The Cultural Revolution

Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976): son of a rich peasant from Hunan; became an early member of the CCP under the influence of Li Daozhao; worked at the Library at Peking University; after 1927, he advocated a peasant line of revolution; rose to leadership in the party in the 1930s during the formative experience of the Long March; established the People’s Republic of China in 1949; the supreme political leader in China until his death in 1976.

Peng Dehuai 彭德懷 (1898-1974): communist general; leader of the Chinese forces in the Korean War; veteran of the Long March; becomes an outspoken critic of Mao’s Great Leap Forward policies in 1959; purged from the Party for his criticisms.

Lin Biao 林彪 (1907-1971): Military leader of the CCP Red Army who became a hero for his fighting in Manchuria during the Civil War; succeeded Peng Dehuai as Minister of Defense after 1959; a supporter of Mao who helped to create the cult of Mao; responsible for collecting important sayings from Mao into the Quotations from Chairman Mao, also known as the Little Red Book; named to be Mao’s successor in 1969; died two years later in a mysterious plane crash over Mongolia; after the crash he was accused of plotting a coup against Mao.

Liu Shaoqi 劉少奇 (1898-1969): Soviet-educated communist leader; member of the founding Central Committee Politburo Standing Committee; becomes head of state in 1959; expected to be a successor to Mao; purged as a revisionist, “capitalist-roader” during the Cultural Revolution; dies in a shed in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904-1997): Joined the CCP while on a work-study program in France in the 1920s; veteran of the Long March; served as a liaison between the CCP and the Red Army; rises to prominence in the Party in the 1950s & 1960s; headed up the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957; purged leadership during the Cultural Revolution; emerges after the Cultural Revolution as the preeminent head of the Party and the state in the 1980s; responsible for opening up market reforms and the Four Modernizations in the 1980s; also responsible for suppressing the 1989 democracy movement in Tian’anmen Square.

Wu Han 吳晗 (1909-1969): A writer and historian in Ming China; served as vice-mayor of Beijing in the early 1960s; wrote a controversial play titled Hai Rui Dismissed from Office in 1961, which was widely interpreted as criticism of Mao for his dismissal of Peng Dehuai in 1959; the attack on the play by Yao Wenyuan (one of the “Gang of Four”) was the first salvo in the launching of the Cultural Revolution.

Jiang Qing 江青 (1914-1991): Third wife of Mao Zedong; left the life of an actress in Shanghai to join the CCP in Yan’an; considered a member of the Gang of Four, and responsible for promoting the Cultural Revolution; responsible for overseeing the creation of the Model Revolutionary Operas (and two ballets).

The Gang of Four: Yao Wenyuan 姚文元 (1931-2005), Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋 (1917-2005), Wang Hongwen 王洪文 (1935-1992), and Jiang Qing 江青 (1914-1991), all of whom were Mao’s closest allies during the Cultural Revolution; they were all Party members from Shanghai; following the Cultural Revolution, these four were blamed for the chaos of the time; they were all arrested in 1976 and their trials were aired on public television in 1981.
Red Guards: Groups of middle school and university students who claimed allegiance to Mao during the Cultural Revolution; led attacks against “feudal” and “reactionary” elements in Chinese society; factions among the Red Guards developed that battled each other, sometimes with weapons. Finally, dispersed in 1969, when many of the urban educated youths were sent down to the countryside.

Political campaigns of the late 1950s & 1960s:
“Hundred Flowers Movement” (1956-57): brief period of liberalization during which Mao called for the “blooming of a hundred flowers and the contending of a hundred schools of thought”; begun when Mao publishes an article on “The Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People”; encouraged intellectuals to criticize the Party; response exceeded government expectation and was then cut off. Those who did speak out were labeled as Rightists and jailed or sent to the countryside for ‘re-education.’

“A-Anti-Rightist Campaign” (1957): Begins in June 1957; represents a major attack on intellectuals and anyone who spoke out against the Party in the Hundred Flowers Movement. Many of those labeled as Rightists were again attacked during the Cultural Revolution. Hobbles the voices of intellectuals in PRC.

The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961): Launched by Mao to try to get the Chinese economy to speed up; fostered the creation of People’s Communes and mass organization; urged the creation of backyard foundries to forge steel; economic disasters resulting from these policies led to the massive famine of 1959-1961.

The Great Famine (1959-1961): Three years of nationwide famine created partly by drought and partly by the policies adopted by Mao under the Great Leap Forward; some 30 million people died as a result of the famine.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976): Social upheaval caused by Mao to root out entrenched bureaucracy within the CCP leadership and to purge the “revisionists” and “capitalist-roaders.” Unleashed massive unrest and the destruction of artifacts of ancient Chinese culture; many intellectuals persecuted as a result of the attacks; at least two CRs, one among the top leadership and one within society at large.

Model Revolutionary Operas: 8 “revolutionary operas” created under the supervision of Jiang Qing during the CR; based on a modified Peking opera; these eight operas were among the only forms of entertainment permitted during the CR; made into films.

People’s Communes: Main unit of economic and political organization in the countryside beginning in the Great Leap Forward and continuing through the early 1980s; each commune was composed of tens of thousands of families; divided into smaller brigades and production teams; did away with all private property; labor was pooled and rewards for work were determined on a work point basis.