

How successful was Mao's attempt to reassert his authority over the party through the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution? (1959-1968)



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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation focuses on the Chinese Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and will discuss “How successful was Mao’s attempt to reassert his authority over the party through the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution?” I will examine Mao’s removal of opposition and his cult of personality prior to and during the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, starting from 1959. History texts and online archive of Mao’s works will be used to investigate the effectiveness of Mao’s purges, specifically that of the Beijing Municipal Government, the mobilization of the Red Guards, the role of the Army and control over public communication will be explored in order to gauge how successful he was in regaining authority, both practically and psychologically. Source A is a primary source, a direct speech given by Mao, chosen for detailed analysis due to its pertinence in outlining Mao’s stated official reasons for starting the Cultural Revolution; while Source B is a secondary source chosen due to the detailed account of the causes of the Cultural Revolution provided in the book that is important for this investigation.

1. Source A¹

This speech was taken from *Long Live Mao Tse-tung Thought*, a Red Guards’ publication, on April 28, 1966. The purpose of Mao’s speech was to publicly assert his disapproval of the Beijing Municipal Government, especially mayor Peng Zhen. It is a primary source that records Mao’s public denunciation of Peng, who was branded as part of the counter-revolutionary group. This document is useful because it shows Mao’s strategies of using speeches and the power struggle to re-establish his leadership through discrediting his political opposition by making a clear distinction between himself, a Great Helmsman, and revisionists such as Peng, who desired to transform China according to their outlook and deviate from the idea of permanent revolution, which put Mao at a better light. His criticisms of Peng were crucial to the subsequent removal of the rest of the Beijing group, which was

¹ Source A: Mao’s speech, “Criticize P’eng Chen,” taken from *The Marxists Internet Archive: Mao Zedong*. [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_56.htm.]

very critical of Mao. However, Mao's arguments may be limited and may not be wholly reliable because he was throwing one-sided accusations at Peng in order to rid him of power and authority, and to restore Mao's own authority.

2. Source B²

This book is written by Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, who was a sinologist on modern China's history and a history professor at University of California at Santa Barbara. The purpose of the book is to convey general information on the rise of Modern China from 1600-1949 onwards for history students and general readers. It is a useful secondary source because Hsü received education both in China and America, hence he could draw upon evidences from both Chinese and Western sources to provide extensive analyses to convey a more thorough view of the evolution of Modern China³. However, Hsü is an American-Chinese and there is limited access to Chinese archives. Hence, the Chinese perspective may not be as fully explored as Western interpretations. Also, it is a comprehensive analysis of a very extensive period of Chinese history, of which only a small part is dedicated to the Cultural Revolution. Hence, information on this is relatively brief.

Section 2: Investigation

The party reorganization in 1956, the Sino-Soviet split and the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1964 increased 'tension and divisiveness within the Chinese leadership,'⁴ and Mao was retreated to second line. The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution was largely initiated by Mao to reassert his own authority. He wanted to preserve himself in power for the rest of his life, and to ensure that his concept of revolution would continue after his death.⁵ This was carried out mainly through strategic removal of political opposition and a cult of

² Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

³ Ibid., Preface

⁴ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*

⁵ Lynch, *The People's Republic of China since 1949*, 39

personality with the support of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), the Red Guards, and control over public communication.⁶

Mao's strategic attack and removal of opposition enabled him to regain authority of the party practically. Firstly, Mao replaced Peng Dehuai, an ardent critic of Mao's ideas such as equating the Great Leap Forward to a 'petty bourgeois fanaticism',⁷ with his 'loyal acolyte'⁸, Lin Biao, as Minister of Defense in 1959.⁹ This puts the Army firmly under his command, whose support became crucial for effective mobilization of the Red Guards later on to secure his authority.

In 1966, Mao dissolved the Beijing power base, which was often labeled as counter-revolutionary at that time. In 1965, Beijing was so well under mayor Peng Zhen's control that Mao described 'even a silver needle cannot penetrate into Peking'.¹⁰ Members of the government were highly critical of Mao's leadership using historical allegories.¹¹ Mao chose it as the first target of his counterattack by directing Yao Wenyuan's criticism of Wu Han's anti-Maoist historical allegorical play '*Hai Jui Dismissed from Office*' on November 10, 1965,¹² which is often believed to be the first strike of the Cultural Revolution.

This was a tactical denunciation because the Beijing group was notable supporters of Liu Shaoqi, President of PRC, Mao's likely successor and adversary. Wu was deputy mayor of Beijing and a leading intellectual associated with Teng To, Secretary of the Beijing Municipal Committee, editor of *Frontline*, and editor-in-chief of the *Peoples' Daily*; and Liao Mosha, director of the United Front Department in the committee.¹³ From October 1961 to July 1964, Teng, Liao and Wu had jointly published 67 articles in the *Frontline*, criticizing

⁶ Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch 1949-1981* (London: University of California Press, 1987), 79

⁷ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 692

⁸ Lawrence, *China under Communism*, 68

⁹ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 694

¹⁰ "Criticize P'eng Chen," *The Marxists Internet Archive: Mao Zedong*

¹¹ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 699

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 698

Mao using historical allegories. A criticism on Wu meant that it would inevitably link to the Beijing group, and most importantly, Peng, mayor of Beijing, and consequently Peng's patron, Liu. The group was then discredited. Wu recanted on December 30, 1965, while Peng disappeared on March 26, 1966.¹⁴ Liu was ousted from all positions and posts within the party on November 1968.¹⁵ Other prominent figures outside Beijing were also attacked, such as Deng Xiaoping, Party General Secretary, Zhu De, founder of the Red Army, and Bo Yibo, vice premier and chairman of State Economic Commission.¹⁶ As seen above, oppositions were purged one by one, allowing Mao to regain power and authority practically by removing those who were against him.

Mao's cult of personality also helped re-establish his 'charismatic leadership.'¹⁷ This was successful in regaining trust and support psychologically. The cult led to mass mobilization of young, zealous Red Guards through propaganda and speeches, whose support became Mao's instrument for 'reimposing his will upon the nation and reshaping it according to his vision,'¹⁸ such that 'a few words from Mao seemed capable of eliciting immediate national compliance.'¹⁹ The Red Guards were a 'spontaneous mass movement from below' that largely fueled Mao's manifestation as their 'great teacher', 'great leader' and 'great helmsman'.²⁰ They branded themselves as successors of the revolution and rebels who swore to uphold Mao's thoughts and were 'dedicated to the elimination of old thought, old culture, and old habits'.²¹ In their eyes, Mao was seen as divine, and the rallies were like religious rituals.²² Millions of Red Guards marched through cities and countryside during August to December 1966, carrying portraits of Mao while chanting Mao was 'the reddest sun in our hearts', waving copies of Mao's *Little Red Book*, which was referred to with 'semimagical

¹⁴ Ibid., 699-700

¹⁵ Ibid., 701

¹⁶ Ibid., 701

¹⁷ Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution*, 78

¹⁸ Lynch, *The People's Republic of China since 1949*, 39

¹⁹ Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution*, 108

²⁰ Meiser, *Mao's China and After*, 336

²¹ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 701

²² Karnow, *Mao and China: A Legacy of Turmoil*, 186

properties'.²³ He was honored as a revolutionary genius 'remoulding the souls of the people'²⁴ during 1966 rallies, and 'the revolutionary tides of the world rose and fell at his command.'²⁵

Loyally and dutifully the Red Guards followed Mao's instructions to 'bombard the headquarters,'²⁶ and attack party officials 'pursuing a capitalist road.'²⁷ They challenged all authority and attacked Liu 'as a revisionist and a Chinese Khrushchev';²⁸ held demonstrations specifically targeted at Mao's greatest adversaries, Deng and Liu,²⁹ which ultimately made them publicly confess their errors in October 1966,³⁰ and led to them being violently attacked by Red Guards and purged. Mao's manifestation as the 'Great Helmsman'³¹ was greatly enhanced as he regained mass support and party authority.

The Army's support was also vital both during the purge and in fueling the Red Guards' mass mobilization. Mao relied heavily on the Army to crush the party, which had been ideologically trained to back Mao to restore order.³² The success of the Red Guards movement was largely attributed to the PLA, which was ordered to assist the Red Guards and allegedly trained the Red Guards,³³ because only the Army was able to 'transport thousands of young Chinese into the city as well as lodge, feed, and outfit them in khaki uniforms for their first demonstration.'³⁴

²³ Meiser, *Mao's China and After*, 339

²⁴ Lynch, *The People's Republic of China since 1949*, 42

²⁵ Ibid., 44

²⁶ Lawrence, *China under Communism*, 71

²⁷ 張戒[Jung Chang] and 喬•哈利戴 [Jon Halliday], 毛澤東：鮮為人知的故事 [Mao: The Unknown Story] (Hong Kong : Kai Fang Chu Ban She , 2006) , 314-315.

²⁸ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 701

²⁹ Lynch, *The People's Republic of China since 1949*, 42

³⁰ Lawrence, *China under Communism*, 72

³¹ Meiser, *Mao's China and After*, 336

³² Lawrence, *China under Communism*, 73

³³ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 340

³⁴ Karnow, *Mao and China: A Legacy of Turmoil*, 183

Mao later set up the Cultural Revolution Group,³⁵ which extended his control over public communications. Lu Tingyi, chief of CCP's propaganda department, who also controlled the *People's Daily* publications, was purged.³⁶ *People's Daily* and *Liberation Army Daily* continuously published editorials that promoted ideas such as 'Mao Zedong Thought is the source of our life,'³⁷ which 'enlarged the cult of individual worship'.³⁸ This reinforced Mao's image as the 'supreme commander'³⁹ who had reinvigorated the youth to 'uproot "bourgeois" ideas'⁴⁰ and continue the revolution.

In conclusion, Mao's reassertion of supreme authority over the party was largely successful, which was achieved through strategic purges of opposition and effective cult of personality with the support of the Peoples' Liberation Army, the devoted Red Guards, and control over public media. The replacement of Peng Dehuai by Lin Biao as Minister of Defence, the tactical attacks on well-chosen political targets like the Beijing group, and subsequently the dismissals of many other high rank officials enabled Mao to secure power practically. Mao's cult of personality heightened greatly and his personal prestige was effectively re-established as he demonstrated himself as the 'great leader' with command over the PLA and fervent support of the masses, specifically the Red Guards who challenged all authority. Mao seized control on multiple levels and succeeded in pushing forward his vision and at the same time reasserted political power.

Section 3: Reflection

Completing this investigation has rendered me more aware of the challenges faced by historians in formulating analysis and conclusions during the process of historical investigation, and the limitations of these methods.

³⁵ Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of A Great Power 1850 – 2009*, 441

³⁶ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 332

³⁷ D. W. Y. Kwok, Gao Gao, and Yan Jiaqi, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 60

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60

³⁹ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 336

⁴⁰ Karnow, *Mao and China: A Legacy of Turmoil*, 179

First of all, I gathered facts from different sources, read different interpretations, and together formulated my own analysis and conclusion on how successful Mao was in reasserting his power and authority through the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. This is a similar process to that faced by historians, as they also gather many data and facts, and attempt to conclude their findings and provide meaningful interpretations through careful selection of relevant information.

A limitation of this method is the difficulty in being unbiased when providing interpretations, in selecting different historical events and in determining their importance. Past events are interpreted and converted into History by historians whose values and thinking were greatly influenced by the context in which they were set in. Hence, there can never be absolute objectivity and certainty as to how and why events happened because historians' judgments cannot be value-free. The reliance on analysis of past events to acquire knowledge in History makes it very much subjective and subjected to paradigm shifts. Through this investigation, I became more aware of the importance for historians to be aware of the assumptions and values they are affected by through understanding the present.

The selection of events and the determination of the importance of certain events are as much influenced by historians' values as are analysis and concluding. However, there is a difference between being biased and selecting. Being biased is more inherent – historians' values embedded most of the time unintentionally influence historians when they make interpretations. However, selecting is a more logical judgment – it is about weighing the importance of an event as compared to other events gathered before analyzing. Though it is important to note that selection could be directed in such a way that leads to the desired interpretations and conclusions. This problem is less pertinent to a scientist or a mathematician, because these disciplines are much more strictly defined. In these disciplines, there are axioms that must be followed in order to arrive at a correct answer, whereas in History, axioms rarely exist – judgments are very much influenced by historians' upbringing and values. Mathematical and scientific analyses are also empirical studies – results and

observations may be reproduced to confirm and reject certain theories. However, in History, this is much more difficult, as historians rely on their judgment to select facts that would help support their interpretations of historical events to become logical conclusions and analyses.

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