

1956-66 Pre-Cultural Revolution period and Mao's lack of self-criticism

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Hasan Gnder*

*Graduate student, Fudan University, School of Social Development and Public Policy,
Department of Sociology, Shanghai/China

E-Posta: hasangonder001@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0001-7327-1408](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7327-1408)

Abstract

The Cultural Revolution was one of the greatest destructions that world history has ever witnessed. According to Frank Diktter, a notable historian, 'it was about loss, loss of trust, loss of friendship, loss of faith in other human beings, loss of predictability in social relationships. And that really is the mark that the Cultural Revolution left behind.' The Cultural Revolution was a period during which children aged between 12 and 14 would call themselves 'Red Guards' and carry out all manner of violence in the streets as Mao's soldiers. In fact, there was no power in the country that could stop these individuals. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that the Cultural Revolution was not the result of spontaneous destruction. In this study, the socio-political and cultural events that took place during the period from 1956 to 1967 in China will be examined, and the factors that caused the cultural revolution will be investigated. As a result of this study, it is understood that the greatest factor which led to the formation of the Cultural Revolution was the lack of self-criticism associated with Mao.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, Self-Criticism, Hundred Flowers Period, Intellectuals

1956-66 Kùltür Devrimi Öncesi Dönem ve Mao'nun Özeleřtiri Eksiklięi

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Öz

Kùltür Devrimi, dünya tarihinin tanık olduęu en büyük tahribatlardan biriydi. Saygın tarihçi Frank Dikötter'e göre bu, 'kaybetme, güven kaybetme, arkadařlık kaybetme, dięer insanlara olan inancı kaybetme, sosyal iliřkilerde öngörülebilirlięi kaybetme ile ilgiliydi. Ve bu gerçekten de Kùltür Devrimi'nin geride bıraktıęı iřarettir.' Kùltür Devrimi, 12 ila 14 yař arasındaki çocukların kendilerine "Kızıl Muhafızlar" dedikleri ve Mao'nun askerleri olarak sokaklarda her türlü řiddet eylemini gerçekeřtirdikleri bir dönemdi. Aslında tüm ÷lkede bu bireyleri durdurabilecek hiçbir güç yoktu. Buna raęmen, Kùltür Devrimi'nin kendilięinden gelen bir yıkımın sonucu olmadıęını vurgulamak zorundayız. Bu çalışmada, Çin'de 1956'dan 1967'ye kadar olan süreçte ortaya çıkan sosyo-politik ve kültürel olaylar incelenecek ve kùltür devrimine neden olan etkenler üzerinde durulacaktır. Bu çalışmanın sonucu, Kùltür Devrimi'nin ortaya çıkmasına yol açan en büyük etkenin Mao ile iliřkilendirilen öz eleřtiri eksiklięi olduęunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kùltür Devrimi, Mao Zedong, Öz-Eleřtiri, Yüz Çiçek Dönemi, Entelektüeller*

Introduction

It is not easy to define the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. One of the main reasons for this is because the term 'culture' has broad meanings in the Beijing dictionary. According to the Liberation Army Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, 'culture' as of 3 November 1966 was seen as comprising 'ideas, all sorts of culture, traditions, customs, political views, legal concepts, views on art, and so on.' Nevertheless, the Cultural Revolution turned out to be an even wider problem arising from Mao's views on the China and the rest of the world.

The Cultural Revolution was mainly regarded as an act of seizing power, whereas the building of a new economy and society would require a different approach. Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Afterwards, the next three decades can be considered the continuation of the revolution through a progression of several mass movements, including the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950s, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Mao's theory of uninterrupted revolution was put into practice in these experiments, and it maintained that even under socialist development, the revolution must continue (Gao, 2008).

Among these experiments, the bloodiest and most severe was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The exact number of dead resulting from the Cultural Revolution is not known, but a figure of 1 million or more is commonly cited. Estimates range from 500,000 to 8 million dead, according to a 2011 paper by Song Yongyi, a scholar of the Cultural Revolution (Jian, Song and Zhou, 2009: 124-142). The number of people persecuted is usually estimated in the tens of millions. On the other hand, millions of others suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, torture, or general humiliation. Additionally, in the early years of the PRC, educated people from the cities were sent to work on farms in rural areas, a movement which accelerated during the Cultural Revolution partly as a way to disperse the Red Guards. More than 16 million young people were sent to the countryside, including Xi Jinping, China's current president.

There were three main factors that led to the formation of the Cultural Revolution. The first of these was Mao's avoidance of self-criticism, paired with his wish to shift the blame regarding the 1956 Great Leap Forward

fiasco. Thus, he aimed to shoot two birds with one stone by getting rid of his opponents. Here, it is worth asking: What was Mao's fault? In order to achieve communism, it was necessary to first industrialise the country. But when Mao began to facilitate the process in the absence of industrialisation, the end was disastrous. The second factor that led to the formation of the Cultural Revolution was that Khrushchev denounced his predecessor, Stalin, and began to 'de-Stalinise' the USSR. Seeing aspects of comparability between himself and Stalin, Mao began to fear a similar fate for himself. The third and last reason was to prepare China for any world war that would take place, and to ensure that in the event that war erupted, China would attain the power to handle both the Soviet Union and the United States.

Mao knew that he needed to keep the enthusiasm of the revolution alive. To keep the revolution as fresh as it was on day one, he was aware of the need to ensure that he must engrain a correct ideological view into every Chinese citizen (Joffe, 1966: 124). In order to do this, it was necessary to take measures to create true supporters of the proletariat from the intellectuals who had previously resisted the Communist Party and the regime from time to time, as well as those bourgeois elements of Chinese society whose writings in the past had affected themselves and others.

The roots of these efforts date back to 1956. Since that time, occasional liquidation movements arose against intellectuals, with the most recent liquidation always showing that the previous one had not succeeded. Ultimately, the Cultural Revolution can be considered a very broad and violent continuation of this chain of liquidation.

1. The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Great Leap Forward

The Hundred Flowers Campaign, also referred to as the Hundred Flowers Movement (simplified Chinese: 百花运动; traditional Chinese: 百花運動; pinyin: Bǎihuā yùndòng), was a period of debate in China that occurred during the 1956–7 period, when, under the slogan 'Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend', citizens were invited to voice their opinions about the communist regime. The phrase 'Let a

hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend'¹ was taken from the golden age of Chinese philosophy in the late Zhou dynasty (3rd century BC), when roving philosophers offered advice to any lord who would listen or collected followers in order to establish a body (school) of teachings. The first Qin emperor suppressed the Hundred Schools in 213 BC (MacFarquhar, 1974: 53). The Hundred Flowers Campaign was an intense but short-lived period that encouraged open criticism and discussion of the Communist regime in the otherwise tightly-controlled intellectual climate of 1950s China. It resulted in another campaign which aimed to purge those considered to be at the 'right' of the party (Schram, 1989).

In May 1956 Mao Zedong (1893-1976), leader of the People's Republic of China, announced that the government would relax its strict control over thought and expression. The policy later became known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign, or the Hundred Flowers Movement. The new freedoms promised under the campaign, however, lasted only a little more than a year. The campaign was preliminarily relevant for literary, artistic, and scientific research. According to China Communist Party's (CCP) Propaganda Chief, Lu Ting-yi, on 26 May 1956:

The Hundred Flowers Campaign was revealed in the literature field and the Hundred Schools Debate Campaign in the scientific field ... The purpose of the campaign was to develop the freedom to speak freely in independent thought, discussion, creativity and criticism (Tang, 1961: 450).

It was after the Hungarian Revolution that the Hundred Flowers Campaign extended to include the political field, and this was a trend personally supported by Mao. China's leader felt that the revolt could lead to demonstrations and unrest in China, and so he wanted to prevent any form demonstration. Another important reason related to the outcome of the Five-Year Plan (1953-57). In short, it was not satisfying, and Mao was aware that further economic progress would be predicated on China's successful training of a greater number of educated specialists (Jackson, 2004). Hence, Mao thought to win over alienated intellectuals by affording

¹ The phrase 'a hundred schools of thought' reverberates throughout China's history in reference to the myriad philosophies, from Confucianism to Daoism to Legalism and more, that proliferated during the Warring States period (475– 221 BC).

them with a degree of intellectual freedom. For example, intellectuals who worked in schools, colleges, and universities were given more access to foreign publications.

However, in this environment of freedom, the intelligentsia drew the long bow. In some extreme cases, wall posters appeared in public attacking the entire Communist system. Some people even publicly questioned the legitimacy of CCP rule. Mao and other party leaders were not prepared for the volume and intensity of the criticism (MacFarquhar, 1960). Resultantly, after some time had passed, the period of the Hundred Flowers ended, and a radical liquidation movement was launched. It is important to note that this point that the Hundred Flowers Campaign demonstrated two points to Mao: firstly, that the CCP's ideological stereotyping efforts had failed and the Party was not able to play an effective role in educating the masses; and secondly, that there existed resistance among the intelligentsia against the Party.

As a result, Mao was unable to let the intelligentsia get in his way during those debates. In response, he called on intellectuals – people from outside the Party – to criticise the CCP as a way of putting pressure on those officials who were standing in his way.

2. The 1957-58 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China

By early July, just five weeks after the inauguration of the campaign, the Party launched the dramatic new Anti-Rightist Campaign that shifted the target of criticism from the Communists to the intellectuals. Critics of the regime were themselves severely criticised by members of the CCP. An estimated 500,000-800,000 intellectuals were denounced or blacklisted, with some being arrested and others being sent to the countryside to 'rectify their thinking through labour' (Goldman, 1967). Apart from the intellectuals who criticised the party in the era of the Hundred Flowers, the Anti-Rightist Campaign also liquidated those intellectuals who did not criticise but who were not CCP members, and as such, who supported different small parties. These parties included the Kuomintang's Revolutionary Committee, the Democratic Autarchy League of Taiwan, the Chinese Democratic National Building Association, and the Democratic Party of China's Workers and Peasants.

On 19 June 1957, Mao Zedong's speech addressing the 'People's Contradiction' was published. Noteworthily, the editor admitted that Mao had gone over the text and made certain additions. This was the most important document on the Hundred Flowers Campaign. In the article, six criteria were inserted for the Hundred Flowers policy. In particular, the two aspects about the socialist path and the leadership of the Party were the most important ones for Mao (Mao Zedong, 1977: 412)

When the intellectuals attacked these above-mentioned aspects, Mao and his Party lost confidence in giving more freedom to the intellectuals. Mao, who had actually initiated such the affordance of freedom, now had to give an explanation as to why he later retracted it. He asserted that 'turbulent large-scale mass class struggles characteristic of the revolutionary periods have in the main concluded', yet shortly afterwards, he went on to state the danger of class struggle:

The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the struggle between various political forces, and the class struggle in the ideological field between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will still be long and devious and at times may even become very acute. The proletariat seeks to transform the world according to its own world outlook, so does the bourgeoisie. In this respect, the question whether socialism or capitalism will win is still not really settled.

There has been much debate about Mao's motives for the Campaign. Was it a genuine attempt to find out what people thought or a devious way of flushing out the opposition? One of the common assertions related to this debate, commonly advocated by historians and observers who favour the rule of the Kuomintang, is the "Trap Interpretation" of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. To them, the Campaign was designed by Mao to expose and discredit anti-party elements in the intellectual community. The major evidence for this argument derived from a statement in People's Daily editorial from 22 June 1957, which asserted that 'the Party decided not to deal immediate counterblows, so that the masses might fully recognise the faces of the bourgeois rightists.' This analysis is based on the assumption that the CCP never trusted intellectuals since the 1949 liberation. Mao was particularly unhappy to see that the intellectuals remained quiet on the surface but made a lot of complaints behind closed doors. The CCP and its chairman were always looking for an opportunity to get rid

of those intellectuals who were never loyal to the course of the socialist revolution in China. Noteworthy, this interpretation was commonly accepted by historians based in Taiwan (Mao Zedong, 1977: 423).

In this article, we claim that the trap interpretation is not an accurate reflection of the reality. If so, Mao would not have allowed a second period of limited freedom during the Great Leap forward project, and limited freedom would certainly not have been extended to intellectuals.

3. The Great Leap Forward

By 1958, the short period of liberation had been terminated and the Great Leap Forward period had begun. It was initiated with second 'Five-Year Plan' for development. If we examine the structure of the pre-communist Chinese economy, its most obvious feature is a feudalistic structure based on agriculture. Mao, with the Great Leap Forward period, expeditiously aimed to move away from feudalism and towards the communist ideal. In this period, private agricultural production was completely prohibited, and any farmers who were found to be involved in private production were accused of being counterrevolutionaries.

With this move, before China was fully industrialised, 500 million peasants were to be incorporated into 26,000 'communes of communities', with the expectation that communism would be achieved within a few years (zsoylu, 2006: 10). However, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the return of Soviet technicians and scientists to their country due to the Sino-Soviet conflict (which started in these years), as well as a series of natural disasters, were as consequential in bringing about failure as the mistakes in planning, as well as the exaggerated numbers that had to be reached (Sander, 1967: 25-41). However, this claim was contradictory to the basic principles of communism, since in order to reach communism, a society had to be first industrialised. China's desire to reach the communism in such a short space of time was the product of a rivalry that started between Soviet Russia and Communist China, intensified by the Soviet Union's declaration that communism would finally be settled in their country by 1980 (Armaođlu, 1984: 575).

Mao predicted that China's steel production could catch that of Britain within fifteen years as a result of the Great Leap Forward. In this regard,

China would pursue a rapid industrialisation policy and catch the UK in the industrial field within fifteen years. When look at the public investments that were made during this period, it becomes immediately clear that resources were allocated to the heavy industry in a significant way. Proportionally, most of the increased investments were directed towards heavy industrialisation, with the heavy industrial investment of the state increasing from 38% in 1956 to 56% in 1958 (Yang, 1996: 35).

The end of the Great Leap Forward period was not as Mao had expected. Although the increase in production was achieved in the first year due to the favourable weather conditions, plans collapsed starting in 1959 because of a severe drought. Additionally, the high level of agricultural productivity of 1958, attributable to the favourable weather conditions, yielded no benefits because of the shift of part of the labour to iron and steel production. Ultimately, the period from 1959 to 1962 was a disaster for the Chinese people. As a result of both worsening weather conditions and the implementation of dubious economic policies, starvation began in China, resulting in the loss of numerous Chinese lives. The number of people who lost their lives in the disaster is still a topic of debate among today's experts. According to Coale, an estimate of 16.5 million dead between 1958 and 1961 is reasonable, while Aird and Xizhe favour the figure of 23 million, and Ashton, Hill, Piazza and Zeitz estimate that 29.5 Chinese citizens died (Yang, 1996: 37). Regardless of the number of deaths, the magnitude of the catastrophe seems obvious.

Critically, the severity of the failure dealt a major blow to Mao's administration and the Chinese revolution. Mao was blamed and partly sidelined by the CCP's leaders, many of whom pulled back on some of the most extreme efforts at collectivisation. After 1961, the young generation underwent a serious stagnation and experienced bitter disappointment in the bureaucracy. The Chinese revolution had lost its foundation of enthusiasm among the masses, and more moderate policies were now being pursued by the administration. For example, free markets that were closed during the Great Leap Forward Movement started to offer a new channel for the villagers to provide food for the cities, and so were reopened to absorb the purchasing power (Naughton, 2007:73).

4. The Limited Hundred Flowers Period (1961-64)

This period is easier to understand if it is considered together with what took place in 1966, namely, the liquidation of the intellectuals and the period of limited freedom (Hundred Flowers) (Doolin, 1961: 34-42) of 1961-62. The 1966 liquidations represented a delayed response to the 'bourgeois' and 'right-wing' ideas of the 1961-62 period, just as the 1958 right-wing campaign was an answer to the ideas put forward in the Hundred Flowers era. Almost without exception, the writings published in recent months, as well as some of the intellectuals accused of spreading bourgeois and revisionist ideas, were all in the footsteps of the 1961-62 period (Munro, 1966: 5).

The 1959-62 period was a disastrous one for the Chinese economy. The failure of the Great Leap Forward, paired with a bad harvest that lasted until 1962, pushed the Chinese economy into a depression. Leaders needed the cooperation of all quality personnel, especially intellectuals, to mobilise the economy, and for this purpose, in 1961, a new 'Let the Hundred Flowers Bloom' campaign was launched. As a result, in the period between 1961 and September 1962, a liberal atmosphere began to emerge in the country. However, this relaxation was limited compared to the previous period. One of the main reasons for this was because the CCP had learned from the Hundred Flowers period and, as such, acted more carefully. Furthermore, it had placed a hard line between academic debate and ideological contention. Nevertheless, various ideas, especially in the disciplines of economics, education, and history, started to collide.

In the economic field, ideas were gathered around economic profit, efficiency, and the reduction of the Party's control over factories and farms. Furthermore, relaxation in the field of education began with a speech given by Ch'en Yi, the deputy prime minister, to higher education graduates in Beijing on 10 August 1961. In summary, Ch'en Yi stated:

It is necessary to distinguish between the schools that have political education and the other schools, and the students who read in these other schools could no longer be interested in politics. It would be better for themselves and the country, if they work on their own field. These students who develop themselves in their own fields, could indirectly assist in the establishment of socialism. Ch'en Yi added this humour to his

speech: 'Who wants to fly with a pilot who is fully conscious of politics, but not a competent person?' (Perlez, 2013)

These innocuous words inspired great excitement in Beijing and political education was greatly reduced in schools. In general, it can be said that in this period of relaxation, raising the academic standards became the main goal, and it was widely stated that in the context of school, education must be placed before anything else. However, when the group of elites trained in this way began to have a certain weight on the system, the organisational structure of China began to change at the end of the period of relaxation (Spence, 1999:61-72).

These emerging circles also disturbed the revolutionary tradition, as illustrated by their use of the slogan 'peaceful development'. Therefore, when the economic situation recovered, the Party tightened the reigns of political control and accused intellectuals of displaying a meaningless and absurd favour for feudalism and capitalism, all the while overlooking socialism and making no efforts to advance it. As a result of this, Mao launched a new national campaign in February 1964: 'Learn from the People's Liberation Army in the fields of ideology and politics'. This demonstrated Mao's insecurity in the political education channels, as well as the role that the army was expected to play in Chinese life and the urgency Mao felt to raise a body politic consisting only of one type of person.

To show the essence of the movement, it is useful to give an example of the script written in the period 1961-62 and accounted for after 1965. For example, Teng To speaks of an illness of forgetfulness in his historical analogy, which he draws attention afterwards. The story concerns a diseased man living in the Ming dynasty period, who is trying to hide from the arrows he himself is shooting, thinking that somebody else is shooting them at him. After revealing the story, Teng stated:

'Those who complain about this disease acted as they did not say what they said, they denied it and they can no longer be trusted. Teng To recommends that patients take a full rest when their disease progression cannot be prevented. He also suggested that they do not say anything and do not do anything, otherwise, the result of their action might be very serious. This historical analogy was interpreted by the Party authorities as giving

up all the powers of the Party and Teng To was declared a socialist opponent. But in fact, it was a subtle mask of political satire (Maurice, 1966: 1-17).

In addition, the question of who would become China's leader after Mao Zedong revealed an unavoidable struggle for power. Even now it can be sad that Mao is the only inspiration source for the Chinese people. At that time, however, those immediately following him in the hierarchy were aware that the day of his departure from the scene of power was not far removed from the present time. Possible successors, including P'eng Chen, wanted to take advantage of the final liquidation to try to reinforce their own foundations. In particular, P'eng Chen's basis was to strengthen the Beijing party organisation, which he had been heading since 1949 and trying to protect from unwelcome external influences. This was the reason why P'eng Chen opposed the 1965-66 the liquidation. As a result, the Red Flag newspaper accused P'eng Chen of 'seeing the Beijing municipality as an independent kingdom', stating that he had taken the opposite side against the Cultural Revolution. This epitomises the way in which the Cultural Revolution was linked to the struggle for power among China's leaders. In connection with this, the death of Stalin led to anti-Leninist policies by Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, and Mao feared a similar fate for himself.

After 1964, Mao gradually and systematically exacerbated the liquidation movement against intellectuals. It can be clearly seen now that in September 1965, in a new campaign that Mao opened for this purpose at the CCP Central Committee meeting, he did not find the power required to solve all problems in the way he wanted. As a result, in the following months, Mao resorted to a new experiment to bring all of those who were not on the desired path into line: the Cultural Revolution.

Conclusion

It is a fact known by everyone that Mao was and continues to be an important figure for China, and one who will occupy a very important place in Chinese history. Mao ended the civil war, which lasted nearly 40 years in China, and he united the whole of China under one roof. Furthermore,

he exacted a historical victory against the nationalists and created the China Communist Party out of nothing.

Perhaps the Cultural Revolution is one of the most controversial events in Chinese history. Among these, the most prominent one is Taiwan-based Trap Interpretation. However, the 'Trap Interpretation' of the Hundred Flowers Campaign is an assumption based on the wrong premise. Otherwise, Mao would not have given limited freedom to intellectuals after the Great Leap Forward fiasco. Mao provided to China's intellectuals two opportunities to show their loyalty, and instead of accepting these offers, the intellectuals wasted both. It is evident that if the intellectuals had worked to advance socialism and collaborate with Mao, he would gradually have afforded more freedom. However, when the intellectuals became uncontrollable, Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps one of his biggest mistakes that Mao committed in the course of his 83-year lifespan was his avoidance of self-criticism. As a case in point, when he was trying to identify the reasons for the failure of the Great Leap Forward, he preferred to blame intellectuals rather than to admit his own faults. As history has shown repeatedly, those who lack self-criticism tend to make mistakes, even though some of them are the greatest figures in the history of their country. If they do not learn from their mistakes, bigger mistakes further down the line are almost inevitable. The best example of this is Mao Zedong, a man who is perhaps rightly regarded as China's greatest leader.

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