

Recreating a Nation's Identity Through Symbolism: A Chinese Case Study

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It has been 50 years since the purge, persecution, bloodshed, and chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China, and yet, the lingering horrors of the 1960s remain fresh in the memories of the Chinese people. The decade between 1966 and 1976 witnessed the proletariat attempt to transform the order according to its own outlook of the world, as dictated by then Chairman Mao Zedong. However, this ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism, and the desire to bring about a cultural change in China, turned out to be less of a class struggle and more of an attempt by Mao to retain his power within the Communist Party. This militant call by Mao resulted in unprecedented violence, destruction, and loss of life in China, making it one of the most horrifying events in Chinese history.

This paper attempts to analyse the role of political symbols used by Mao to mobilise the masses during the period of the Cultural Revolution, how these symbols transformed the nationalist movement into a struggle for power, and the effects these events had on the overall economy of China. The methods used for the purposes of analysis and cumulation in this paper are largely qualitative, based on secondary sources such as research papers, editorials, newspaper articles, and speeches. This paper covers the major objects of political symbolism that were used in the era of the Cultural Revolution – the Little Red Book, the propaganda posters, Mao badges, and other forms of art, respectively – and the social and economic effects these had on the Chinese people.

Aim of the Cultural Revolution

For Mao, the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to “remould” the minds of the Chinese people and crush the people in authority, also known as the counter-revolutionary “revisionists”, who were plotting to create a “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”. [1] He called on the nation's youth to purge the “impure” elements of Chinese society and restore the revolutionary spirit that had led to victory in the civil war 20 years earlier and the founding of the People's Republic of China, believing that existing Communist leaders were leading the party and China in the wrong direction. [2] Now often known as Maoism, he set his ideologies apart from the Soviet-style Marxism, placing a non-Western, anti-colonial agenda front and centre. Thus, for these purposes, one of the first groups of people that were mobilised was that of students, who later formed the foundation for the Red Guard/Red Army. The Chinese students were fearless and brutal, causing mayhem across the country as a response to Mao's militant call to unleash chaos on the “four olds” – old ideas, old customs, old habits, and old culture. This led to institutions like schools and universities being shut down and churches, shrines, libraries, shops, and private homes being ransacked and destroyed. [3] As anarchy and terror spread rapidly across all parts of China, horror stories about students slaughtering their teachers and officials being humiliated, tortured and killed started floating around. Eventually, the student groups were joined by workers, peasants, soldiers, and a vast number of revolutionary cadres and intellectuals, all armed with Mao Zedong's thoughts. The aim was to foster among the masses an entirely new ideology, culture and customs, and habits – those of the proletariat. [4]

Mao's Little Red Book

Amid all this, Mao's Little Red Book emerged as the ideological manual which guided the masses, especially the People's Liberation Army, on the path of purge and destruction – “Every Communist must grasp the truth: Political

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power grows out of the barrel of a gun."It was the perfect encapsulation of the fears and anxieties that Mao had about liberalism and the capitalist mode of production, forming a huge part of Mao's political career and legacy. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, the copies of the Little Red Book were being printed for almost a billion people, making it the second-most printed book in the world, after the Bible.[5] Eventually, the book developed into a cult piece, a religious icon, and a ground-breaking artifact.

Propaganda Posters

In addition to this, the period of the Cultural Revolution was marked by a large number of campaigns aimed at bringing about a change in the thinking and lifestyle of the Chinese people. The streets were laced with propaganda posters, consisting of illustrations and unambiguous paintings, indicating what kind of behaviour, clothing, and hairstyle was acceptable at the moment.[6] As the streets got filled with red flags, banners, and people wearing red armbands, these propaganda posters became the sole source of information for the Chinese people, making them oblivious to what was going on outside the bubble that Mao had created. Moreover, as a part of his ways to demonise the West and its bourgeois ways of life, he vehemently brought about reforms for the educational system in China. He believed that education should be about enlightenment and not cramming, and it should be directly linked to productive labour. Thus, he aimed at reforming the education system in a way that transformed men from bourgeois capitalists to socialists and communists.[7] This led to the establishment of the peasant class as one of the earliest political symbols of new China. As a result of this, collections of Western books, art, and music were destroyed, and gangs of young people were sent away to the countryside for the purposes of getting "re-educated" by the poor and low-middle class peasants.[8]

Mao Badges

By the late 1960s, Chairman Mao's badges became the iconic objects that symbolised the Cultural Revolution. The badges were usually made of a copper alloy and consisted of a portrait of Mao alongside one of his quotations. Soon, several varieties of Mao badges were being distributed in the urban and rural areas alike and were worn by the Chinese people as an expression of loyalty to Mao.[9] This "Mao badge phenomenon" largely contributed to the entire personality cult that had emerged in the 1960s, saturating everyday life with symbolic imagery and inscriptions. To date, Mao badges, as remnants of that battle, reflect the influence of imagery on the Chinese people as an ideological motivator.

Other Forms of Art

The rhetoric of the revolution – Mao's teachings – were also presented in the form of revolutionary paintings, songs, and dances. This shows how deeply ingrained Mao's thoughts and teachings were in the everyday life of the Chinese people. As a result, music became the art form that accurately represented the emotions behind the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution.[10] One of the most notable examples is the Chinese patriotic song known as '*The East is Red*.' It was written, composed, and performed for the sole purpose of tapping into the high emotional appeal of the Chinese people – "Chairman Mao loves the people. He is our guide to building a new China." [11] In most of the songs, the anticipation of the future of the Chinese people was beautified and glorified in a lyrical fashion, ironically with a tonal foundation of Western music. Several revolutionary songs were also written by Chinese minorities; for instance, the popular song "The Great Beijing" was written by a Xinjiang composer, filled with rhythms and melodies typical of Xinjiang minority dances.[12] Currently, after over 50 years since they were originally composed and sang, these songs act as archival sources, enhancing the contemporary world's understanding and study of the Cultural Revolution.

Aftermath

Although by the mid-1970s, life in China began to gain some degree of normalcy, the shock waves of the previous decade were still felt at the highest levels of the Party and the government. In addition to all the political and social instability that was caused because of this mobilisation, the economy of China also took quite a hit. Households were exhausted, with people working 24 hours a day, and most of what was agriculturally produced was exported; the

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economic growth became exponentially slower, and the government struggled to deliver goods and services. The failure of the first 5-year plan (1953-57) and the Great Leap Forward was piled upon by the onset of the Great Chinese Famine in the latter half of the 1950s, which led to the deaths of almost 30 million Chinese. As trade relations with the Soviet Union were severed in the 1960s, China started opening up to the West, exporting most of the rice and soybeans that were produced, starving the Chinese people in the process. Due to this scarcity of goods, people were forced to fall back on traditional ways of bribery and other forms of persuasion, spiking the corruption rate within the party. Eventually, in the first half of the 1970s, attempts were made by Premier Zhou Enlai to nudge China towards some kind of stability. As a part of that, China began opening up its economy to the outside world, increasing its trade links and building on its political and cultural relations. While Mao was weary and sceptical of most of these moves, there was little he could do after being diagnosed with a fatal malignancy in 1972.[13] By the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping had emerged as the ruler of China, freeing the radicals who were imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution by Mao and giving them their political duties back. Deng created special economic zones and got rid of the commune agricultural system, opening the Chinese ports to foreign investors. Many scholars believe that these reforms in rural China played a crucial role in China's overall transition to a market economy.[14]

Conclusion

Even after over 50 years, the events of the decade between 1966 and 1976 are rarely brought up by the public or the Communist party in China. During the Cultural Revolution, 1.5 million people were killed, and millions more were imprisoned, had their property seized, were tortured, or were humiliated in some way.[15] For most who lived through the death and destruction, it is still hard to recall and confront the horrors of that decade, and so, there is usually deafening silence around it. The artefacts from that time have now become physical manifestations of the ideologies and concepts that were used by Mao to mobilise the masses, and thus, they provide us with excellent archival material to learn about the revolution. In the end, as it is popularly believed, the Cultural Revolution caused nothing more than violence and chaos. While his leadership did everything right till the summer of 1957, according to the official Chinese view, the errors of Mao's final years overshadowed his real economic achievements in the first half of the century.

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