were recalled to Beijing in February to give an account to Mao. While Mao agreed with their overall approach, he suggested it was time to deepen the movement and rather than merely chanting slogans, “students should make a deeper study of things and choose a few passages to write some critical articles about.”

By this point, not only in Shanghai, but all over China’s cities, Red Guards were roaming streets perpetrating violence against one another; schools were out of session, as the teachers had been deposed and children were at loose ends; many parents were involved in political struggles in their places of work or residence, and were unable to look after their children; workers were organizing, contesting each other, management, and Beijing’s authority; and the Party was all but destroyed as a functioning administrative body.

Linking Up

As students were freed from study and as school and parental control weakened or disappeared altogether, many of them took to the roads and railways to travel the country and see the revolution unfolding. Non-Beijing residents seized the opportunity to travel to Beijing, in hopes of being received by Mao on Tian’anmen Square, as he had done in August 1966. (He did in fact receive Red Guards a total of eight times.) Meanwhile, many from Beijing took the opportunity to travel elsewhere. Some decided to make pilgrimages to hallowed revolutionary sites, such as Shaoshan (Mao’s hometown), Jinggangshan and Ruijin (the pre-Yan’an base areas), and Yan’an. Several particularly intrepid groups decided to retrace the steps of the Long March.
A huge movement of youth got under way, “linking up,” in the language of the time, the various revolutionary movements in different parts of the country. Railroads suspended the need for tickets, as did buses and other modes of public transportation. Students crowded onto trains with little more than a toothbrush in their hands. Food was distributed free, and students stayed with Red Guard groups at university dorms or public spaces. Travelers overwhelmed the capacities of smaller sites, and larger places overflowed.

These experiences were perhaps the most exhilarating aspect of the Cultural Revolution for many. Never before given so much freedom of movement—pressures and poverty served to keep most youths rooted to their places of residence—this was the first time most had ever traveled anywhere; and it was the first time most were away from home. They got their first glimpses of their huge and diverse nation. For a few, travel confirmed what they thought they already knew; for the majority, travel was extraordinarily eye-opening.

The continued poverty of the rural areas was a shock to those from the cities, who had never seen or dreamed of such conditions. The difficulties peasant women continued to face, due to gender inequality, was astonishing to city girls, who took their equality for granted. The unevenness of socialism, or perhaps, the unevenness caused by socialism, came as a revelation. Urban privilege and rural disadvantage became clear. Some formed the desire to lock this unevenness in place in order to protect their positions; many formed the desire to do what they could to change it.

**The People’s Liberation Army**

Through the beginning of 1967, Mao became increasingly dismayed at the lack of unity among rebel groups. He was staring at the specter of complete chaos in the country. There was only one ideologically trustworthy organization left intact that could bring order to the situation: the army.

In late January 1967, the PLA was called on to intervene in the internecine battles on the streets, campuses, and factories of the cities. Lin Biao, on Mao’s orders, moved the army into Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and other areas in chaos. While the PLA remained under civilian control—Mao’s control—its intervention nevertheless tipped the balance toward certain outcomes. In the interests of restoring order and stability, from February to March 1967, the army forcibly disarmed rebel student groups and radical worker organizations, killing thousands and arresting many more. Much of the vast violence of early 1967—often attributed to “radical Maoist” students and workers—was perpetrated by the army. This had an obvious dampening effect.

The next step came as the army redefined the Cultural Revolution as a movement to study Mao Zedong Thought, rather than to use Mao Zedong Thought as a guide to action. By discouraging activism and encouraging study, this, too, tamped down some of the passions. And the tamping down of passion was precisely what Mao desired at this point. He began calling some of the more radical manifestations of the previous six months “anarchistic,” and was insistent that these tendencies be staunched. In particular, he called for the cessation of the physical assaults on Party cadres and state leaders, and for the revival of certain functions of the state and Party apparatus.

Through the early spring of 1967, the PLA took over the mass organizations formed in the Party’s stead. By May, mass resentment was high—against the PLA and its restoration of deposed Party cadres. Beijing, Shanghai, and especially Wuhan exploded in mass activism all over again. In a series of bloody and Byzantine intrigues, these rebellions were quelled, although in the process, the specter of civil war and of PLA factionalism was raised. In August, these possibilities came to the fore, as the mass movement broke down and different sectors attempted to ally with the PLA.

Mao remained silent. Jiang Qing goaded the Red Guards on, advising them to “defend themselves with weapons.” And yet, the Party was regrouping under the protection of the military. It was preparing to re-seize command, now with Mao and Lin Biao on its side and at its head, rather than in opposition.

**“Normalcy”**

In the summer of 1967, Mao embarked on an inspection tour of the provinces. He was evidently appalled at what he witnessed. In September 1967, the PLA again was sent to crush opposition, to disarm civilian groups, and to restore “normalcy.” The order was signed by Mao, the Central Committee, the CCRG, the Central Military Affairs Committee of the PLA—in short, by all conceivable branches of the government, to demonstrate its definitive nature and its seriousness. Jiang Qing was tasked with announcing the order and in the process renouncing her previous views that students and mass organizations were justified in taking up weapons against the army. The about-face was total, and the suppression of mass initiative
all but complete. The process was long and difficult, and in the provinces quite bloody. Yet, by October 1, 1967, the PLA’s generals, reviled as covert capitalists just a short few months before, now stood atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace alongside Mao for the National Day celebrations. By mid-October, the Red Guards were ordered to disband, and students were instructed to return to their classrooms.

In an attempt to explain the chaos, Mao “revealed” that Liu Shaoqi had been at the root of the anarchy. With the toppling of Liu, now publicly named the “big Krushchev” and dismissed in disgrace, the poison could cease to flow through the veins of the Chinese body politic. However, the ferocity with which mass organizations in many places fought against the PLA to retain their hard-won political gains is testament to how unsuccessful the propaganda campaign against Liu was in convincing anyone that a covert puppeteer controlled the movement. Indeed, it was quite clear to workers and rebel students that the promise of the Cultural Revolution—mass politics in command—was being betrayed.

By the end of 1967, while the CCP staged its revival, Zhou Enlai presided over the rebuilding of the state apparatus. The forces of order were readying their comeback.

“Down to the Countryside”

The summer of 1968 saw the last-gasp attempts of the mass organizations and student groups to recapture the political energies of the year before. Anger over the restoration of those who had been mercilessly critiqued and so very recently deposed boiled over in many places. Before it could become a renewal of mass activism, a ruthless military crackdown was launched to suppress, once and for all, the challenges to “normalcy.” University campuses were the sites of this last-ditch struggle, and they turned into bloodbaths.

The only way to diffuse, finally and completely, student passions and organizational densities, Mao decided, was to disperse them. Starting in 1968, university and senior and junior high school students were systematically invited to volunteer to go down to the countryside and into the factories to work with the peasants and proletariat. A very large number of idealistic students did go of their own free will to “rusticate” themselves. Piling into railway cars, buses, trucks, and tractors, students were shipped out of the cities, batch by batch, to places both close to and far from their hometowns to learn from the peasants, humble themselves before the nation’s workers, and cleanse themselves of bourgeois tendencies, thoughts, and habits.

Once those who volunteered departed, a huge number of remaining students were forced out of the cities by urban authorities. They were placed in small factories and collective farms in remote areas, where they were expected to produce for their living. Originally designed as a short-term solution to the rebelliousness and violence of Red Guard organizations, the voluntary “down to the countryside” movement became a coercive measure of being “sent down,” so as to empty the cities of potential challengers to the restoration of Party power.

The students who went early and voluntarily often recall the idealism with which they began their sojourns among peasants or workers. The dreams of growing their own food, relying on their own labor, and learning from the hard-working class leaders of the revolution (peasants and proletariat) sustained many a teenager through very tough transitions to unfamiliar terrain far from familiar faces.

These idealisms and dreams were followed by progressive disillusionment with the circumstances. Some of this had to do with the incredible poverty and straitened conditions in which they found themselves, for which the socialist propaganda about ever-improving standards of living had ill prepared them. Some of it was related to the relative hostility with which the students were received by unsuspecting villagers, forced by local Party leaders to accommodate youths who had never seen a rice shoot, never carried a shoulder pole, and never done manual labor of any sort. Much of the disillusionment was due to the cultural conditions of the rural areas and what urbanized educated students understood to be the “feudal” unschooled and traditional thoughts of peasants. Mostly, forbearance turned to despair as paths back to the city were closed off and rusticated youths realized they were now expected to stay forever in their new locations.

Students with powerful and politically intact families were able to maneuver their way around the regulations to get back to the cities after a few years. Students, whose families had been politically active, now destroyed, but who still had good contacts within the system, were stuck for a while longer yet had an escape route. Students who had never had powerful or politically connected families gave up all hope of escaping their circum-
stances; they reconciled themselves with resignation or extreme anger to their dashed expectations. Power, it turned out, was eminently corruptible by those who could work the system.

The emptying of cities removed the student elements from mass organizing, helping calm the urban areas and restore order. Workers went back to work, with only some of the democratic factory floor gains they had sought. Spaces were opened at the universities and urban learning institutions for peasant and proletarian children, who had never had a chance at college-level education or maybe even at urban life. When schools reopened in the early 1970s, it was with the favored “worker, peasant, soldier” student as the major constituency. Curricula were redesigned to serve these students and the goals of the Cultural Revolution, to render culture into something useful for the revolutionary everyday lives of the masses. Bookishness, abstract research, learning for the sake of learning—all this “bourgeois” dross was discarded in favor of practical education. The teachers allowed back into the classrooms took instruction from the students by enhancing their own practical skills, and students spent only a fraction of the day in the classrooms, with the rest of it spent in practical training. Campus life was thoroughly revolutionized and politicized. This was approaching Mao’s vision of education for the masses.

The Ninth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party

In 1969, the CCP convened its ninth national Congress. In his opening address on April 1, Mao reviewed the long and torturous history of the CCP—from its twelve-delegate founding in 1921, through the lean years and Yan’an, to the present. He lauded the Party for having rid itself of its internal enemies, primarily Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen, and expressed the hope that after all the divisiveness resulting from exposing enemies, the Congress would be one of unity and victory.

Mao had reason to feel confident. He had marginalized his enemies. The Party, state, and cultural apparatuses were now preponderantly staffed by Maoists. The country was relatively quiescent, having come through a cataclysmic set of events kindled by Mao himself, and taken up by millions of students and workers. He had reoriented the course of development, education, and cultural policy toward revolutionary goals. Institutions had been remolded around Maoist ideals, and bureaucratic Party cadres had been sent in droves to cadre schools in remote areas for re-education through labor. Industrial and agricultural production was stable and growing. China increasingly was hailed, in many places around the globe, as a leader in a type of Communism appropriate for the nonindustrialized third world. The PRC in fact had become a pilgrimage site for left-leaning people from all over the world. Mao met with as many as he could, including African, Asian, and Latin American leaders, as well as writers, cultural figures, and Communists from Japan, Europe, and the United States.

However, there were still a few things bothering Mao. In his speech of April 28 at the First Plenum of the Ninth Congress, he vented. First, Mao complained about Soviet verbal attacks that labeled the CCP as a “petit bourgeois party” rather than a party of the proletariat. These attacks loomed particularly large in the wake of the airing of the “Brezhnev doctrine.” Proclaimed in 1968, just as Soviet troops were violently quelling the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, this doctrine held that Moscow had the right to depose those in the socialist bloc posing a challenge to Communist principles. As with Hungary in 1956, there was no Chinese support for the Prague Spring. But there was considerable discomfort about Soviet troops marching into other people’s territories, and about the “revisionist” USSR as the self-proclaimed leader of correct Communist doctrine and practice.

Second, Mao complained that factories were still being run along old Liu Shaoqi rules of material incentives and profits in command. The point, Mao noted, was to make the factories bastions of proletarian politics in command. “Economism,” or rewarding productivity with money, in Mao’s view, demonstrated the wrong values; production should be led by (revolutionary) politics, not cash. Third, Mao complained that rusticated youths and those in cadre schools had become divorced from the world and the life of the nation. He urged that they should be brought back in through study classes organized to “talk about history . . . about the course of the Great Cultural Revolution during the past two years.”

Mao also warned that China was still not sufficiently prepared for war. With the Americans in Vietnam and the hostile Soviets on the northern border, Mao cautioned that it was probably only a matter of time before “imperialists and revisionists” (Americans and Soviets) attacked. Lastly, Mao complained about the continuing signs of disunity in the country, from small-scale petty quarrels to larger matters of policy. In this regard Mao proposed “the answer to the problem of the localities lies in the army; the answer to the problem of the army lies in political work.”
The corollary to relying on the army for domestic solutions, in the context of potential war, was the naming of Lin Biao—the PLA commander and one of the most respected generals of the anti-Japanese and civil wars—as Mao’s successor. Nobody could have predicted that a short year later, Lin was to be accused of sedition and “exposed” as the biggest CCP snake of all.

The Cultural Revolution
DENOUEMENT AND DEATH OF MAO, 1969–1976

As the Cultural Revolution was unfolding in China, the 1960s were unfolding across the rest of the world. From Africa, Latin America, and Asia, to the United States and Europe, domestic radicalism and anti-colonial revolutionary nationalism were shaking up the global establishment. These upsurges were met, sooner or later, by forces of national and international order. Corresponding to attempts to beat back the transformative tide was a rise in revolutionary internationalism. This internationalism—in its domestic and global forms—spun a vision of a new world without domination or exploitation.

Revolutionary Internationalism and the Global 1960s

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was an inspiration for many in envisioning this new world. This was not because the movement was well understood. Far from it. The idea and image of a people, apparently set free from constraint to practice mass politics, appealed to those, who were increasingly disaffected from the routines of life. They were tired of political quiescence, and impatient with grinding exploitative, sexist, and racist views and practices. The perceived imaginative and creative exuberance of the Cultural Revolution—particularly in its early days—tapped into burgeoning desires everywhere for common people to seize politics from the dead hands of faraway bureaucrats, technocratic social engineers, and militaristic warmongers and turn it into something of culturally enduring and everyday significance.