

Setting the Record Straight

The Truth About the Cultural Revolution

We are constantly bombarded with the message that “communism is dead,” that it hasn’t worked and cannot work, and that revolutions in power lead to tyranny. It is nothing less than an ideological crusade, and one of its aspects is to systematically distort the revolutionary experiences of the Soviet Union and China, especially the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. In this Fact Sheet we will show why the Cultural Revolution was necessary, we’ll analyze and draw lessons from the problems that emerged in the course of it, and we’ll outline the overwhelmingly positive achievements of this mass revolutionary upsurge involving hundreds of millions of people. This is all part of the new synthesis of the communist project that Bob Avakian, the Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, has been developing.¹

What was the Cultural Revolution really about?

In 1949, China’s worker-peasant revolution overthrew the old order, ending thousands of years of feudal oppression and a hundred years of foreign domination of China. The revolution established a socialist political and economic system that empowered the masses and brought great benefits to people, but significant economic differences and social inequalities still existed in the new socialist society. Most dangerously, a new privileged elite began to emerge. Its political-organizational center was right within the Chinese Communist Party, and its political and ideological influence was growing.

By the mid-1960s, the top *capitalist-roaders* (so called because they were high-ranking Party leaders who used a watered-down Marxism to justify taking China down a political-economic road that would lead to the restoration of capitalism) were maneuvering to seize power. Their goal was to re-institute systems of exploitation and to open China back up to imperialist domination—in short, to turn China into the “sweatshop paradise” that it is today!

Far from being a “palace power struggle,” the Cultural Revolution was a profound and intense struggle over the direction of society and over who would rule society: the working people or a new bourgeois class.

Mao and the revolutionary forces in the Communist Party mobilized people to rise up to prevent capitalist takeover and to shake up the higher levels of the Party that had become increasingly cast in a bourgeois-bureaucratic mold. But the Cultural Revolution was much more than that. The masses were carrying forward the revolutionary transformation of the economy, social institutions, culture, and values and were revolutionizing the Communist Party itself. This is what Mao called continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.²

But was this really a popular upheaval?

The Cultural Revolution was not about “round-ups,” people being sent to “forced-labor camps,” or “totalitarian group-think.” The methods of the Cultural Revolution were quite different. Workers, peasants, and people from all walks of life engaged in mass criticism of corrupt officialdom. They engaged in great debates about economic policy, the educational system, culture, and the relation between the Communist Party and the masses of people. Mao wasn’t interested in “purges.” He was calling for mass action from below to defeat the enemies of the revolution. Here are some examples of how the Cultural Revolution was waged.

- *The Red Guards*. Millions of young people formed into these political brigades. They criticized government and party leaders taking society down the capitalist road. They called out elitist practices in the universities. They roused workers and older people to lift their heads and to question and challenge reactionary authority and policies. They traveled to the countryside to spread the movement and to learn about the conditions of the peasantry.
- “*Big-character posters* .” These handwritten posters went up on the walls of schools, factories, and neighborhoods. They were an incredible expression of public criticism of policies and leaders. Paper and ink were provided free of charge. Accessible to everyone, they gave an immediate platform for debate. Over 10,000 kinds of newspapers and pamphlets were published by ordinary people in China as a means to debate political issues on a large scale (and in Beijing alone there were over 900 newspapers).³
- *Overthrowing capitalist-roaders and creating new power structures from below*. 40 million workers in China’s major cities took part in intense and complex political struggles to seize power back from entrenched elites. The political atmosphere was electric—in the city of Shanghai, there were over 700 organizations in the factories. Through political debate and experimentation, and with the leadership provided by the Maoist revolutionaries, new institutions of proletarian rule were forged.

Wasn’t great violence perpetrated during the Cultural Revolution?

Standard Western accounts suggest that violent attacks on people and physical elimination of opponents had the official blessings of Mao—and that, policy or not, thuggish violence was widespread. Both of these claims are utterly false.

Mao’s orientation for the Cultural Revolution was clearly spelled out in official and widely publicized documents. In the *Sixteen Point Decision*, it was stated: “Where there is debate, it should be conducted by reasoning and not by force.”⁴ Other Maoist guidelines narrowed the scope of people who were identified as enemies to a small handful of “people in authority taking the capitalist road.” Among intellectuals and in academia, the policies drew the distinction between a handful of bourgeois academic tyrants, who were trying to lord it over people and impose the old feudal and bourgeois standards, and a larger number of intellectuals who were trained in the old society and had a lot the outlook of that society, but were people who were friends of the revolution, and should be won over even if there were contradictions there. Other policies were aimed at limiting the damage, given the understanding that there *would* inevitably be excesses. For instance, Red Guards were not allowed to carry weapons or to arrest or try anyone.

Mao called on the masses to “bombard the headquarters” and overthrow the handful of capitalist-roaders who were trying to lead society back into the clutches of capitalism. These were overwhelmingly political uprisings. *Mass debate*, *mass criticism*, and *mass political mobilization*—these were the main forms of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution. Party and administrative officials at all levels were given the opportunity to reform and participate in the struggle (and no more than 3% of cadre were even expelled from the Party—not exactly a draconian purge).

Was there violence? Yes, there was. This was intense and turbulent class struggle. In an unprecedented mass movement of this scale (we're talking about 30 million young activists alone), in a country of this size (800 million at the time), it would be hard to imagine otherwise. And it is inevitable that any great social movement that rights injustices is going to lead to some excesses. But three points must be stressed.

First, the violence that did occur was *limited* and *sporadic*—it involved only a minority of the movement.

Second, where harmful trends persisted on the people's side— for instance, Red Guard students physically attacking people or humiliating officials, or people using the movement to settle personal scores and grievances—these things were criticized, condemned, and struggled against by the Maoist leadership. Take one crucial episode of the Cultural Revolution that you seldom hear about. In Beijing, workers following Mao's line went into the universities to put a stop to factional fighting among students and to help them sort out differences.⁵

Third, much of the violence that occurred was in fact fanned by high-ranking capitalist-roaders seeking to defend their entrenched positions. When they came under sharp criticism, one of their tactics was to mobilize groupings of workers and peasants to attack sections of people in the name of the Cultural Revolution. They even created their own conservative Red Guard formations that went on rampages! This was part of their effort to deflect the struggle away from themselves and to discredit the Cultural Revolution.

This is the complexity of it: there were certainly people who were wrongly victimized in the Cultural Revolution. It's almost inevitable in this kind of mass revolutionary upheaval—which doesn't mean it's okay. But if you need to rupture a society more fully onto the socialist road and prevent capitalism, which is what they did, and you need to completely revolutionize and restructure the Party in the course of this, which they also did, you *will* have excesses, and you have to (and Mao did) try to correct them. If they hadn't had the mass upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, they would very quickly have gone back to capitalism.

And eventually, in 1976, the capitalist-roaders *did* succeed in overthrowing proletarian power. And speaking of reactionary violence, it was *they* who turned the army loose on protesting students and workers at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

What about the policy of sending people to the countryside and the treatment of artists and intellectuals?

One of the objectives of the Cultural Revolution was to break down the cultural lopsidedness that existed in China. It was a social situation in which artists, intellectuals, and professionals were concentrated in the cities, and in which their work was largely divorced from the greater society, especially the 80% that lived in the countryside at the time. The Cultural Revolution spawned society-wide discussion about the need to narrow the inequalities between mental and manual labor, between city and countryside, between industry and agriculture, and between men and women.

Artists, doctors, technical and scientific workers, and all kinds of educated people were called upon to go among the workers and peasants: to apply their skills to the needs of society, to share the lives of the laboring people, to exchange knowledge, and to learn from the basic people. Great numbers of youth and professionals answered Mao's call to "serve the people" and go to the countryside.

Now for social change to take hold, it was also necessary to institutionalize new social policies. For instance, high school graduates were required to spend at least two years in rural villages or factories before being considered for college. So there was an element of coercion (policies were enforced)—but would you object to school desegregation because it was mandated? And for many intellectuals, abandoning privilege and integrating with the masses in the countryside was a tremendous experience.⁶

Attacks on the Cultural Revolution for “ruining lives” and “destroying careers” are really taking issue with the Cultural Revolution’s radical, anti-elitist social policies.

It is often alleged that the policy of sending doctors and engineers and intellectuals and other skilled people to the countryside was “punishment.” No, it was not. This policy has to be seen in a larger social-economic context of Maoist China’s quest to achieve balanced and egalitarian development. In the Third World, there is a crisis of chaotic urbanization and distorted development: overgrown and environmentally unsustainable cities with rings of squalid shantytowns; massive inflows of rural migrants who cannot find work; economic policies, educational systems, and health care infrastructure skewed to the well-off in the cities at the expense of the urban poor and the countryside.

Maoist China was consciously seeking to avoid Western-style urban overconcentration, integrate industrial and agricultural development, decentralize productive capabilities, and overcome regional inequalities. It was a strategy of development that paid attention to the welfare of the countryside and gave priority to the needs of the formerly exploited and neglected.

Artists were encouraged to engage in the revolutionary movement. This included carrying out self-examination of how their works either advanced the revolution or held it back, and viewing their work in the context of the struggle to create a new society. The Cultural Revolution aimed to foster revolutionary art that portrayed the masses and helped the masses propel history forward, and ground-breaking model cultural works were created.

At the same time, the intense attention to those works may have had a negative effect on broadly unleashing more diversity in artistic expression. There is a dialectical relationship here: between on the one hand, creating model works that were led in a very finely detailed and calibrated way from the highest levels, and mobilizing artists in that process, and on the other hand, encouraging intellectuals and artists to create new works and experiment without such close leading attention, and then over time leading the masses to sift through what got created from the standpoint of the revolutionary transformation of society. Bob Avakian has been exploring this question in recent writings, and has called for further investigation and struggle to understand the implications.⁷

Avakian has also criticized the tendency among the Chinese revolutionaries, even including Mao, toward a certain amount of nationalism.⁸ He’s raised the question of whether this carried over into treating intellectuals and artists who had been trained in, were influenced by, or had an interest in Western culture, as people who should be criticized regardless of the content of their work, or even treated as enemies. Avakian calls for evaluating these criticisms of the Cultural Revolution in the context of the great achievements of that era: the flowering of revolutionary art and culture involving the masses of people as never before, all in order to draw lessons for the future of socialist revolution.

What about the many first-hand accounts of the Cultural Revolution that describe great personal agony?

Different social classes and their literary representatives have very different conceptions of what's "right" and what's "wrong," of what's "horrible" and what's "liberating." The fact that someone "lived through an event" doesn't change this in the slightest, or necessarily give him or her special insight.

Many privileged urban-professionals in China felt "wronged" by the Cultural Revolution. They were subjected to criticism; their normal routines of life were disrupted; their privileges were undercut. These were the "wounds" they suffered, and this is the story they tell...with no small amount of distortion. It is hardly surprising that such works are lavishly praised and promoted in the U.S. and in China (where the enemies of the Cultural Revolution came to power in 1976). Positive assessments of the Cultural Revolution and positive "inside accounts" of what it meant for the ordinary laboring people don't generally get published.

Think about it for a second. What kind of understanding of the French Revolution would you gain from someone who was part of the old aristocracy? What would you learn about the U.S. Civil War from a member of the plantation gentry? Or about the struggle today around affirmative action in education from a white person who describes his "persecution" when he was skipped over for admission to his law school of choice? It stands to reason that such accounts, "eyewitness" though they might be, would be deeply biased against social change.

It's no different for the Cultural Revolution. More privileged social forces see, and distort, the Cultural Revolution through a particular social lens. This is not to say there's nothing that can be learned from any of these works, or that no mistakes were made in how some people were treated. But these highly personal narratives greatly misrepresent the actual events, the mass movement, and the main trends of the Cultural Revolution. They obscure the class interests and social programs that were in real opposition and conflict.

Can you point to real accomplishments of the Cultural Revolution?

First and foremost, the Cultural Revolution succeeded in maintaining proletarian rule and preventing capitalist takeover in China for 10 years (1966-76). It also led to profound social and institutional changes and deepened the orientation of organizing society around the principle of "serve the people." Here are some examples.

Education. China's universities—which in the early 1960s were still the province of the sons and daughters of intellectuals, cadres, and the former privileged classes—were transformed. The old curriculum was overhauled as part of meeting the needs of building an egalitarian society. Autocratic teaching methods were criticized. At all levels, education was taken as much more than just classroom schooling—it was understood to be a broad social and lifelong process. Study and research were combined with productive labor. Revolutionary politics and political study were integral to the educational process. The Cultural Revolution attacked the notion that education is a ladder to "getting ahead" and that skills and knowledge are a ticket for gaining advantage and privilege over others. It promoted new values and the outlook that knowledge must be acquired and used to serve the collective good.

The universities instituted open enrollment: by the early 1970s, worker and peasant students made up the great majority of the university population. Educational resources were vastly expanded in the rural areas: for instance, middle-school enrollment rose from 15 to 58 million!⁹

The charge that the Cultural Revolution was a “wasted decade” in education is a gross distortion, and another example of class prejudice.

Culture. “Model revolutionary works” in opera and ballet put new emphasis on workers and peasants and their resistance to oppression (in place of old imperial court dramas). Western techniques were integrated with traditional Chinese forms, and many new performance works brought forth powerful depictions of revolutionary women that challenged patriarchal relations. There was an explosion of creativity among the masses: short stories, poetry, paintings and sculpture, music and dance. Cultural troupes and film units multiplied in the countryside. Between 1972 and 1975, Beijing held four national fine arts exhibitions (with 65% of exhibited works created by amateurs) that attracted an audience of 7.8 million, a scale never reached before the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰

Economic management. In factories and other workplaces, traditional forms of “one-man management” were dissolved. New “three-in-one” combinations of rank-and-file workers, technicians, and Communist Party members took responsibility for day-to-day management of factories and other types of work. Workers spent time in management and managers spent time working on the shop floor.¹¹

Science conducted in new ways. “Open-door research” was introduced: research institutes were spread to the countryside and involved peasants; technical laboratories literally opened their doors to workers; and universities set up extension labs in factories and neighborhoods. Popular primers made scientific knowledge available to the masses.¹²

In conclusion.

The Cultural Revolution was an historic event without precedent. In a situation in which a socialist system had been established, Mao and the revolutionaries in the Chinese Communist Party mobilized the activism and creativity of the masses to prevent the restoration of the old order and to carry forward the socialist revolution towards communism: the elimination of classes and all oppressive relations. History has never seen a mass movement and struggle of such scale and guided by such revolutionary politics and consciousness. History has never seen so radical an attempt to transform economic relations, political and social institutions, and culture, habit, and ideas.

Were there mistakes and shortcomings in the Cultural Revolution? Yes, even some serious ones. But viewed in the context of its enormous achievements, and certainly set against the horrors of capitalist society, these are secondary.

But the communist revolution cannot stand still. It has to critically learn from its experience, not fear to interrogate itself, and advance further and do better. Bob Avakian has been providing the pathbreaking Marxist-Leninist-Maoist understanding to do just that.

Bob Avakian has been bringing forward a vibrant vision of socialism and communism. He has been enlarging the understanding of the tasks and contradictions of revolutionary leadership and how the masses can be unleashed to rule and transform society. He has been speaking to the indispensable role that dissent plays in socialist society, especially in contributing to the critical spirit that must permeate all of society. He has drawn attention to the importance of the intellectual and cultural spheres under socialism and that socialist society needs—and must foster—great intellectual ferment, creativity, and experimentation.

If you hunger for a different kind of world...you need to explore the truth of the Cultural Revolution...you need to explore the visionary writings of Bob Avakian.¹

FOOTNOTES:

¹ See, for instance, Bob Avakian, “Grasp Revolution, Promote Production—Questions of Outlook and Method”; “Reaching for the Heights and Flying Without a Safety Net”; and “Dictatorship and Democracy, And the Socialist Transition to Communism,” all available online at revcom.us.

² Bob Avakian, *Mao Tsetung’s Immortal Contributions* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1979), chapters 6 and 7.

³ Mobo C. F. Gao, “Debating the Cultural Revolution: Do We Only Know What We Believe,” in *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (2002), p. 428.

⁴ “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (Adopted on August 8, 1966), in *Important Documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).

⁵ Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), Part II, chapters 3-5.

⁶ See, for example, Xueping Zhong, et. al., *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2001).

⁷ Bob Avakian, “Marxism ‘Embraces but Does Not Replace,’” in *Grasp Revolution, Promote Production - Questions of Outlook and Method, Some Points on the New Situation*, December 2002, available online at revcom.us.

⁸ Bob Avakian, “Conquer the World?: The International Proletariat Must and Will,” 1981, available online at revcom.us.

⁹ Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Educational Reforms and Their Impact on China’s Rural Development* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 88; Suzanne Pepper, “Education,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. XV (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), p. 416; Ruth Gamberg, *Red and Expert: Education in the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Schocken, 1977).

¹⁰ Gao, “Debating the Cultural Revolution,” pp. 427-430. Gao, who participated in the Cultural Revolution, describes the impact of the new culture in villages like his: “The rural villagers, for the first time, organized theater troupes and put on performances that incorporated the contents and structure of the eight model Peking operas with local language and music. The villagers not only entertained themselves but also learned how to read and write by getting into the texts and plays. And they organized sports meets and held matches with other villages. All these activities gave the villagers an opportunity to meet, communicate, fall in love. These activities gave them a sense of discipline and organization and created a public sphere where meetings and communications went beyond the traditional household and village clans. This had never happened before and it has never happened since” (p. 428).

¹¹ See Stephen Andors, *China’s Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

¹² See Science for the People, *China: Science Walks on Two Legs* (New York: Avon, 1974).