

JEAN ESMEIN has travelled extensively in China. From December 1965 to June 1968, he was a press attaché in Peking, and witnessed the Cultural Revolution first-hand.

# The Chinese Cultural Revolution

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First Edition

TO CHARLES HAGUENAUER

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## Introduction

China today is a land without legal codes, where human conduct is governed by principles rather than regulations. In this situation there is virtually no distinction between political and moral control. The advice given by the Party press amounts to sermons, by which all who accept the prevailing ethic try to live.

In normal times information is monopolized by the central government. Rather than giving a selection of news about current events the Chinese press carries a message, and it makes up for the shortage of news by its wealth of ideological and tactical education. Through it the Party puts out examples for its cadres to publicize, and exhortations for them to pass on.

With the spread of the Cultural Revolution, all kinds of new sources of information appeared. They varied in value and could not be used uncritically. While some of the texts printed in the revolutionary press—speeches by national leaders, for example—were apparently checked before publication, the rest were polemical. Posters and leaflets had to be read with reserve.

What counted most was that, taken together, this supplementary source of news gave far more facts than the official press generally did.

Using one type of source to fill in the blanks left by the other, one can more or less put the story together in terms

of facts, dates and ideas. Although often vague, and in need of keys for its interpretation, the official press remains the most reliable basic source. Comparison with other contemporary sources can explain the meaning of the official press. And the papers themselves had a history of their own, insofar as they were objectives in the struggle for power.

The exposed positions of the press, from which examples and ethical principles were transmitted, kept changing hands. Although it would have been too much to expect prolonged debates in their columns, some did manage to develop.

The Chinese are inveterate exaggerators. Posters calling for the Minister of Petroleum to be 'burned alive' did not mean that the revolutionaries were getting the stoves ready. The wish to 'smash' a minister's 'dog's head' generally amounted to no more than a demand for his suspension. The story is full of surprises: political figures thrown out of some organization were often later summoned to its meetings. People supposedly discredited for all time reappeared beside Mao Tse-tung on top of the T'ienanmen rostrum on ceremonial occasions. The revolution may have given rise to exceptional measures, but the regime tended to preserve its opponents.

This approach, combined with the patience of the leadership in the face of growing disorder, has led some people to believe that the Cultural Revolution was an organized movement; and it was still possible to hold this view when the regime was taking precautions to prevent the workers and peasants from being contaminated by the students. The initial plan for the Cultural Revolution was perhaps only for a micro-revolution. But those who wanted to run things in the usual way were isolated in their ivory towers when revolutionary detachments seized power in the cities under the cold January sun.

But was something more than a deep arousal of the masses intended? When the propaganda chiefs were asked, by the Chinese themselves, 'Does the movement involve reorganizing the masses?' they answered that 'it was not a question of the reorganization of the masses, but of their

self-education and assistance'.<sup>1</sup> There is no key to explain this reply, which was inevitably ambiguous. An organized revolution would have taught the people nothing. All the same they had to be helped to make revolution.

Who, in the last resort, was able to control the people completely? The Party soon lost the privilege of being feared or respected. When Liu Shao-ch'i's wife proudly stood her ground at her public trial and said, 'As a Chinese woman, as a Chinese woman Communist, I am independent,' her interrogator replied, 'What sort of Communist are you? You are a class reject, drawn into the Party by Liu Shao-ch'i.'<sup>2</sup> Her accuser may even not have been a Party member himself. The Party aristocracy was stripped of its complacency. Its leaders learned, to their cost, how the masses could sentence to political death without recourse to hanging or killing. The struggle, waged by a tiny number at first, embraced a whole section of China, especially the cities. It had its fanatics. The movement for a personality cult of Mao Tse-tung struck one even as a distant observer. There were also realists. 'If you are to seize power, you cannot be lifted over the obstacles. You have to make a big jump,' said Chou En-lai to the young revolutionaries. 'If you are not made head of the department on the spot you will have failed.'<sup>3</sup>

It is surprising that few new leaders emerged. Did the men, old men for the most part, who had wanted and brought about this struggle, come forward with so much enthusiasm and experience that they eclipsed the younger men who joined forces with them? It is hard to believe that the Cultural Revolution can have raised nobody to the side of Mao Tse-tung but some old faithfuls: soldiers, his own wife, and two younger men, of whom one is his son-in-law.

<sup>1</sup> 'A reply to false principles,' Interview given by An Tse-jen, editor of the *People's Daily*, and other revolutionary cadres, and recorded by the Red Guards of the secondary school attached to Peking University, February 10, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> *Current Scene*, vol. VI, no. 6, April 15, 1968, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> 'Leaders at the Centre discuss the Seizure of Power,' *Yutien Fenglei* (revolutionary journal) February 10, 1967—Chou En-lai's words.

It should also be added that the Cultural Revolution has not been the purge that has generally been supposed. It was intended to give the country a rejuvenated Party with strengthened cadres. Care was taken to keep all those who could be won over to Maoist politics. The congress that brought it to an end gave two-thirds of the places on the Central Committee to newcomers.

## 1. The Roots of the Cultural Revolution in Mao Tse-tung's Ideas

### I. MAO'S THOUGHT AND THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

Much of the imagery of the Cultural Revolution, the names of the Red Guard organizations and sometimes their arms—spears with red tassels, shields, and even straw sandals—were borrowed from the history of the revolutionary bases in Kiangsi and Chingkangshan thirty-five years earlier. The Chingkangshan mountains in particular, where Mao had retreated with his troops in September 1927, were given new publicity. They were a symbol, a base from which revolutionary fighters set out to conquer a recalcitrant or hostile world and within which a new society was created.

From 1966 to 1968 speeches and papers, whether or not of Red Guard origin, often drew their examples and exhortations from the experience of the areas governed by the Chinese Soviets. They were invoked in order to revive the relationship that had existed between the people, the Party and the army in the Communist zones. Coming at the time when the Thought of Mao Tse-tung was at its height, these symbols and references served to remind the people of how much Mao's thinking owed to his earliest experiences and decisions as a revolutionary leader. Moreover, the leaders of this new revolution, now being mounted by the government of the dictatorship of the proletariat, looked to past experience as their guide-line.