

Politics, Memory, and Trauma: Rethinking the Cultural Revolution in Contemporary China

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Abstract

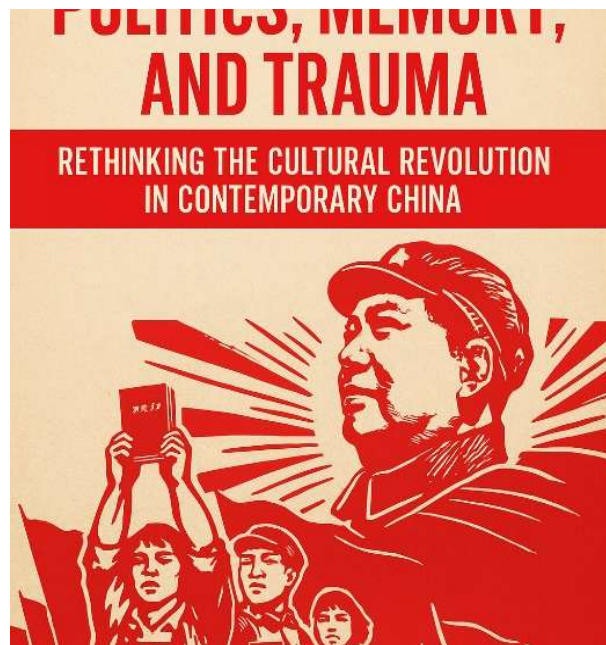
The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), launched by Mao Zedong, was one of the most radical social and political upheavals of the twentieth century, profoundly reshaping Chinese society while leaving legacies that continue to influence contemporary China. Originally initiated to safeguard Mao’s ideological vision and purge “revisionist” elements within the Communist Party, the movement rapidly escalated into mass mobilization, with Red Guards attacking traditional culture, intellectuals, and perceived enemies of socialism. Campaigns against the “Four Olds” led to widespread destruction of cultural heritage, the closing of schools, and disruptions in governance and production. Political violence, purges, and factional struggles produced chaos and suffering, while the rustication campaign sent millions of urban youth to the countryside, transforming lives and perspectives for generations. Although the movement officially ended with Mao’s death in 1976 and the arrest of the Gang of Four, its consequences were long-lasting: educational setbacks, economic stagnation, and deep social trauma. Yet the Cultural Revolution also reshaped political culture, as the Communist Party drew lessons from the era, prioritizing stability, institutional control, and economic pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. In contemporary China, its memory remains contested—official narratives emphasize its mistakes but avoid detailed reckoning, while unofficial voices highlight suffering and resilience. This paper argues that the Cultural Revolution’s legacies continue to shape China’s political strategies, social attitudes, and struggles over historical memory.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, Red Guards, Four Olds, political violence, social upheaval, rustication, Chinese Communist Party, memory politics, contemporary China

Introduction

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) remains one of the most controversial and transformative episodes in modern Chinese history, both as a radical political movement initiated by Mao Zedong to reassert his ideological authority and as a profound social upheaval whose effects continue to reverberate in contemporary China. Launched under the banner of safeguarding socialism from “revisionism” and ensuring the revolutionary purity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the movement rapidly evolved into a mass mobilization that upended established institutions, destabilized governance, and inflicted deep social, cultural, and economic dislocation. Mao, wary of the growing influence of pragmatists within the CCP who sought a more technocratic and developmentalist approach after the failures of the Great Leap Forward, called on the youth to challenge authority, thus creating the Red Guard movement that spread across the nation. Students attacked intellectuals, officials, and

traditional symbols of “feudal” and “bourgeois” culture, leading to the destruction of temples, libraries, and artifacts in a campaign against the “Four Olds”—old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Schools and universities were closed, leaving a generation without formal education, while millions of urban youth were later rusticated to rural villages in the “sent-down youth” campaign, reshaping both urban and rural societies.



Political purges targeted senior leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, while millions of ordinary citizens faced humiliation, imprisonment, or violence during struggle sessions and factional conflicts. The state apparatus weakened as local governance disintegrated and military intervention became necessary to restore order in many regions. Economically, production was disrupted by chaos and instability, leaving long-term developmental setbacks. The end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, following Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, did not immediately resolve its legacies but rather opened a new phase in which the CCP sought to rehabilitate victims, stabilize governance, and embark on pragmatic reforms under Deng Xiaoping. Yet the scars of the decade persisted: trauma from violence, dislocation of education and careers, and the loss of cultural heritage left enduring marks on Chinese society. In the decades since, the Cultural Revolution has been officially condemned by the CCP as a “serious setback” for socialism, but its memory remains carefully managed; detailed discussions are often suppressed in favor of emphasizing unity, stability, and progress. At the same time, unofficial accounts—memoirs, oral histories, and scholarship—reveal the extent of human suffering and highlight themes of resilience, adaptation, and survival. Contemporary Chinese politics continue to be shaped by lessons drawn from this period: the Party avoids mass mobilization campaigns, prioritizes institutional discipline, and emphasizes stability and economic growth as foundations of legitimacy. Socially, the generation that experienced

rustication, political persecution, or disruption in education has passed on memories that shape attitudes toward authority, reform, and tradition. Culturally, the destruction of heritage during the Cultural Revolution has heightened modern sensitivities about preservation and identity. The movement also influences China's international image, as it serves as both a cautionary tale of revolutionary excess and a reference point in discussions of authoritarian resilience.

Context: Mao Zedong's Launch of the Cultural Revolution, Political Motives, and the Mobilization of the Red Guards

The launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 was as much a political maneuver by Mao Zedong as it was a mass social upheaval, rooted in his determination to reassert ideological supremacy after the catastrophic failures of the Great Leap Forward and to counter what he perceived as creeping "revisionism" within the Chinese Communist Party. Mao, whose position had been weakened after the famine of 1959–61, saw pragmatists like Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other Party leaders pushing policies that emphasized technical expertise, economic stability, and rational planning over revolutionary fervor, which Mao interpreted as a betrayal of socialist purity and a slide toward Soviet-style bureaucratic stagnation. Determined to prevent the CCP from drifting into what he considered a technocratic elite divorced from revolutionary masses, Mao framed the Cultural Revolution as a struggle between proletarian and bourgeois elements, calling upon the youth to challenge entrenched authorities in schools, universities, and government institutions. The Red Guards—predominantly students and young intellectuals—became the vanguard of this radical campaign, responding enthusiastically to Mao's call to "bombard the headquarters." Armed with quotations from the "Little Red Book" and inspired by Mao's cult of personality, these youth groups attacked teachers, intellectuals, officials, and anyone labeled as "class enemies" or representatives of the "Four Olds"—old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Their actions included public humiliation in struggle sessions, the destruction of temples, artifacts, and books, and the violent persecution of those deemed counterrevolutionary. For Mao, the mobilization of the Red Guards served a dual purpose: it re-energized the revolutionary spirit by placing power in the hands of ordinary youth while simultaneously destabilizing bureaucratic and Party elites who had grown skeptical of his leadership. Yet the radicalization of youth quickly spiraled into factional violence, as different Red Guard groups clashed over competing interpretations of Maoist ideology, and local governance collapsed under the weight of chaos. The People's Liberation Army was often forced to intervene to restore order, revealing both the mobilizing power of Mao's charismatic authority and the destabilizing consequences of unleashing mass political violence. Mao's motives thus combined ideological conviction with personal power consolidation: he sought to maintain revolutionary momentum, eliminate rivals, and prevent the Party from institutionalizing in ways that might marginalize him. The Cultural Revolution's launch and the Red Guards' mobilization illustrate the paradox of Mao's politics—using mass mobilization to circumvent Party structures while simultaneously creating chaos that threatened the very stability of the state. It was a moment that encapsulated Mao's radical vision of continuous revolution, the dangers of unchecked charismatic authority, and the instrumental use of youth as agents of political upheaval.

Significance: Explains Maoist Legacies in Political Culture, Authoritarian Resilience, and Debates over History in Modern China

The significance of the Cultural Revolution lies not only in the devastation it caused during the decade of chaos but also in the enduring legacies it left in China's political culture, authoritarian resilience, and historical memory, which continue to shape the Chinese state and society today. Politically, the Cultural Revolution demonstrated both the power and the peril of mass mobilization. For the Chinese Communist Party, the lesson was clear: mass campaigns that unleash uncontrolled popular energy could destabilize governance, threaten Party unity, and jeopardize long-term stability. As a result, post-Mao leadership under Deng Xiaoping emphasized collective leadership, institutional discipline, and technocratic governance, moving away from Mao's reliance on charismatic mobilization. The CCP internalized the principle that stability must take precedence over ideological zeal, embedding a culture of authoritarian resilience that relies on tight Party control, economic performance, and limited ideological campaigns carefully managed from above. The Cultural Revolution also left a legacy in political culture through the institutionalization of the "cult of personality," which illustrated how charismatic authority could mobilize loyalty on an unprecedented scale but also produce destructive outcomes when unchecked. In contemporary China, official narratives warn against the dangers of personality-driven politics, even as leaders like Xi Jinping carefully balance centralization of authority with Party consensus. Socially and culturally, the destruction of heritage, suppression of intellectual life, and disruption of education created deep scars, yet they also sparked subsequent efforts to protect cultural preservation, expand higher education, and promote science and technology as cornerstones of modernization. Perhaps most enduring is the contested memory of the Cultural Revolution: the CCP's official line frames it as a "serious setback" for socialism and a deviation from the Party's correct path, but avoids detailed discussion, fearing that open reckoning would undermine legitimacy. Public discourse remains tightly controlled, though unofficial memoirs, oral histories, and scholarly works document trauma, resilience, and the survival strategies of ordinary people. This tension between official amnesia and private remembrance reflects broader debates in Chinese society about how to reconcile the past with the present. The Cultural Revolution's legacies also extend into contemporary political strategy: the CCP emphasizes economic growth as a new foundation of legitimacy, curbs grassroots mobilization to prevent destabilization, and uses historical lessons to justify authoritarian control. Internationally, the Cultural Revolution is often cited as a cautionary tale about revolutionary excess, but within China, its legacy is more complex—both a source of trauma and a reminder of the CCP's capacity to recover from crisis.

Literature Review

Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (2006) in the study *"Mao's Last Revolution"* said that the Cultural Revolution's origins lay in Mao Zedong's determination to reassert control over the Communist Party and redirect China toward his vision of permanent revolution after the failures of the Great Leap Forward. They argued that Mao's fear of "revisionism" and bureaucratization led him to mobilize students and the Red Guards to attack Party elites, which destabilized institutions and created a decade of chaos. Their work highlights Mao's central

role in orchestrating the campaign and presents the movement as both a political purge and a mass upheaval that reshaped the trajectory of Chinese socialism.

Andrew Walder (2009) in the study *“Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement”* said that the violence and factionalism of the Cultural Revolution were not spontaneous eruptions but structured conflicts shaped by Maoist ideology and state incentives. He traced the trajectory of student radicalism, showing how the Red Guards initially unified around Mao’s call to destroy the “Four Olds” but quickly divided into rival factions competing for legitimacy. Walder emphasized that political violence was deeply tied to the collapse of institutions, the erosion of trust, and the instrumental use of youth as tools of Mao’s political strategy, illustrating the destructive consequences of state-sanctioned mass mobilization.

Frank Dikötter (2016) in the study *“The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–1976”* said that the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution devastated society at every level, with millions persecuted, imprisoned, or killed, and countless lives disrupted. He presented harrowing evidence of violence, arbitrary persecution, and the destruction of cultural and educational institutions, arguing that the decade left scars that extended far beyond its formal conclusion in 1976. Dikötter’s approach foregrounds the human cost of the Cultural Revolution, framing it as a catastrophic period of mass trauma and institutional collapse that profoundly shaped subsequent generations.

Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun (1997) in the study *“Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution”* said that the movement’s legacies must be understood not only through national narratives but also through local experiences, particularly in urban centers like Shanghai where workers and students contested power. Their work revealed how class politics, factionalism, and state interventions created both opportunities for grassroots empowerment and devastating repression. Perry’s broader scholarship also argues that the CCP later learned from these dynamics, developing strategies of authoritarian resilience that emphasized discipline, co-optation, and economic pragmatism to avoid repeating the instability of mass mobilization.

Rana Mitter (2008) in the study *“Modern China: A Very Short Introduction”* said that the Cultural Revolution continues to shape modern Chinese identity through its contested memory. He argued that while the CCP officially condemned the movement as a “serious setback,” it simultaneously sought to suppress open discussion, leading to tensions between official silence and private remembrance. Mitter highlighted how the Cultural Revolution remains central to debates about China’s past and present, influencing narratives of nationalism, reform, and authoritarian control, and demonstrating how unresolved historical trauma continues to shape political culture.

Yang Jisheng (2010) in the study *“Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962”* said that although his focus was on the Great Leap Forward famine, the legacies of Maoist radicalism and state violence carried directly into the Cultural Revolution. He argued that both episodes illustrated the dangers of unchecked ideology, suppression of dissent, and the prioritization of political loyalty over truth. Yang’s broader reflections on the Mao era demonstrate how trauma from repeated campaigns shaped a culture of silence, fear, and resilience, leaving legacies that still inform how Chinese society negotiates history and authority.

Analysis & Discussion

Causes and Launch (1966)

The Cultural Revolution was launched in 1966 by Mao Zedong as both an ideological campaign and a political struggle to regain dominance after the Great Leap Forward's failures. Mao feared that the Communist Party was succumbing to "revisionism" and bureaucratization, drifting toward Soviet-style stagnation. To reassert revolutionary purity, Mao declared that class struggle must continue under socialism, framing the Cultural Revolution as a battle against hidden "bourgeois" elements. His motives were deeply political: weakening rivals like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping while reviving mass enthusiasm. Thus, the revolution's cause lay in Mao's blend of ideological conviction and power consolidation.

Mobilization and Red Guards

Central to the Cultural Revolution was Mao's mobilization of students into Red Guard units, transforming youth into political enforcers of his ideology. Encouraged to "bombard the headquarters," the Red Guards attacked authority figures, intellectuals, and symbols of the "Four Olds"—old customs, culture, habits, and ideas. Armed with the "Little Red Book," they staged parades, destroyed temples, and humiliated teachers and officials in public struggle sessions. Initially celebrated as revolutionary vanguards, the Red Guards soon fractured into competing factions, escalating violence and chaos. Mao's mobilization empowered youth while destabilizing institutions, showing both the mobilizing strength and destructive potential of radicalized masses.

Political Violence and Social Upheaval

The Cultural Revolution unleashed unprecedented political violence and social upheaval. Millions were subjected to persecution, imprisonment, or death during purges and struggle sessions. Factional clashes between rival Red Guard groups, as well as conflicts with Party officials and local authorities, led to widespread lawlessness. Institutions collapsed, with schools, factories, and local governments paralyzed by revolutionary committees. Families were torn apart as loyalty to Mao superseded kinship, and accusations of "counterrevolutionary" behavior led to betrayals. The People's Liberation Army intervened to restore order, but the decade's violence left deep trauma. Social trust eroded, and the political culture of fear became entrenched.

Cultural and Educational Impact

The Cultural Revolution devastated China's cultural and educational landscape. Campaigns against the "Four Olds" targeted temples, artifacts, books, and traditions, erasing centuries of heritage. Intellectuals were branded "class enemies," humiliated, and often sent to rural labor camps, silencing academic life. Schools and universities were closed for years, disrupting education for an entire generation. The focus on revolutionary propaganda replaced scholarly inquiry, narrowing intellectual horizons. Art and literature were reduced to serving Maoist ideology, producing "model operas" and political posters that glorified the revolution. This cultural and educational void left lasting consequences, undermining intellectual development and damaging cultural continuity.

Economic and Social Disruption

The Cultural Revolution caused severe economic and social disruption as productive activity gave way to political struggle. Factories slowed or shut down, agricultural output suffered, and trade declined, deepening poverty. Skilled professionals were purged, weakening technical capacity, while bureaucratic paralysis prevented effective governance. Socially, millions of “sent-down youth” were rusticated to the countryside, where urban students struggled with rural hardship while peasant communities faced new burdens. Class divisions hardened as stigmatized families of landlords and intellectuals endured systemic discrimination. The turmoil not only weakened China’s economy but also fragmented society, creating dislocation that would take decades to repair under reform policies.

End of the Cultural Revolution (1976)

The Cultural Revolution gradually lost momentum in the early 1970s as chaos proved unsustainable, but it only formally ended with Mao’s death in September 1976 and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four. Mao’s declining health and Zhou Enlai’s moderating influence had tempered excesses, but political purges and instability persisted. After Mao’s death, Hua Guofeng briefly took power before Deng Xiaoping’s rise marked a decisive shift. The fall of the Gang of Four symbolized the repudiation of radical Maoism. The official closure of the Cultural Revolution paved the way for rehabilitation of victims, policy realignment, and the reform era.

Legacies in Contemporary China

The Cultural Revolution’s legacies continue to shape China’s political culture, governance, and social attitudes. The CCP drew lessons about the dangers of unchecked mass mobilization, emphasizing stability, institutional discipline, and economic pragmatism in the reform era. Political leaders avoid personality cults while carefully balancing central authority with Party consensus. Memory politics remains contested: official narratives condemn the Cultural Revolution as a “serious setback” but suppress open discussion, while memoirs and scholarship document trauma and resilience. Socially, disrupted education and rustication shaped a generation’s worldview. Thus, the Cultural Revolution remains a defining episode, informing China’s authoritarian resilience and identity.

Case Studies

Red Guard Movement: Youth mobilization and factional violence

The Red Guard movement epitomized the radical energy of the Cultural Revolution, as Mao Zedong mobilized millions of young students to challenge established authority and defend his ideological vision. Initially celebrated as revolutionary vanguards, the Red Guards targeted intellectuals, officials, and cultural institutions under the banner of destroying the “Four Olds.” Public humiliations, book burnings, and the destruction of cultural heritage became widespread. However, the movement quickly fractured into rival factions competing for legitimacy, sparking violent clashes that destabilized schools, cities, and entire provinces. The Red Guards embodied Mao’s strategy of mass mobilization but also exposed its destructive volatility.

Rustication Campaign: “Sent-down youth” sent to countryside

The rustication campaign, or “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement,” saw millions of urban youths forcibly relocated to rural villages during the late 1960s and 1970s. Intended to reduce urban unrest and instill revolutionary values through peasant labor, the campaign disrupted education and careers for an entire generation. Young people often struggled with harsh rural conditions, while local peasants bore the burden of supporting them. Though some developed empathy for rural struggles, most experienced disillusionment, feeling betrayed by the state. This policy left lasting scars, shaping attitudes toward authority and fueling later demands for reform.

Mao’s Cult of Personality: Political control through ideology

The Cultural Revolution reinforced Mao’s cult of personality, elevating him to a near-divine figure whose image and writings dominated everyday life. Propaganda posters, revolutionary operas, and the “Little Red Book” were omnipresent, embedding Maoist ideology into schools, workplaces, and households. Loyalty to Mao was equated with patriotism, and questioning his leadership was treated as counterrevolutionary. This ideological dominance consolidated Mao’s authority, enabling purges of rivals and mass mobilization campaigns. Yet the excessive focus on Mao also highlighted the dangers of personalist rule, as the Party later recognized that such unchecked veneration destabilized governance and undermined institutional credibility.

Post-1978 Reforms: Deng’s repudiation of the Cultural Revolution and redefinition of legitimacy

After Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping redefined China’s political and economic trajectory by repudiating the Cultural Revolution while avoiding a full reckoning. Deng promoted stability and modernization, emphasizing pragmatism over ideology through the “Reform and Opening” policies. Political campaigns gave way to technocratic governance, while economic growth became the Party’s new source of legitimacy. Victims of persecution were rehabilitated, education was restored, and intellectual life cautiously revived. By framing the Cultural Revolution as a “serious setback,” Deng distanced the CCP from its radical past without undermining its rule, reshaping Chinese authoritarian resilience.

Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution was a transformative yet traumatic episode in China’s twentieth-century history, reshaping politics, society, and memory in ways that endure to this day. Launched as Mao’s effort to preserve revolutionary purity, it unleashed mass mobilization, violence, and cultural devastation, while destabilizing governance and crippling education and economic development. Its end in 1976 paved the way for Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, which redefined legitimacy through stability and growth. Yet its legacies persist in authoritarian caution, contested historical memory, and generational scars. Ultimately, the Cultural Revolution remains both a cautionary tale and a formative experience shaping contemporary China.

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