The Cultural Revolution

Then And Mao

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Preface

I grew up in the Sixties, an era of peace, love, and flower children. I was pretty young, so I didn’t get a chance to participate in all the protesting going on. I had no draft card to burn, I wasn’t allowed to grow my hair long, and I was scared to death to drop acid, smoke a joint, or do any other kind of drugs. Not that I had an opportunity.

But there was that time I helped my siblings harbor a couple of Vietnam War deserters. They hid out in our garage loft, and my mother never had a clue. We thought that was far out. And yes, I did learn all those corny cool slogans, like “far out,” “groovy,” and, well, “cool.”

There was a lot of shit going down in the Sixties. It was a youthquake. Young people were rebelling against the establishment like never before. Hippies were living in communes, smoking joints, and turning into Jesus freaks. Old stodgy attitudes were on their way out, and being replaced by fresh new ideas that promoted free love and free thought. It was a revolution, in a sense. A cultural revolution.

Well, we weren’t the only ones. Because while we were getting in the groove in America, more than 7,000 miles away another cultural revolution was taking place in the People’s Republic of China. And it was actually called the “Cultural Revolution.” But unlike the peace, love, and flowers in our hair that we got to experience, their Cultural Revolution was some heavy shit.

It was downright scary for many people. And for good reason, because a lot of folks died.

We didn’t have much of an idea what was really happening in China at that time. Some thought that whatever it was, it must be wonderful since it was tagged with such a high-minded label: “Cultural Revolution.” Some
hippies even imagined that they liked Chairman Mao, and they carried around his little red book of quotations. But nobody had any idea what Mao was really like.

For most of us, the details of the Cultural Revolution were sketchy. And in many ways, it remains a mystery. Books have covered it, but very few have been written by those who bore the brunt of it. And the Chinese government refuses to allow access to its archives, so that investigative journalists can answer many of the questions the world has wondered about.

But in spite of this, some information has escaped. And for those diligent enough to research this strange era of Chinese history, much of the mystery can be resolved.

Some information can be found on the internet. I know, because I’ve been googling and reading. I’ve been grabbing bits of info here, and dabs of it there, analyzing it, throwing out that which seems too suspect to believe, and then putting the rest together to form the best picture I can.
I got interested in the Cultural Revolution while watching the news, and growing alarmed at all the political unrest that’s been going on lately. I’m no longer the young, rebel-at-heart of the Sixties. Now I’m in my sixties, and a long-standing member of the establishment. So when I saw people marching, rioting, burning, and looting, last summer, I got downright unsettled. I didn’t mind the marching, but the rioting, burning, and looting kind of put me in survival mode.

I’ve noticed some parallels between the 1960s and the summer of 2020. Young people were marching and calling for change. They demanded justice and equality. And they called the police the same vile names, like “pigs” and “bacon.”

But there are some differences. For instance, the cops seem to have used a lot more restraint these days, than they used on the hippies in the days of yore. The media coverage seemed to also be much kinder on protesters. And members of the establishment seemed to be rolling over like never before, throwing their support behind outrageous demands, such as the call to defund police departments.

It feels a bit unnerving for an old guy like me. And what’s even more unnerving is that those who dare speak anything even slightly critical of the Black Lives Matter movement, run the risk of losing their careers, or being targeted for violence. In fact, to say something as seemingly anodyne as “All Lives Matter” is to invite a level of censure and condemnation that borders on hysteria.

And I don’t remember the iconoclasm we’re witnessing these days. The toppling of statues, including those of Grant and Lincoln, is foreign to my memory of the Sixties. It makes no sense. It seems like madness.

But then again, so did the Cultural Revolution of China. This is why I’ve turned to if for answers. I’m seeing sinister parallels. I’m seeing political correctness taken to the point of persecutorial nitpickiness. I’m seeing intolerance on the part of those who demand tolerance. I’m seeing the opposite of peace, love, and flowers, yet in the name of peace, love, and flowers.

It’s piqued my curiosity. And so I’ve turned to China’s past to learn about our potential future.

So far, I think we can feel grateful we’ve never experienced a movement nearly as dangerous and deadly as China’s Cultural Revolution.
Although we seem to be heading down that road, thankfully we’ve only made it a short distance.

This book was originally intended to be a short series of posts on my blog, Chasing Unicorns. But it turned into a series of posts about as long as one of Marco Polo’s famous journeys. Yeah, I guess maybe I got a little carried away. In fact I got so carried away that I went all the way back to the birth of Mao Zedong, in 1893, and to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

So this book will teach the reader a thing or two, not just about the Cultural Revolution, but also about the life of Mao Zedong, the Chinese Civil War, China in general, and much more.

I hope the reader will see what I mean, when I draw parallels from what happened in China to what’s starting to happen now in the U.S.A. We seem to be going through a bit of our own Cultural Revolution, and I want us to learn from China’s tragedy.

I believe that no matter how wonderful the message and cause may seem, there is danger in any movement. The ideals of today can quickly morph into disasters tomorrow. I think that regardless of how much we may admire a cause, it’s important to remain wary, lest we get so caught up in the crusade that we do things we regret later.

It can be easy to harm others in the passionate heat of the “greater good.” And it’s common for people to create monsters that turn on them and devour them. We must be careful.

The Cultural Revolution stands as a prime example of the dangers of any social movement. As our country continues through its current era of turmoil, I hope people will be circumspect enough to learn from history, and avoid taking things too far. Only then can we make progress without wounds, scars, and backlash erasing every benefit activists may struggle so hard to achieve.

--Tippy Gnu, February, 2021
Millions with a question mark. That’s one way to describe the Cultural Revolution. Historians can’t agree on how many died as a result of it, but a few low estimates actually go below a million, to hundreds of thousands.

Most estimates seem to range from 1.5 million to as high as 20 million. That’s quite a spread of tormented souls calling from the grave for accountability. We’ll never know anything close to the exact toll, because many deaths went unreported, or were covered up by local authorities.

Also, China did a piss-poor job of keeping accurate statistical records at that time, and the Chinese government has not allowed scholastic access to what archives it maintains, concerning this tragic event. But from what many scholars have gleaned from the evidence they’ve been able to access, it seems millions were killed in China.

And millions more died abroad, because the Chinese exported their Cultural Revolution to the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia. With Chinese funding, Pol Pot and his supporters murdered nearly a quarter of Cambodia’s population, or 1.5 to 2 million people. Those targeted for death were considered to be enemies of the communist revolution, similar to those targeted in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Beyond those who died, millions more were left crippled for life, mostly due to beatings from Red Guards. Millions were imprisoned on baseless, trumped up charges, and forced to endure hard labor. And millions lost their livelihoods, and were unceremoniously fired from their posts in universities, government, and even the Communist Party itself.
Nobody of any level of importance, prestige, or position of authority was safe during the Cultural Revolution. Top Party officials, including the president of China, Liu Shaoqi, were arrested, beaten, and imprisoned. Top generals were sacked and publicly humiliated, and sometimes murdered.

But low level authorities were also targeted. Teachers, mayors, landowners, supervisors of workers, heads of small departments, and anyone else who rose even slightly above the average prestige of a peasant, found themselves vulnerable to attack.

Civil war broke out in parts of China, resulting in even more deaths. A red hysteria swept the nation, pitting pro-Maoist factions against each other. Violence broke out everywhere. The hysteria that sought to persecute so-called counterrevolutionaries was so widespread, that every Chinese citizen was in some way affected by the Cultural Revolution.

For ten years this revolution ground on, until it finally ended with Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, and the arrest of the Gang of Four. In fact, the Cultural Revolution was instigated by Communist Party Chairman Mao, and facilitated by the Gang of Four, which included Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing.

But why? Why would Mao do this to his own people? The Cultural Revolution set China back economically, intellectually, and politically for many years. It weakened China in many ways, though some have argued that there were some benefits. What was Mao’s motivation? Those meager benefits at the cost of all those lives?

To understand the Cultural Revolution, it helps to go back in history to the events that led up to it. It helps to study the life history of Mao Zedong, and it’s also useful to learn about the rise of communism in mainland China.

We’ll start with Mao first, and follow his inimical rise to absolute power, his fall from power, and his diabolical scheme to regain power through the complex machinations of the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter 1: Buddhism and Beatings

What would you do if you knew that the child you were raising would become the most prolific murderer of all time? If you were Mao Zedong’s father, Mao Yichang, I’m guessing you’d kill him. But if you were his mother, Wen Qimei, you might try harder to turn him into a good person.

I don’t know if Mao’s father actually tried to kill him, but at times it may have seemed like it. Mao Yichang was a cruel man, and a strict disciplinarian, and he often beat his son severely. Wen, on the other hand, was a practicing Buddhist. She tried her best to protect her son from the cruel hand of his father.

Wen used the teachings of Buddhism to try to convince the elder Mao to temper his rage and go easy on their son. Sadly, she was largely unsuccessful. She also used Buddha’s teachings to convert Mao to Buddhism. This may have been her best hope, but eventually it too fell flat, because when Mao was a teenager he left the religion.

He was born on December 26, 1893, into a life of privilege and hardship. His family was rich, and from that came the privilege. But his father was mean, and from that came the hardship. They lived the peasant farmer life, but as relatively rich peasants, in a rural area of Hunan Province, in China.
Mao became an avid reader, between beatings and work on the farm. And from his reading he cultivated a political consciousness. He found a good cause to fight for. Perhaps the Buddhism he learned from his mother inclined him toward finding a good cause. But if so, then maybe his father’s beatings inclined him toward fighting for his cause using the most sadistic means possible.

Revolution was in the air, in Mao’s young life. In fact, revolution would hang in the air throughout his life. In his young days, the Qing dynasty held power over China. But it was tenuous power, corrupted and weakened by foreign influence, and left vulnerable to attack by those who sought political change.

And many in China did seek such change.
Chapter 2
The Boxer Rebellion

Mao was six years old when the Boxer Rebellion broke out, in the year 1900. He probably had no interest in it at that time, but it must have influenced him later in life as he became more politically aware.

At that time, China was in danger of being broken apart by foreign imperialism. It was loosely held together by the Qing dynasty, but popular support for this dynasty was weak, due to its ineffectiveness at resisting foreigners.

These foreigners included Americans, British, French, Germans, Italians, Russians, and Japanese. Yes, us imperialist pigs were at it again, messing around with a part of the world that couldn’t resist our bullying. And we did things that left many Chinese feeling angry and upset.

The British and French were the first to mess with China. They forced the Chinese to accept the import and sale of opium. Before the British came along, there was no drug problem in China, and opium was practically unheard of. But now, widespread addiction ravaged the populace, leading to many personal and family tragedies.

Two Opium Wars had been fought in the 19th century by the Qing dynasty against the British and French, in order to rid the nation of the opium trade. But they were defeated by superior military technology. This greatly weakened the Chinese government, and made the country more vulnerable to foreign influence.

The Chinese had proudly followed three different religions for
thousands of years, prior to the arrival of foreigners. These were Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. But such faiths appalled Christian foreigners, and they insisted upon establishing missions to convert the Chinese to Christ and save their souls. This was highly resented by traditionalist Chinese.

And the foreigners had greedy eyes out for the ownership of territory. All of the foreigners competed against each other, jockeying for position, while planning to carve China up into separate colonies. Many Chinese felt wary and worried about this, and wanted to avoid being at the mercy of foreign rule.

A resistance organization formed in North China, called the “Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists.” It was a spiritual and martial arts movement started by ordinary villagers, that practiced magic and propagated the belief that their magic could make them impervious to bullets and other weapons.

They called themselves Yihetuan, or “the militia united in righteousness.” But the foreigners just called them Boxers, which was the British term for anyone who practiced martial arts. In June 1900, the Boxers spontaneously rose up against foreign legations in Beijing. This would become known as the Boxer Rebellion.

These fuckers meant business. Their goal was to exterminate all foreigners in Beijing, as well as the rest of China. And they massacred thousands of foreigners, including many missionary families, and nearly succeeded with their rebellion. But they were finally driven back when reinforcements arrived to rescue the remaining besieged foreigners.

It’s certain they would have succeeded had they actually been impervious to bullets, as they imagined they were. But they weren’t, and many died from gunshot wounds. Many more were rounded up and executed after the rebellion was put down.
Boxers executed in neck towers, where stones beneath their feet were slowly removed, causing strangulation.

But although they failed, the rebellion helped solidify Chinese nationalism. It encouraged would-be revolutionaries, and signaled the beginning of the end of thousands of years of imperial Chinese rule.
Chapter 3
Consequentialism

Revolutionaries knew they couldn’t count on the Qing dynasty to keep foreigners out, so they plotted and planned to overthrow it. And they debated among themselves what to do with China if they succeeded at revolution.

The prevailing argument was to keep China whole, combining all its many ethnicities into a united Chinese nation. This argument was known as Chinese nationalism. And as Mao became aware of Chinese nationalism, he decided to support this view. He thought it was a good cause.

That good cause would soon see battle. In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution broke out against the Qing dynasty, and Mao took up arms to fight for it. But he never saw any action. The last emperor of China was overthrown on February 12, 1912, and the Republic of China was created. And so, after six months of quiet revolutionary service, it was back to civilian life for young Mao, without ever having fired a shot.

Now what the hell could he do? He was out of good causes. So at eighteen years old, he decided to pursue his education. But this didn’t
work out so well. Turns out, Mao wasn’t so good in school. He dropped out of a police academy, a soap production school, a law school, an economics school, and a middle school.

Apparently, Mao was too damned independent for classroom learning. He discovered that he’d have to go it alone, and pursue a self-education.

So he spent a lot of time in libraries, studying books on classical liberalism. This is how he discovered the philosophy of Consequentialism. Consequentialism is the ethical theory that the consequence’s of one’s conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgment about the rightness or wrongness of the conduct. In other words, the end justifies the means.

This was right up his alley, and with no teacher to dissuade him by pointing out the drawbacks, Mao embraced Consequentialism wholeheartedly. Consequentialism gave him the excuse to do whatever he wanted, just as long as he could justify that it was for the greater good.

He liked the idea of doing whatever he wanted. He had a cruel streak, which he acquired from his father. He was a young man in a lot of pain, as many young men are. In fact we all suffer, whether young or old, male or female. But how we deal with our pain and suffering differs from person to person.

Had Mao stuck with his mother’s Buddhism, he might have learned how to deal with his pain without being cruel to others. Buddhism teaches that suffering is caused by craving, and that by letting go of craving, one frees oneself from suffering. Buddhism prescribes an Eight-fold path for letting go of craving, that involves following precepts and disciplining the mind through meditation.

Apparently, Mao didn’t care much for the Eight-fold path, and so he chose a different path. And it seems it was the path of his father. And this path was the path of causing pain to relieve pain.

Mao’s father relieved his pain by beating him. In this manner, he let off pent-up steam that had been building up inside, and found relief. This is not an uncommon way to handle pain. Many people have learned that letting off steam by being abusive to others, helps them to feel better.

But letting off steam can lead to more problems. People who are abused sometimes rebel and retaliate. At the very least, they become distant, leading to a sense of loneliness in the abuser’s relationships. And property can be destroyed when one flies into a rage, so it can be
expensive.

Another problem is that letting off steam can become addictive. It feels pleasurable, which can lead to letting off steam more and more often. Also, causing small amounts of pain can get old, with a loss in the pleasurable effect. And so one must progress to crueler and more sadistic methods to achieve the same enjoyment.

But letting off steam seems to have been the path for dealing with pain that Mao chose. It was the path laid out by his father, and when Mao killed millions, he was merely following in his father’s footsteps. His father would likely have done the same if he’d had the opportunity. But Mao did find the opportunity. And he found it through pursuing a good cause, and by using Consequentialism to justify the means with the end.
With Consequentialism firmly ensconced in his psyche, all Mao now needed was another good cause. A cause he could fight for, that would justify the infliction of pain. He already had nationalism, and that was becoming an issue again, due to the rise of warlord kingdoms in China. But it wasn’t enough for someone who wants an excuse to fight and hurt others. He needed more.

He became a student/teacher at the First Normal School of Changsha, which was regarded as the best school in his home province of Hunan. And there he found a cause to fight for. He organized protests against school rules.

But then one day he discovered another cause. He joined a society that studied and debated the ideas of Chen Duxiu. Chen was very liberal, and later became one of the first Communists of China. This led to Mao traveling north to Beijing, at age 24, where he took on a job assisting the librarian at Peking University. This librarian’s name was Li Dazhao. Li would also become an early Communist.

Communism traces its beginnings in China to the May Fourth Movement, which began on May 4, 1919. This was a series of protests and strikes against the Treaty of Versailles, a treaty which ended World War I. This treaty proposed to award territory in the Shandong province of China to Japan. Japan had taken Shandong from the Germans in 1914, near the start of World War I.
The Chinese were outraged by this proposal. Shandong is an important and strategic coastal province that juts out into the Yellow Sea. It’s the birthplace of Confucius, and holds special historical and cultural meaning to the Chinese.

Due to popular pressure from the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese ambassador to France refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, and this necessitated a separate peace treaty with Germany. It was settled in 1922, with the Nine-Power Treaty. This treaty returned Shandong to China, but allowed Japan to maintain its economic dominance of the province, and of its railway.

This was mostly a symbolic victory for China, as the Nine-Power Treaty was virtually impossible to enforce. But the May Fourth Movement, itself, marked a major shift in Chinese intellectual thought. Intellectuals became disillusioned with the Western democratic model, which they believed had let them down, and many shifted radically to the left.

Intellectuals who were already leftists, such as Mao’s friends, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, began to seriously study Marxism. In 1921, they both co-founded the Communist Party of China. These two Marxists greatly influenced and radicalized Mao, so that he too began to take Marxism seriously.
Mao soon moved back to his home province of Hunan, where he began writing articles for a liberal magazine. But the governor of Hunan, Zhang Jingyao, was no liberal, and was not amused. He tried to suppress his writings, and this gave Mao a new cause to fight for. Revolution. Mao locked horns with the governor, and agitated for his overthrow. He organized a general strike, which was successful, and from that he managed to secure some concessions from Governor Zhang.

But Mao was a wily man and he realized that victory is not always a safe thing. He became fearful of reprisal from Zhang, and worried he wouldn’t be able to win anymore fights against him. So he fled back north to Beijing.

To his surprise, he discovered that he’d become something of a hero to local revolutionaries in Beijing, who’d been reading his writings. This gave Mao an idea. He realized he could use his hero status to make his fight against Zhang more winnable. So he began soliciting assistance from his admirers, for overthrowing Zhang.

Around this time, the famous revolutionary, Sun Yat-Sen, had established the Kuomintang (KMT). This was an armed political party that sought to establish a united, nationalist government in China. The Chinese government had devolved into rulership by warlords, that had divided China into something that resembled a loosely organized network of small kingdoms. Sun Yat-Sen founded the KMT in 1919, to resist this kind of rule, and unify the country.

Mao was introduced to General Tan Yankai, of the KMT, and learned he was plotting to overthrow Zhang. This dovetailed nicely with Mao’s own cause, so he assisted Tan by organizing students. And together, with Tan’s troops and Mao’s students, Zhang was forced to flee, in June 1920.

This was Mao’s first big success at revolution.

Now Mao had cachet. He was rewarded for his efforts with an appointment to a lucrative job as headmaster of a school. He got married, but unlike most people in such a cushy situation, he decided not to settle down. No, he just wasn’t satisfied. Pain is never-ending, and so Mao looked for more causes to fight for, where he could enjoy letting off steam and making others feel his pain.
Chapter 5
Mao and Chiang

When Mao was 27, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao established the Communist Party of China (CPC). Mao must have decided this was a good cause that could result in a lot of great fights. He soon set up a branch in Hunan, and on July 23, 1921, attended the first session of the National Congress of the CPC. There were only 12 other attendees, so Mao was in on this good cause early on.

And it really was a good cause at the time. Peasants and workers had endured centuries of repression and frequent famine in China. Large landholders and a few other wealthy plutocrats controlled almost all the means of production. The middle class was small. As a general rule you were either very poor or very rich, in an economy that was stacked against ordinary citizens.

The one percent were highly resented by the 99%. Mao sensed this, and smelled blood. He knew when a fight was brewing.

He got busy. He founded the Self-Study University, that made revolutionary literature available to readers. He joined a campaign to fight illiteracy, while ensuring that literacy students read his radical sentiments. But most importantly, he helped labor unions organize strikes.

He led a famous and successful coal miners strike, with the help of Liu Shaoqi and Li Lisan. But they may have come to regret helping him, later in life. That’s because Liu would later become President of the People’s Republic of China, and die as a result of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Li Lisan would also fall victim, being tortured by Red Guards, and officially dying of “suicide” in 1967. No one was immune to Mao’s sadism, not
even his long-time friends and allies.

At that time, the Kuomintang (KMT) accepted all political persuasions into its ranks, whether left or right. The KMT was essentially Socialist in a strange, undefinable way. But it was not Communist. The goal of the KMT, under the leadership of Sun Yat-Sen, was simply to unite China, while allowing political differences to be resolved through debate and democracy. And so Communists were welcome.

The CPC aligned itself with Sun Yat-Sen’s KMT, and Mao managed to be elected to the KMT’s Central Executive Committee. Mao was an enthusiastic supporter of this organization, and both the left and right factions managed to work together in harmony. Mao and others must have sensed that a united front offered the best chance for defeating the warlords that kept their country divided.

But in 1925, Sun Yat-Sen died of liver cancer at the age of 58. Unfortunately, Sun’s policy of unity died along with him. General Chiang Kai-shek, who had helped Sun establish the KMT, took over.

Chiang was quite a bit like Mao. He was a man in a lot of pain, who employed cruelty to deal with it. And perhaps less like Mao, he had a bad temper and was known for flying into rages to let off steam.

But one big thing set him apart from Mao. He did not like communism. So as soon as he came to power, he moved to marginalize the KMT’s left-wing faction. Disunity and fighting was Chiang’s way of going about things. But if he was looking for a fight, he didn’t get one. At least, not this time. Mao and the CPC were not aware of Chiang’s anti-communist sentiments, and so they still supported him. They mistakenly assumed he was pro-communist, because he was anti-capitalist. So they did not tangle.

But soon Mao and the CPC would regret their support.
Chapter 6
Civil War

In 1926, Chiang Kai-shek set off for North China to make revolution. This would become his famous Northern Expedition, and it turned into one hell of a fight. Chiang attacked and defeated warlords, and fought hard and successfully, taking province after province while uniting much of China.

But there was one unexpected result of Chiang’s successes that left the right-wing leaders of his Kuomintang (KMT) feeling unsettled. Peasants were feeling encouraged by Chiang’s victories, and began rising up, attacking and killing wealthy landowners. Senior right-wing members of the KMT didn’t like this because they, too, were wealthy landowners. But left-wing members were quite satisfied and encouraged by this development, as communists don’t care much for landowners. They thought it was just dandy. This led to friction between the left and right wings of the KMT.

In March 1927, while Chiang was still out fighting warlords, left-wingers of the KMT, from Shanghai, tried to strip Chiang of his power and install a left-winger in his place. It seemed Chiang had a new fight on his hands. An internal power struggle against Communists. So in April 1927, he returned from his Northern Expedition and marched on Shanghai. There he viciously turned on the left-wing and arranged for criminal gang members to slaughter 12,000 Communists in what became known as the Shanghai Massacre.
Chiang then began a cruel campaign of purging Communists and Communist sympathizers all over China, in what was called the White Terror. His forces loyal to him were merciless. Over the next year more than 300,000 people were murdered across China, in anti-Communist suppression campaigns. Some historians actually put the number of dead in the millions.

Chiang was famously quoted to have said that he would rather mistakenly kill 1,000 innocent people, rather than allow one Communist to escape.

Obviously, Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, and the leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC), had greatly misjudged Chiang. They had previously assumed he was sympathetic to communism, and Chiang’s picture had even been hung on walls in public places throughout the Soviet Union. Of course, those pictures came down quickly, and Stalin stopped supporting the KMT.

Chiang Kai-shek was a hard man to read, concerning his political philosophies. Maybe he was a little crazy. He was against big business and capitalism, but he was also against communism. He wasn’t really a fascist, because he never preached the superiority of the Chinese race. But he often behaved like a dictator, even while in theory, trying to establish democracy.
The confusion concerning Chiang’s vision worked against the communists, initially, because it took them by surprise. But it would eventually lead to his downfall and defeat by Mao, and force him to retreat to Taiwan.

The KMT’s murders and massacres during the White Terror had decimated the CPC, reducing its members from 25,000 to 10,000. This marked the split of the left and right within the KMT, and the beginning of a bloody, bitter, and painful civil war in China that would endure for more than 20 years.

The Communists that remained were expelled from the KMT. They were demoralized, and on the ropes. But Mao had an idea. He’d taken notice of the peasant uprisings that followed Chiang’s Northern Expedition, and he realized that peasants had a lot of potential as a fighting force.

Soon the CPC organized an army of peasants, which they called the Red Army, to battle Chiang, and Mao was appointed commander-in-chief. At last an opportunity arrived for Mao to get some blood on his hands.

In August 1927, Mao sent a battalion to attack Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province. They were initially successful, but after about five days, KMT forces drove the Communists out.

Then on September 7, 1927, Mao led four regiments to attack Changsha in his home province of Hunan, where the school he had taught at was located. But one of his regiments deserted to the KMT and attacked his own army. Mao fled in defeat to the Jinggang mountains in Jiangxi Province, taking with him about a thousand survivors.

But he’d tasted his first blood. And it might have been his last, because the CPC didn’t like Mao’s inclination for fighting. They criticized what they called his “military opportunism,” and they expelled him from the Party.

But fighters like Mao can’t be rid of that easily. Rather than pack his bags and go home, Mao simply chose to ignore his Communist comrades.

He moved his troops to Jinggangshan City and set up a base of operations. There he won the support of nearby villages and set up a self-governing state. He garnered the support of peasants and began confiscating land from rich landlords. The landlords were executed, giving Mao more of a taste of blood.
He built his forces to 1,800 strong, and established strict disciplinary rules for his recruits. The CPC saw all this and realized Mao wasn’t going anywhere soon. They grudgingly readmitted him to the Party, and put him to work fighting the KMT.
Mao turned out to be a scrappy military leader, but he was not very experienced. It was a tough struggle. Over the next few years his forces usually lost to the Kuomintang (KMT), but during this time of conflict in the Jinggang mountains he learned many lessons on warfare. Especially guerrilla warfare. He often learned the hard way, through defeat, but at least he learned.

One of Mao’s famous quotes about guerrilla warfare is, “When the enemy advances, we retreat. When the enemy halts and encamps, we harass him. When the enemy seeks to avoid battle, we attack. Whenever the enemy retreats, we pursue.” Mao eventually won respect as a genius at guerrilla warfare, and his relentless tactics have been emulated by Marxist forces throughout the world, including the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War.

While Mao fought in the Jinggang mountains, Chiang Kai-shek pressed on with his military campaign against the warlords ruling China. He was highly successful, and by December, 1928, he forced Manchuria to capitulate, and became ruler of a unified China.

Well, mostly unified. He still had Mao Zedong to deal with. Mao and his troops struggled through one defeat after another, with few victories. They endured food shortages and other privations. By 1929, his numbers had increased to 2,800 fighters. This was too many people to keep alive, so in January of that year he realized he had to move to an area where he could feed his troops better. He evacuated the Jinggang mountains and headed to the southwestern region of Jiangxi province.
Li Lisan, the leader of the CPC, began quarreling with Mao. Li thought Mao and his unsophisticated peasant army could not succeed, and ordered him to disband his forces. Mao refused. Then Moscow decided to replace Li with 28 Soviet-educated Chinese Communists, to head the CPC. But the ever-rebellious Mao would not accept their authority, either.

The renegade Mao created a provisional Communist government in Southwestern Jiangxi, in 1930. Soon after, a tragedy befell him. Karma, perhaps, for all the fighting he had instigated. In November of that year, his wife and sister were captured by the KMT and beheaded.

Mao was a bigamist, having married another woman six months earlier. Still, this death of the mother of his children must have left him in a particularly nasty mood, and it was no time to trifle with him. He was very likely itching for a fight. And a fight is exactly what he got.

In December, just one month after Mao’s wife and sister lost their heads, troops known as the Futian battalion mutinied, accusing Mao of being a counterrevolutionary, and of plotting to surrender to the KMT army. They occupied the town of Yongyang, raised banners proclaiming, “Down with Mao Zedong!” and they appealed to the CPC for help.

This was fucking bullshit as far as Mao was concerned. But it was a delicate situation, requiring delicate strategy to deal with this internal rebellion. In June 1931, Mao came up with a “delicate” idea for handling the dissenters. It was actually quite a cruel idea, which of course he particularly liked. And so it became a strategy he would implement in one form or another, occasionally throughout the rest of his life.

He invited the rebels to a meeting, where they could discuss their differences and try to come to a resolution. 200 troops accepted the invitation and showed up. But as soon as they sat down, troops loyal to
Mao disarmed them and executed them. After this, dissenters all over Jianxi were rounded up, tortured and executed. This became known as the Futian Incident, and by the time the bloodbath was over, two to three thousand dissenters had been slaughtered by Mao’s loyalists.
Chapter 8
The Encirclements

Mao’s “delicate” handling of the Futian Incident did not impress the Communist Party of China (CPC). Mao was stripped of his leadership of the Red Army, and General Zhou Enlai took over. But although this might seem like a setback, it turned out very well for the murderous Mao. General Zhou became Mao’s most loyal follower, and a formidable partner in the civil war and Communist revolution.

Zhou would later serve as Premier of China, from 1949 to 1976. He was politically astute enough to survive most of the Cultural Revolution, but a son and daughter were not so lucky. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, had them arrested, tortured, and killed in 1968. So even Mao’s most loyal follower would eventually feel the sting of Mao’s pain.

Mao still retained some power, and was named Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars. Meanwhile, the CPC moved its headquarters to Jiangxi, as they considered it to be a secure location. Soon, the CPC declared Southwestern Jiangxi an independent Communist state,
calling it the Soviet Republic of China.

But Chiang Kai-shek wasn’t having it. He sent Kuomintang (KMT) troops to Jiangxi and encircled the region, with the object of annihilating the Red Army. The Red Army was vastly outnumbered by the KMT, so Mao wanted to resort to guerrilla tactics. But Zhou Enlai was the new leader, and he preferred conventional warfare. He got his way, and surprisingly, Zhou was very successful.

Zhou defeated two encirclement campaigns, much to Chiang’s dismay and wroth. Finally, Chiang decided to personally lead the KMT in more encirclement campaigns. But Zhou defeated Chiang also, and sent him and the KMT packing.

In September 1931, the Empire of Japan invaded Manchuria, in northeast China, in what some historians refer to as the beginning of World War II. This saved the Soviet Republic of China from future attacks, as Chiang now had to focus on resisting the Japanese.

He left the Red Army alone, and this gave it a chance to expand the size of the Soviet Republic of China, until it included three million people. Peace prevailed, and for the next few years, Mao was able to implement a land reform program.

Then in 1934, Chiang decided that the Communists posed a greater threat than the Japanese, and he returned his focus on defeating the CPC of Jiangxi. He launched his Fifth Encirclement Campaign, and things were about to get very hairy.

The KMT laid siege on Jiangxi, cutting it off from the outside world, using concrete and barbed wire barriers. This was a blockhouse strategy, recommended by German military advisers, and it was highly effective. The Red Army found it impossible to breach these barriers.

The KMT also beefed up its troop numbers to a half million, vastly outnumbering the Red Army. Then they bombed the hell out of the Red Army, using military aircraft. It was overwhelming, and Zhou found he could not defend against the onslaught, regardless of the conventional warfare tactics that he tried.

The Jiangxi Soviet shrank further and further in size, against the slowly advancing Nationalist Army. Red Army casualties piled up and troop strength weakened. Supplies of food and medicine ran low. The situation for the Communists grew desperate. Finally, in October 1934,
after 13 months of futile resistance, the CPC decided to evacuate.
Chapter 9
The Long March

5,000 Communist soldiers and 15,000 Communist cadres broke through the Kuomintang (KMT) line on October 14, 1934, and headed to southern Hunan Province. This began what would famously become known as the “Long March.” And it was indeed, very long.

It was a grueling and deadly ordeal of thousands of miles, which would later be mythologized and exaggerated to seem even more grueling, deadly, and long than it actually was. But even without exaggeration, the Long March was a heroic effort that galvanized the Communist Party.

By December 1st, 50,000 had already been lost, through military casualty or desertion. They encountered heavy fighting, crossed rivers, and pushed tenaciously onward, finally arriving in Guizhou Province in January, 1935. There they were able to rest for a little while, catch their breath, and hold an important bureaucratic meeting to discuss their shitty situation.

This meeting is known as the Zunyi Conference. In this conference, Mao got involved in another fight. It was a power struggle over how they’d gotten into this mess, between some hand-picked leaders chosen by Stalin, and Mao and Zhou Enlai.

Zhou took responsibility for having made poor decisions, and criticized himself in front of the other leaders. But Stalin’s men did not take any responsibility. Mao, himself, had no responsibility, since he had been stripped of most leadership positions two years earlier. So he was in a position to criticize. And he went after Stalin’s men, and managed to have
them demoted.

Zhou put his support behind Mao, and the two managed to emerge victorious. Mao emerged as the undisputed leader of the Communist Party. He was elected to Chairman of the Politburo, and leader of both the CPC and the Red Army. Zhou emerged as the number two leader.

They would both retain these #1 and #2 positions for the rest of their lives. Well, except for Mao, during the five years or so leading up to the Cultural Revolution. Stalin felt dismayed by all of this, but he grudgingly decided to support Mao.

Now Mao and Zhou were running the show. They knew the Red Army couldn’t stay where they were for very long, because Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT Army were after them. So the question put to Mao was, which way to go? North? East? South? West?

Mao decided on north by west. They would head west first, to evade the KMT. Then they would head north, until they reached Shaanxi Province in northern China. Shaanxi was near Japanese occupied territory. Mao reasoned that by fighting the imperialist Japanese forces, the Communists would win over the trust of the people, and could turn them against the KMT, who had abandoned their fight against the Japanese.

But China is a big country, and Shaanxi was a long, long way off from Guizhou Province, especially by foot. Mao led his troops through mountain passes. They fought their way over bridges. And when Chiang flew in KMT troops to meet him, he managed to outmaneuver the KMT and continue northward.

At one point, his forces encountered 50,000 CPC troops, led by General Zhang Guotao. Zhang urged Mao to head west to avoid capture, but Mao was stubborn in his direction north. The two forces parted ways. And onward Mao’s troops forged, through quagmires where they were attacked by Manchu tribesmen, and where famine and disease took the lives of many Red Army soldiers.

Finally they straggled into Shaanxi, 370 days and 5,600 miles later. Or so the propaganda claims. Some historians say they only traveled about three to four thousand miles, and the rest is exaggeration. But even so, it was a long, arduous, and costly journey. Only 7,000 to 8,000 of the original 100,000 managed to survive this march.
The Long March came at a tremendous cost to the Red Army and the Communist Party. But it was a moral victory for Mao. He became a celebrated hero, and this further secured his position as undisputed leader of the Party.

By the spring of 1936, Mao’s forces had increased to 15,000 strong. He began a recruitment and training operation, and by January, 1937, he was able to send guerrilla fighters into Japanese occupied territory to attack and harass imperial troops.
Chapter 10
The Crazy, Wacky Xi’an Incident

In 1936, the Chinese civil war took a strange twist. Joseph Stalin came up with the cockamamied idea of the Communist Party of China (CPC) uniting with the Kuomintang (KMT) to take on their common enemy, the Japanese. Mao was cool to this idea, but he depended a lot on Stalin for help, and so on May 5, 1936, he humored Stalin by telegramming this proposition to Chiang Kai-shek. But Chiang predictably ignored the telegram. Those two hated each other.

Their refusal to set aside their differences to take on their common enemy led to the crazy, wacky Xi’an Incident.

General Zhang Xueliang (also known as Chang Hsueh-liang) was the main protagonist in this Incident. He had been the commander of KMT forces in Manchuria when the Japanese invaded in 1931. He knew his army was no match against the imperial forces, so he had retreated without a fight, practically handing over Manchuria to Japan.

But Zhang wanted Manchuria back, and he resented the fact that Chiang had decided to leave the Japanese alone, and instead focus on making war with Mao and his Communists. He zealously wanted the civil war to end, so that the Japanese could be driven out of Manchuria. It meant a lot to him. He’d been criticized for his retreat from Manchuria, and he had his honor to regain.

The CPC knew this, and so they approached Zhang and made a secret deal with him, in June 1936. This agreement involved Zhang overthrowing Chiang, then uniting the KMT with the CPC, against Japan.

On December 12, 1936, Zhang and another KMT general named Yang
Hucheng managed to pull off the impossible. Chiang had flown into Xi’an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, to coordinate a major assault on the Red Army. He headquartered in a cabin, where his security was not very strong.

Zhang and Yang seized upon the soft target this presented, and they had their bodyguards abduct Chiang, in what became one of the craziest kidnappings in history. They held Chiang against his will, but they did not demand money for his ransom, as one would expect from most kidnappers. Instead, they demanded that the KMT end their civil war against the CPC.

Chiang held out for a few weeks, refusing to meet the ransom demand. But when he realized his life was at stake, he finally struck a deal with Zhou Enlai of the CPC. He would go ahead and unite his forces with the CPC, and stop fighting them. In return, Chiang would be allowed to live, and could return back to the nation’s capital of Nanjing.

Zhang’s supporters urged him to execute Chiang, but he refused. A deal was a deal, and he had his honor to protect. So instead, this kidnapper did the honorable thing and returned Chiang safely to Nanjing.

But as soon as Chiang arrived back in Nanjing, he had Zhang and Yang arrested. Zhang spent the next 50 years under a loose form of house arrest, first in mainland China and then in Taiwan. Yang was imprisoned, and then executed in 1949.
Chapter 11
Victory

Chiang Kai-shek may have been a cruel man, but he did have a sense of honor. So he kept to his word and united the Kuomintang (KMT) with the Communist Party of China (CPC), in a joint effort to oust their invaders. This was very popular with the Chinese people. They were incensed at the brutality of the Japanese, and were eager to join in the fight. As a result, Mao’s Red Army swelled from 50,000 to a massive 500,000.

During the fighting that ensued, Mao sat at his base and wrote books for his many troops. These books taught them guerrilla warfare tactics, introduced them to Marxist theory, and outlined a vision for a glorious Communist future in China. Mao never missed an opportunity to propagandize his “good cause.”

In August 1940, the United Front of the KMT and CPC slammed the Japanese, killing 20,000 enemy troops, disrupting rail lines, and retaking a coal mine. But after this encouraging joint success, the two sides began to clash. They skirmished against each other in one incident after another. Officially, they remained allies, but in reality they were competitors, jockeying for position, seeking the most advantageous situation for the inevitable resumption of civil war.
Soon after the Japanese surrender to Allied forces, an effort was made to reconcile the differences between Mao and Chiang. They talked and talked and yakked and yakked. And after 43 days of negotiations, they finally signed the Double Tenth Agreement on 10/10/1945. In this agreement, the CPC acknowledged the KMT as the legitimate government, while the KMT in return recognized the CPC as a legitimate opposition party.

You’d think the two sides had finally figured out how to get along. But all the heartwarming Kumbaya and group hugs didn’t last long. The two sides soon began to clash in small military campaigns and shootouts that gradually intensified. Finally, in the summer of 1946, Chiang launched an all-out attack on the Communists, and the Chinese Civil War was back on.

The Red Army had been renamed the People’s Liberation Army, or PLA. American diplomats who had been to China knew that the CPC was less corrupt, stronger, and more popular than the KMT. But their advice fell on deaf ears in Washington, and the U.S. government backed Chiang Kai-shek with military assistance in his fight against the Communists.
But Chiang was such an enigma, he found it hard to gain support within his own country. Nobody could figure out his political vision. By this time, everyone knew he was against communism. But he also seemed to be against capitalism. He would crush Communists with one hand, while attacking and confiscating the wealth of Capitalists with the other. But he pushed for government control of industry, so perhaps it’s best to describe him as an odd form of Socialist.

His main support came from gangsters, who he used as muscle for extorting money from Capitalists, in order to fund his military expeditions. For this reason, corruption ran rampant throughout the KMT, and he had weak popular support.

But Mao was different. His political vision was clear to everyone, because everyone knew he was a Communist through and through. And he and the PLA enjoyed wide popular support from the underclass, the downtrodden, the peasants of China. In their eyes, Mao was going to level the playing field, destroy the overclass, and equalize wealth among all classes. And they were all for it.

In August 1945, shortly before the Japanese surrender, the Soviet Army had invaded and occupied Manchuria. After the war ended, the Soviets delayed their departure until Mao’s PLA could sneak in after them and take over the territory. This enabled the PLA to confiscate a large supply of arms left behind by the Japanese.

This gave Mao a huge boon. And Mao meant business. He was damned determined to use those arms to kill lots of people while winning this civil war.

In fact, Mao is famously quoted as saying, “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” At least he said this honestly. For him, the end justified the means, and this quote was fair warning to anyone expecting anything other than ruthless violence.

In May 1948, Mao ordered the siege of the city of Changchun, in Manchuria. His forces encircled the city and prevented food from entering. Civilians began to starve, and desperately attempted to leave this besieged
metropolis, but the PLA prevented their escape. Mao wanted them to stay in place so they would consume any remaining food that KMT forces would otherwise eat.

They did eat the food, rending their cupboards bare. But they still were not allowed to leave. And after five hungry months of siege, at least 160,000 civilians had starved to death.

A regiment of the KMT defected to the Communist side, and attacked another regiment of the KMT that had been receiving favorable treatment in the distribution of food. This resulted in the capitulation and surrender of KMT forces in Changchun. Thus, the end worked out well for the PLA, but the means were ghastly.

Soon after the fall of Changchun, the remaining Manchurian cities fell like dominoes to the PLA.

Mao and the PLA pushed on relentlessly, mercilessly laying siege to more cities throughout China. Finally, in December 1949, Chiang Kai-shek was forced to flee mainland China to Taiwan. The civil war was over. Mao and his “good cause” of communism had won.
Chapter 12
First, the Landlords

Communism is established in countries as a dictatorship of the proletariat, when following pure Marxist doctrine. Dictatorships can only survive by suppressing their opposition. So there’s a measure of instability that comes with communism.

Mao Zedong was now the leader of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). But in order to maintain his leadership he would have to keep fighting for the “good cause.” And again, the end always justified the means, as far as this bloodthirsty tyrant was concerned.

The founding of the PRC in 1949 gave Mao the perfect excuse to unleash his cruelty upon the masses. He claimed he needed to secure the dictatorship of the proletariat.

At first he focused on landlords.

Landlords had long been criticized and condemned by Chinese Communists as a major cause of poverty for peasants. So now that the PRC had been established, they were in some deep shit kind of trouble. Mao claimed that during the civil war, landowners had their chance to see the error of their ways, and that those who had not yet corrected their “excesses” would have to be dealt with.
But Mao felt reluctant to arrest landowners, and imprison or execute them at the hands of the state. He preferred landless peasants to do at least some of this dirty work. He wanted them to actively take part in the purging process, rather than be passive observers. He reasoned that in this way, ordinary folks would tie themselves to the revolution, wet their hands with blood, and thus become co-conspirators with him.

He made it clear to the people that landlords had no protection from the law, and that the state would not step in to interfere with any retribution anyone wanted to exact upon those who owned land. And that’s all the peasants needed to hear.

What followed was a bloodbath at the hands of mobs all over China. Landlords were hunted down, condemned by vigilantes, and executed in a variety of cruel ways. Some were buried alive, others were dismembered or strangled. The lucky ones were shot.

Struggle sessions became popular at this time. In these events, a landlord was put on display before a mob, while a speaker humiliated him or her by accusing the victim of many despicable crimes against the people, whether real or imagined. Then the victim would be thrown to the mob to be beaten, often to death.

Scholars estimate that up to five million people were executed by
mobs in China, between 1949 and 1953. Millions more were sent to labor camps, where many perished. Mao’s pain was manifesting on a mass scale, and many millions were coming to understand him, under the cruelest circumstances possible.
Chapter 13
Killing Campaigns

Next on the docket, after the landlords, were “counterrevolutionaries,” in the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries. These included former Kuomintang (KMT) officials, businessmen, and many intellectuals.

Some really were counterrevolutionaries. They resisted the new regime by conducting sabotage operations, spying, and fomenting armed rebellion. During 1950, there were over 800 counterrevolutionary riots nationwide. Tens of thousands of Communists were murdered, and many more buildings were burned.

These counterrevolutionaries hoped to undermine the Communist government enough to spark a new civil war, or to encourage Chiang Kai-shek to return from Taiwan and continue the old civil war. So Mao wanted them rounded up and executed. And he established execution quotas for cities to meet, throughout China.

Propaganda poster from 1951, depicting the arrest of a counterrevolutionary.
For example, in a telegram he sent to Party officials in Shanghai on January 21, 1951, he instructed: “In a big city like Shanghai, probably it will take one to two thousand executions this year to solve the problem.”

The next day he sent a telegram to Guangdong Province, with the instructions: “It is very good that you have already killed more than 3,700. Another three to four thousand should be killed . . . the target for this year’s executions may be eight or nine thousand.”

Some areas didn’t have enough counterrevolutionaries to meet Mao’s quota, so many people were arrested based on assumptions, and often the charges against them were vague and without evidence. It was common for people to be executed simply on the basis of having been accused. It was also common for local officials to settle old scores with their adversaries, just by accusing and then executing them.

The Chinese government estimates that 712,000 accused counterrevolutionaries were executed during this campaign, but scholars put that figure much higher, at somewhere in the millions.

Human life was an expendable commodity to Mao, and in China he had a lot of lives he could spend. In October 1950, he involved the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the Korean War, where at least 180,000 Chinese troops would die. And later, when it seemed China might go to war against a nuclear USSR, he told Khrushchev that it wouldn’t matter if China lost 300 million people in a nuclear war, as the other half of the population would survive and emerge victorious.

Mao came up with another way to inspire terror and death, in 1951 and 1952, when he launched the Three-anti and Five-anti campaigns. The Three-anti campaign was waged against government bureaucrats, to weed out corruption, waste, and bureaucracy. The Five-anti campaign was waged against Capitalists who owned businesses, to weed out bribery, theft, tax evasion, cheating, and spying.

They were very divisive campaigns. Workers were encouraged to denounce their employers, spouses turned against each other, and children informed on their parents. Most victims of the anti campaigns were humiliated and threatened, although some thousands were executed. But hundreds of thousands committed suicide, rather than endure the Struggle Sessions that would be inflicted upon them by accusers.

In fact, suicide was a strategy of Mao’s. Sometimes he instructed his
security chief to avoid killing anyone, but rather to terrorize the accused to the point where they would take their own lives. This strategy worked well. In Shanghai at one point, so many people were jumping off of tall buildings that residents had to avoid walking near skyscrapers, as a safety precaution.

Mao was treacherous in his cruelty. He knew how to lay a beautiful carpet, then pull it out from beneath the feet of his prey. In 1956 he launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign, targeted at intellectuals. It was inspiring in theory, and grand in sound.

In this campaign, he encouraged citizens to speak their thoughts openly, and express their opinion of the Communist government. As he put it, “The policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is designed to promote the flourishing of the arts and the progress of science.”

But in practice, Mao was trying to identify his critics. It was a treachery that hearkened back to the Futian Incident of 1931. This campaign began a pattern in China, where free thought would be promoted and then suppressed, periodically.

In July 1957, Mao ended the Hundred Flowers Campaign, and soon followed it with the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Having now identified his critics, he began to persecute them as Rightists and counterrevolutionaries.

At least 550,000 intellectuals were targeted. Some were merely criticized and beaten, in Struggle Sessions. Some lost their jobs. Some were sentenced to hard labor, and some were executed.
Mao was a man with a plan, and with communism, plans tend to come in five-year increments. Why, I don’t know. Maybe because five is a nice, round number. But in 1953 Mao deployed his First Five-Year Plan. It was a Soviet-style plan, and it was a ripping success.

By 1958, the First Five-Year Plan had substantially boosted iron and steel production, coal mining, cement production, electricity generation, and machine building. Industrial production increased 19% annually, and the national income grew at a rate of 9% a year. Also, more than two-thirds of all businesses were now state-owned, with the remainder partially owned by the state.

However, agricultural output did not increase as much, and this was worrisome for some officials, who feared mass starvation. But Chairman Mao didn’t worry. He became consumed by the hubris of his success.

In 1958, Mao initiated the Second Five-Year Plan. He just knew that since his First Five-Year Plan had been so successful, his next plan would be phenomenal. He even gave it a phenomenal name: The Great Leap Forward.

But this time things turned out differently, and in a way that would profoundly affect China, and Chinese leadership, for decades to come. As it turned out, Mao’s Great Leap Forward was more like a great leap off a cliff.

Mao had grown skeptical of the Soviet Union, when he saw Nikita Khrushchev moderate the policies of Stalin, who had recently died. So he
decided that, rather than model his Second Five-Year Plan after the Soviets, which he’d done with his First Five-Year-Plan, he’d come up with his own damned plan.

But his own damned plan became an epic disaster, and caused what was quite possibly the worst humanitarian crisis in human history.

The Great Leap Forward was aimed at increasing both agricultural and industrial production equally, and intended to put China on a road that would match the United Kingdom’s Gross National Product within 15 years. But in order to navigate China to this road, Mao had to set very ambitious goals for communes and factories.

But the Anti-Rightist Campaign had scared the shit out of a lot of people in charge of agricultural production. They feared the disfavor and wrath of the Communist Party. So rather than admit they couldn’t meet the goals, they fudged the numbers. They proclaimed surpluses, and took extra grain away from collectives in order to impress their superiors.

The government then sold that grain to foreign countries, to raise capital for more industrial development.

The extra grain taken from collectives took food from the mouths of peasant farmers. These were the very people working at the agricultural collectives. Starvation ensued, and over the next several years, up to 45 million rural Chinese died.

Most of them died from malnutrition, but not all. Others were worked to death while starving. And many died from beatings at the hands of their overseers, because they were too weak to work as fast as they were required to work in order to meet the unrealistic quotas.

In 1959, in a secret meeting in Shanghai where the food shortage was discussed, Mao is quoted as saying, “When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.”

Food was often denied to those who had been labeled as “black elements” in previous campaigns, such as the anti-Rightist campaign. These were religious leaders, rich peasants, former landlords, and so forth. Such people tended to die in the greatest numbers.

The more peasants starved, the more they had to be beaten and tortured to force them to work. Punishments for failure to work hard enough were severe. Some were buried alive, some were bound and
thrown into pools, some were stripped naked and forced to work outside in the middle of winter, some were doused with boiling water, and on and on. About half of those who were in charge of collectives regularly beat and caned their workers.

Aside from not working hard enough, other reasons peasants were beaten, or even killed, included: rebellion, reporting real harvest numbers, reporting inflated numbers, sounding alarm, refusing to hand over food, trying to flee a famine area, begging for food, stealing scraps of food, and angering officials.

The harsh treatment of peasants led some to resist. Armed rebellions occurred in at least eight provinces and regions of China. The rebels raided granaries, set buildings on fire, robbed trains, and committed acts of vandalism. However, these rebellions never posed a serious threat to the government, and never lasted much longer than a year.

One of Mao’s goals in the Great Leap Forward was to increase the production of high quality steel. Mao didn’t know shit about steel manufacturing, but he fancied himself an expert. In his self-assured “wisdom,” he encouraged rural and urban citizens to set up backyard furnaces, and to melt down scrap metal to produce steel.

Everyone was eager to get the good prices the government offered, so they began melting down anything made of iron. Pots, pans, farming equipment, and anything else made of iron was fair game. And wood was stripped from houses, to burn in the furnaces. Trees were also denuded, to stoke the furnaces with firewood. Farmers stopped farming so that they could produce steel instead, and this exacerbated the famine.
But in the end, the best metal the backyard furnaces could produce was a low-grade pig iron of little economic value. Intellectuals could have warned Mao this would happen, but after the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the emperor with no clothes was dressed to the nines as far as they were concerned. Nobody dared correct and enlighten him.

*Iron smelting at night, from so-called “backyard furnaces.”*
By April 1959, it had become apparent to Party officials that the Great Leap Forward was a clusterfuck of catastrophic proportions. Mumblings among Party officials led to Mao stepping down as State Chairman of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Mao’s hand-picked successor, First Vice-Chairman of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Liu Shaoqi, replaced him. Together, Liu and CPC General Secretary Deng Xiaoping were put in charge of fixing Mao’s mess. But they were mere puppets. Mao was still calling all the shots, from behind the scenes.

But there was one troublemaker who was not so easily manipulated. A year earlier, General Peng Dehuai, head of the National Defense Ministry, dared to speak out against Mao’s economic policies. In April 1958, during a tour of Guangzhou Province, he openly criticized Mao by saying, “The Chairman talks all the time about more, faster, better, and more economical results. That is annoying. What does he want with chanting these liturgies all the time?”
In the fall of 1958, Peng toured more of China and found mature crops going unharvested, due to farmers busying themselves with steel production using primitive backyard furnaces. He encountered serious food shortages, starving peasants, and angry elders. He became so concerned that he composed this poem:

Grain scattered on the ground,
Potato leaves withered,
Strong young people have left to make steel,
Only children and old women reap the crops,
How can they pass the coming year?
Allow me to raise my voice for the people!

The Communist Party held a conference in July 1959, called the Lushan Conference. Mao opened the conference by encouraging Party members to criticize and offer opinions on the government’s mistakes and shortcomings. Peng, who was boiling over with opinions, fell for it. He composed a letter to Mao that criticized the policies of the Great Leap Forward.

Most of the Party leadership agreed with Peng. But then Mao had the letter circulated among the attendees of the Lushan Conference, and then criticized the letter, and attacked Peng. Mao threatened that if the leadership sided with Peng, he would split the Party, retreat into the countryside, and lead a peasant rebellion against the government.

The leadership capitulated in the face of this threat, and turned against Peng. He was formally condemned, and forced to issue a self-criticism, where he admitted he had made “severe mistakes.” Later, he privately confessed to Premier Zhou Enlai, regarding his self-criticism, “For the first time in my life, I have spoken out against my very heart.”

A few months later, Mao replaced Peng as Defense Minister with one of his lackeys, Lin Biao, who would later rise to become the leader of China during the Cultural Revolution.

But he didn’t stop there, with this general. In 1966 his wife, Jiang Qing, had Peng arrested by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Peng was one of the first major public officials to be persecuted by Jiang Qing and her Cultural Revolution Group.
Peng had been a national hero. He had participated in the Long March. He had fought hard against Japanese occupation. He had defeated the Kuomintang (KMT) in northwest China during the civil war, against long odds. He had even saved Mao from being taken prisoner, when he defeated the KMT in the Battle of Shajiadian. He had directed China’s war effort during the Korean War. And now, this national hero who had given so much of himself for the Communist revolution, had become a prisoner. Peng was publicly humiliated during Struggle Sessions, falsely accused of many crimes against the people, and tortured. He died in prison in 1974, at age 76, from the effects of years of torture, and from an order by Mao to deny him medical treatment.

In 1959, shortly after the purge of Peng Dehuai, Wu Han, the Vice Mayor of Beijing, wrote a play entitled Hai Rui Dismissed from Office. Wu Han was not just Beijing’s Vice Mayor. He was also a historian, and this play was a historical account of a Ming Dynasty official who was purged and imprisoned by the emperor for having criticized him. The play was a popular hit, and was even praised by Mao. But then critics began to interpret it as an allegory for Peng Dehuai’s dismissal from office by Mao. And in 1962, Peng Dehuai was stupid enough to write another letter to Mao, where he wrote, “I want to be a Hai Rui!” This effrontery pissed the hell out of Mao. But it also gave him an inspiration.

Even though Liu Shaoqi had taken his job as State Chairman in 1959, Mao remained the de facto chair, and any decisions made by Liu had to be
cleared by him. Liu was merely a puppet. But in 1961, Liu managed to maneuver Party leadership enough to strip Mao of these de facto powers. And with Mao pushed out of the way, Liu was now the undisputed head of China.

This didn’t set well with the megalomaniac Mao. He liked power, and wanted it back. It gave him a way to spread his pain to the masses, and he did not enjoy giving that up. Then he received the letter from Peng Dehuai, declaring that he wanted to be a Hai Rui. And from this letter, Mao devised a sinister, twisted, highly complex plot to oust Liu Shaoqi and retake control of China. This would culminate in the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter 16
Continuous Revolution

He’d lost his job as State Chairman, and was no longer in control of China. But Mao continued in his position as Chairman of the Communist Party. At that time, this was just a ceremonial role with inconsequential power.

However, Mao was charismatic and wildly popular with the Chinese people, so he found ways to leverage his popularity, combined with his role as Party Chairman, to wield a little more power than he would otherwise have.

Mao proposed the idea of perpetual, permanent, or continuous revolution. He claimed to be worried that an elite minority had taken power at the top of Chinese government and society, and that they were unresponsive and out of touch with the will of the people.

He reasoned that continuous revolution was the only way to preserve Communist ideals and prevent bureaucrats from putting China back on a road to capitalism. He called such bureaucrats, “capitalist-roaders.” By waging continuous revolution, Mao argued, those in power would be subjected to a continuous purity test. This would weed out those who did not keep communism and the interests of the people foremost in mind.

But in order to get his continuous revolution going, he had to find a starting point. With that in mind, he reasoned that first he had to go after the thinkers, philosophers, and writers of China. The intellectuals. They influenced opinion, and he needed to ensure they would not get in his way, in his quest to retake his former leadership.

In 1963, Mao announced there were capitalist-roaders among the
intellectuals within the Communist Party, that were trying to poison minds. He claimed they were revising fundamental Marxist teachings to make them appear to favor capitalism.

The populace, who loved and respected Mao, became alarmed.

And so Party leaders decided to do something about this, and began the Socialist Education Movement. In this movement, intellectuals were removed from schools, universities, or wherever else they lived and worked, and were sent to the countryside to be reeducated by peasants.

They were forced to work on farms, and also spend time in self-criticism sessions. Peasants led these sessions, and required them to examine their hearts and uncover any counterrevolutionary sentiments they might be harboring. They had to confess these sentiments to the group they were in, criticize themselves, and accept criticism from others.

Conditions and punishments were sometimes harsh for the intellectuals, and from 1963 to 1966, over 70,000 perished. More than five million others were persecuted to various degrees.
Chapter 17
The Little Red Book

During the time of the Socialist Education Movement, Mao worked on another facet of his Machiavellian plot to regain power. He used his influence as Chairman of the Communist Party to have a book published, entitled, “Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung.” It contained quotations from his speeches and writings, given over his lifetime. It was bound in a red vinyl wrapper over cardboard cover, was pocket-sized, and became known as the Little Red Book.

It was first printed in January of 1964, and contained 25 topics and 267 quotations, and was distributed to troops in the People’s Liberation Army. It was the brainchild of Lin Biao, a sycophant of Mao who would later be elevated to the top leadership of China during the Cultural Revolution. Lin had recently replaced General Peng Dehuai as Defense Minister. Peng, as you may recall, had been purged for criticizing Mao’s Great Leap Forward.

“Study Chairman Mao’s writings, follow his teachings, and act according to his instructions,” Lin Biao admonished in a prefaced endorsement leaf. This page would later be removed after Lin allegedly attempted to assassinate Mao in 1971.
The Little Red Book expanded several times over the next year, with the final version containing 33 topics and 427 quotations from Mao. Top priority was given to its publication, shoving aside all other works-in-progress, including publication of The Complete Works of Marx and Engels.

The goal was to print and distribute enough copies so that 99% of the population could own and read this book of Mao’s quotes. Over a billion copies were printed between 1966 and 1969. It was exported also, and by May 1967, it could be found in bookstores in 117 countries, with 20 translations in 35 versions.

As of today, some estimate that over 6.5 billion copies have been distributed throughout China and worldwide. This is likely an exaggeration, but if accurate the Little Red Book could be the Most Read Book in history, pushing the Bible into second place.

The Little Red Book became very popular. This was not just because of all the press and promotion it received. It was mainly because every Chinese citizen was expected to own a copy, study it, and carry it on their person at all times. This was never an official requirement, but those who did not do this ran the risk of being labeled a capitalist-roader, or counterrevolutionary, or a revisionist, or something else that could get them into deep trouble.

The Little Red Book was part of Mao’s plan to establish a Cult of Personality, where he would be worshiped like a living god. With Mao elevated to god-like heights in the minds of the people, anything he said would be believed without question, and everything he wanted would be granted. And that’s because his adoring masses would make sure it was granted.
The Socialist Education Movement was only the beginning for Mao, because it only persecuted intellectuals, and could not reach as high as State Chairman Liu Shaoqi. Liu was the one who had taken power from Mao, and so he was Mao’s prime target. To get at Liu, Mao knew he had to up his game of continuous revolution. And that is why he masterminded the Cultural Revolution.

He began setting up the Cultural Revolution in a way that one might stand up a row of dominoes, where when the first domino is knocked over, the others rapidly fall in a chain-reaction. Chain-reactions run the risk of getting out of control, but that was not much concern for Mao. His biggest desire was to return to power, and he needed some chaos to bring that about.

But he also needed help with this conspiracy, and from someone he could trust. So he turned to Jiang Qing. Jiang Qing was Mao’s fourth wife. Of all his wives, she was the most devious, cruel, and vindictive. Jiang’s character had been a perfect fit for Mao’s, when he married her nearly 30 years before.

His first wife had probably not been a good fit, since she and Mao had not done the fitting. It was an arranged marriage, and his father had made the arrangement. Her name was Luo Yigu. She was Mao’s cousin, and he married her when he was just 13 years old, over his protestations. He resented the marriage, never lived with Luo, and soon abandoned her.

Fortunately for him, but unfortunately for his wife, Luo died of dysentery in 1910, making Mao a widower at age 16. This freed him up to
marry whomever he wanted. The experience turned Mao against arranged marriages and made him something of a feminist for the rest of his life.

His second wife was Yang Kaihui, and this marriage with her was mutually consensual. They wed in 1920, when Mao was 26, and they had three children together. But in November 1930, Yang was captured by Kuomintang (KMT) forces. She was tortured for a month and then beheaded in front of her eight-year-old son.

You might conclude this made Mao a widower again. In a sense it did, of course, but in another sense it did not.

That’s because although Mao was a feminist, he was also a womanizer. In the late-1920s he battled alongside a female guerrilla fighter named He Zizhen, who was a tough lady, whom he must have come to admire very much. She was so tough, she was also known as the “Two-Gunned Girl General.” They fell in love, and He bore a child with him in 1929. In May 1930, he married He. This while still being married to her (Yang).

In other words, Mao was a bigamist, so his status of being a married man did not change with the death of Yang, six months into his bigamy.

Although the beheading of Yang was tragic, it worked out conveniently for Mao. He was already married to He, and now he didn’t have to go through a nasty divorce with Yang, and all the scandal of bigamy revelations that would entail.

He and Mao were quite amorous, as evidenced by all the children they had. Altogether, He had six children with him. But this did not increase the size of Mao’s family much, because all but one died young or were separated from their parents, during the wild, tumultuous war years of the 1930s.

During the Long March, He was wounded in the head by shrapnel, and she was sent to Moscow to recover. But in 1937, while He was away, her husband decided to play. He (Mao) met the actress Jiang Qing, and began a dalliance with her.
This was a cause for concern among Communist leaders. Mao was 45 years old, and Jiang was only 23, and their vast age difference was considered licentious. Besides, even though Jiang was a member of the Communist Party, her lavish lifestyle as a film actress, prior to meeting Mao was criticized as being too bourgeois. And finally, Mao was still married to He. This was officially considered immoral, and not a good example to set for the proletariat.

But Mao worked out a compromise with his fellow leaders. He (Mao) would marry Jiang in a small, private ceremony. But because he was still married to He, she (Jiang) could not be seen in public with him. Also, Jiang was forbidden to participate in politics for 20 years.

They married on November 28, 1938. They had one child together in 1940, named Li Na. And true to their word, Jiang stayed out of politics for 20 years. In fact a little longer than 20 years. As the first lady of China she was often referred to as Madame Mao. And Madame Mao abstained from political involvement until Mr. Mao got her involved in his twisted plot to regain power, in 1965.
Chapter 19
The Cultural Revolution Begins

Jiang Qing had been an actress in the 1930s and this, along with being Mao’s wife, enabled her to serve as head of the Film Section of the Communist Party’s Propaganda Department in the 1950s. She became an expert in propaganda, and her husband needed such an expert, and one whom he could trust.

In February of 1965, Mao secretly commissioned Jiang and literary critic Yao Wenyuan to publish a critique of the play, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. The author of this play was Wu Han, the Vice Mayor of Beijing. Wu’s direct superior was Peng Zhen, who was the First Secretary of the Beijing Communist Party. Peng was a very powerful official within the Communist Party. Not only that, but Peng was State Chairman Liu Shaoqi’s strongest supporter. Liu needed Peng’s support, to remain the leader of China.

A discerning reader may notice by now, that this plot of Mao’s involved a lot of people and moving parts. It was highly complex.

Mao calculated that if he could
discredit Wu, the playwright and Vice Mayor, then Wu’s direct superior, Peng, would also be discredited. By taking down Peng, who was Liu Shaoqi’s strongest supporter, Liu would lose much of his support within the Party, and be vulnerable. Liu could then be taken down. This would be a complicated coup, and many dominoes would have to fall correctly, but Mao had set those dominoes up carefully.

Yao, the literary critic working with Jiang Qing, was instructed by Mao to write a critique accusing Wu, the playwright, of attacking Mao. So in Yao’s article, he claimed that the play Wu wrote, about a Ming Dynasty civil servant who was purged from office after criticizing the emperor, was actually a political allegory. He claimed that the honest civil servant symbolized General Peng Dehuai, who had criticized Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and then was subsequently purged by Mao. And he alleged that the corrupt emperor in this play, symbolized Mao.

Yao’s article left Peng Zhen feeling very nervous. Pay careful attention to some dominoes Mao had set up, and you’ll understand why.

Mao had recently appointed Peng to be the head of a “Five-Man Group” commissioned by Mao to study the potential for a Cultural Revolution. The writer of the play, Wu, had been under Peng’s direct supervision when the play was written. This implicated Peng as a co-conspirator in the attack on Mao, and made him vulnerable to the accusation of being a counterrevolutionary.

And now the plot thickens: Peng knew that the Cultural Revolution would be all about persecuting those suspected of being counterrevolutionaries. He worried that he would become a target of the very campaign he was helping Mao to set up. Peng also had some control over the publication of Yao’s article that critiqued Wu’s play.

So Peng decided to forbid the publication of Yao’s article in any major newspaper under his control. This included the nationally distributed People’s Daily. He only allowed publication in a few, small, locally distributed newspapers. He hoped it would go unnoticed and be quickly forgotten.

Meanwhile, Mao pushed over a few more dominoes. He went after those he expected to come to Peng’s defense. As Chairman of the Communist Party, he was able to fire Yang Shangkun, who was a senior leader of the Central Committee, on bogus charges of spying on Mao. He
replaced him with a staunch Mao loyalist.

Mao then had his loyal ally, Defense Minister Lin Biao, accuse the chief of staff of the People’s Liberation Army, General Luo Ruiqing, of being anti-Mao. Luo was denounced and dismissed. This ensured that the rest of the military command would be loyal to Mao.

The next domino was the sacking of the Propaganda Department chief, Lu Dingyi, who was a Peng ally. This helped to isolate Peng, and gave Mao unrestricted access to the press.

Now Peng was in Mao’s crosshairs. Peng’s Five-Man Group had recently issued a report that claimed the Hai Rui play was merely an academic discussion, and had nothing to do with politics. But at a high-profile meeting of the Politburo, Mao got two of his supporters, Kang Sheng and Chen Boda, to call bullshit on this. They brought Yao’s damning article to the Politburo’s attention, they showed how Peng had tried to suppress this article, and they claimed that this was evidence that Peng had revisionist tendencies.

Revisionist was one of the most damning names you could call a Communist. It’s used for people who try to revise the interpretation of Karl Marx’s writings to satisfy capitalist motivations.

Without Peng’s allies to come to his defense, the Politburo was convinced, and Peng was deposed from office. Then on May 16, 1966, the Politburo released an official document condemning Peng, disbanding his Five-Man Group, and replacing it with a new committee, called the Cultural Revolution Group (CRG).

Chen Boda was named Chairman of the CRG, with Jiang Qinq as Vice-Chairman. Other members included Kang Sheng and Yao Wenyuan. With Peng out of the picture, the CRG could go after Liu Shaoqi, leader of China, without any interference.

These actions by the Politburo are often cited as the official start of the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter 20
Rise of the Red Guards

Peng Zhen had been State Chairman Liu Shaoqi’s most powerful supporter. With him gone, Liu was now vulnerable, and at Mao’s mercy.

The Politburo also released a statement that had been prepared under Mao’s personal supervision, strongly implying that enemies of the Communist Party had infiltrated the Party. It claimed that these class enemies “wave the red flag to oppose the red flag,” and it prescribed “the telescope and microscope of Mao Zedong Thought” to identify these people. Which of course could be found in Mao’s Little Red Book, which he had made sure was published a few years earlier.

This statement gave a green light to Mao loyalists. And with the Beijing Communist Party in disarray after the dismissal of Peng Zhen, chaos was about to break out in the capital of China.

This chaos erupted nine days later, on May 25, 1966, at Peking University in Beijing. In fact, Peking University came to be known as the epicenter of the Cultural Revolution. The rumbling began when the head of the Philosophy department, Nie Yuanzi, authored a big-character poster that attacked the university’s Communist Party administration.

Big-character posters had been used since the Qing Dynasty. They are handwritten posters using large characters with artistic calligraphy, that are mounted on walls for public display. They’re generally used for propaganda purposes, or for protest.

Nie’s poster had been encouraged by the wife of a Mao loyalist, but it’s suspected that Jiang Qing and Mao himself were the ultimate influence
behind it. The poster insinuated that the university’s leaders were trying to undermine the Communist Party, and were engaged in the dastardly practice of revisionism.

It was now Mao’s turn to topple another domino. He used his access to the press to endorse the poster and call it “the first Marxist-Leninist big-character poster in China.” This endorsement was like a bombshell. Mao was revered in China, so anything he said was quickly chewed, swallowed, and digested by the masses. Students in schools and universities throughout China interpreted Mao’s words as a signal to revolt against their schools’ establishments.

Soon, big-character posters sprang up on campuses all over the country, denouncing their school administration as revisionist and counterrevolutionary. These posters were plastered everywhere, on sides of buildings, walls, trees, or any other vertical surface that could be found.
By the middle of June 1966, school classes at all levels of education had emptied out all across the country. Students demonstrated en masse, sporting pictures of Mao, chanting slogans, and threatening retribution against all the imagined enemies of communism that had infiltrated the Party.

The students called themselves Red Guards, and were initially denounced by university officials as counterrevolutionaries. But then they wrote a manifesto, and Mao, with his access to the press, ordered that it be broadcast on national radio, and published in the People’s Daily national newspaper. This gave the Red Guards legitimacy, and that is all they needed to wreak havoc upon the nation.
Chapter 21
The Fall of Liu Shaoqi

The Red Guards began arresting members of the establishment suspected of being revisionists, anti-Mao, anti-Cultural Revolution, or anti anything else they supported. They subjected their victims to brutal Struggle Sessions, where they were beaten, sometimes to death.

The country plunged into chaos. The target of the students was the “establishment,” and this worried the hell out of everyone in charge of anything. And among those worried were the heads of state.

State Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Secretary-General Deng Xiaoping were in a swivet, not knowing what the hell to do. They’d been blindsided, and had no idea how or why all of this upheaval was suddenly happening. And so they consulted with the mastermind himself, like chickens running to the fox. They asked Mao for advice.

Based upon the advice Mao gave them, Liu and Deng hastily set up a system of work teams. The work teams were sent to campuses of schools for the purpose of interacting with the Red Guards, restoring order, and re-establishing Party control.

The problem with this was that the members of the work teams were also members of the establishment. And so, by virtue of association, they were suspected by the Red Guards of being counterrevolutionary. The Red Guards didn’t trust the work teams, and suspected that their true purpose was to suppress revolutionary fervor.

It seemed hopeless. So the Communist Party became divided on whether or not to continue with the teams. But Liu insisted on continuing,
in order to stop the mass hysteria.

Of course Mao, the fox in the henhouse, didn’t help Liu. Instead he sided with those who were against the work teams. He criticized the work team idea (even though he had suggested it), and on July 24, 1966, he called for the full withdrawal of these teams. This made Liu look suspect. Liu was pro-work teams, but Mao was anti-work teams. So why was Liu for them? people began to ask. Could Liu be a counterrevolutionary himself?

Then on August 5, 1966, Mao upped the ante. He authored his own big-character poster, and titled it, “Bombard the Headquarters.” He rallied people to target the command center of counterrevolution, which he insinuated was the Party establishment led by Liu and Deng. As a result of this poster, Liu and Deng quickly sank in status within the Communist Party, and effectively lost their power.

Defense Minister Lin Biao, the Mao loyalist who had earlier attacked General Luo Ruiqing, to help pave the way for this coup, was elevated in status and took over Liu Shaoqi’s rank. Lin became the new official leader of China. But in reality, he was supposed to be a puppet who would rubber stamp anything Mao wanted. And so Lin’s rise to power was actually Mao’s rise to power.

Mao once again found himself in charge of China. Lin, as head of state, assumed all the risks, while Mao, pulling strings in the background, enjoyed all the benefits.
With Lin’s installment, Mao’s coup was complete. Well, almost complete. He still had a little more work to do. In 1967, Liu Shaoqi was arrested by Red Guards. They put him through Struggle Sessions, where they beat him regularly. He was denied medication for his diabetes, and denied treatment for pneumonia, which he contracted from his beatings.

He nearly died, but Jiang Qing finally stepped in and ordered medical treatment for him. She wanted him kept alive as a “living target” for the Ninth Party Congress in 1969. At that Congress, the barely living Liu was denounced as a traitor and enemy agent. Shortly after that, he died in prison. Now the coup was complete. Mao’s power was solidified.
Mao’s return to power came with great pain inflicted upon Liu Shaoqi, until he eventually lost his life. Mao had no problem unleashing this kind of pain and suffering. But Liu Shaoqi was just one person. Many, many others suffered as well. Mao released a plague of pain upon his entire nation while usurping power from Liu.

When considering Mao’s legacy, it’s important to consider just how much he cost his country, and how much suffering he put his own people through. The price tag for his sadistic excesses was astronomical, setting China’s economy back for years. And millions upon millions went through hell.

For instance, in August 1966, in what would become known as Red August, over a million Red Guards gathered at a rally in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Mao Zedong and newly-annointed leader Lin Biao mingled with the Red Guards and gave speeches, denouncing enemies of the State that they insinuated had infiltrated the Party.

That’s when the chain-reaction of Mao’s dominoes fell out of control. A red terror swept out of this rally, beginning with a mass slaughter of officials in Beijing, and spreading rapidly to many other areas of China.

Most Red Guards were privileged urban youths. But workers, peasants, soldiers, common criminals, guttersnipes of all varieties, and millions of others occupying the lower strata of society, also joined in on the slaughter and became Red Guards. Yet none of this was necessary. Mao had already returned to power. He could have used this power to disband these Red hooligans and stop the killing. Only someone who
enjoys causing pain would allow the killing to continue.

The police tried to intervene, but then Mao intervened with the police. He instructed the Party to issue a central directive warning them not to interfere. This warning threatened any law enforcement that stood in the way of the Red Guards, with being labeled as counterrevolutionary.

So the police stepped aside and allowed madness to descend upon the country. Thousands of government officials and members of the middle class were hunted down, beaten, and murdered. During the Red August of 1966, 1,772 such people were murdered in Beijing. In Shanghai that
September, 704 people committed suicide, and 534 other deaths occurred, related to the Cultural Revolution.

But this was only the beginning. Millions more would be brutalized and murdered by the Red Guards over the next few years.

An army of 12 million Red Guards ravaged the nation. They were given free rein by the government to travel the country, and could use the railroads without charge, as long as their purpose was to wage revolution. They committed horrible murders and atrocities everywhere they went.

They even turned on each other, splitting into factions and waging armed combat, Red Guard against Red Guard. Small civil wars sprang up in towns and cities of China, as warring sides fought each other for not being pro-Mao enough.
Chapter 23
Out With the Old

It wasn’t just people who were being targeted by the Red Guards. It was also Chinese culture. This was, after all, the “Cultural” Revolution.

During the Red August of 1966, newly-ensconced leader Lin Biao gave a speech advocating the destruction of the “Four Olds.” These were: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. These were described as having poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years.

First to fall victim in the Campaign to Destroy the Four Olds were street names and store names. Streets throughout Beijing were renamed, causing confusion to travelers and shoppers. For instance, “E” street was renamed, “Red Guard Road,” and the “Blue Sky Clothes Store” was renamed to “Defending Mao Zedong Clothes Store.”

Intellectuals were thought to be living embodiments of the Four Olds, and they were rounded up, harassed, and forced to endure Struggle Sessions, where they were severely beaten and often killed.

Old, historic architectural sites were targeted, vandalized, and burned or razed to the ground. Libraries were raided, and books of classical literature were burned. Old Chinese paintings were ripped apart, and Chinese temples were desecrated. In Tibet, Buddhist monks were forced to demolish almost every monastery, many of which had been standing for over a thousand years.

The homes of the wealthy were raided and everything destroyed, especially paintings, books, sculptures, and antiques.
Red Guards raided ancient archaeological sites and smashed priceless relics. In one instance, they raided Ming Dynasty tombs, and dragged the remains of emperors and empresses out, denounced them, and burned them. And the Cemetery of Confucius was attacked and vandalized.

The destruction to the Chinese cultural heritage during this campaign was incalculable. Premier Zhou Enlai, Mao’s most loyal ally, felt appalled at this spoliation. He tried to step in and stop the iconoclasm, but was mostly foiled by Jiang Qing and other ultra-Leftists. Still, he did manage to prevent destruction to a few important historical sites, such as the Forbidden City.

China owes much gratitude to Zhou Enlai for such heroic efforts.

The Cultural Revolution raged on, long past the deposing of Liu Shaoqi. By December 1967, more than 350 million copies of Mao’s Little Red Book of quotations had been printed. Every Red Guard owned one, and they would congregate in study groups to devour and digest the words, while discussing the meaning of Mao’s vague sayings. They found ways to use Mao’s words to justify the Cultural Revolution, and all the death and destruction they were causing.
Chapter 24
Cow Sheds

In 1967, as the Cultural Revolution ravaged the nation, the Red Guards took university professors and administrators prisoner, and forced them to construct what they called “Cow Sheds” on the campuses of universities throughout China. These Cow Sheds were actually makeshift prisons to house the professors and administrators, who were derogatorily labeled “Cow Devils” by the Red Guards.

The purpose of the Cow Sheds was to reeducate and rehabilitate the Cow Devils, so that they could reopen the universities and begin educating students in a pure and proper communistic manner. In fact, the Red Guards in charge of the Cow Sheds were often students of the professors.

The living conditions for the imprisoned Cow Devils were often unsanitary and unhealthy. It weakened them, and made them vulnerable to disease.

Their reeducation consisted of hard labor, and beatings during repeated Struggle Sessions. They also had to memorize quotations from Mao’s Little Red Book, and were thrashed severely whenever they failed to remember a quotation with exact accurateness. Many perished from the harsh living conditions and constant beatings from Red Guards.

Ji Xianlin was a professor imprisoned at Peking University. He was head of the university’s Eastern Languages Department. In the 1990’s, Ji wrote one of the few firsthand accounts in existence of those who survived persecution, in a book entitled, The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Many of Ji’s peers perished during this dark time in Chinese history,
but Ji managed to live a long life. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, he became a popular and highly-respected intellectual. He passed away in 2009, at the age of 97.
The Red Guards, in spite of their cruelty, were highly regarded by many Chinese. But not by all. By 1967, Chinese society had divided into two main rival factions. There was the radical faction, which wanted to purge the Communist Party of moderates, and the conservative faction, which wanted to preserve the moderate Party establishment. Mao backed the radicals and declared an “all-round civil war” against the conservatives.

Mao encouraged the radicals to seize power from the Party establishment. This led to Red Guards and conservatives fighting each other over control of local governments. These were violent and bloody struggles, with both sides deploying tanks, artillery, firearms, and any other type of weapon they could lay their hands on. Cities were bombarded, and many civilians were killed in all the combat.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was divided. Some officers were loyal to Mao, and others loyal to the establishment. For instance, General Chen Zaidao was the Army general in charge of the Wuhan area. He sided with the establishment, and fought to repress the anti-establishment radicals in the city of Wuhan.

Premier Zhou Enlai sent orders to General Chen to back down, and switch his support to the radicals. But Chen refused. And this refusal was quite surprising. It marked a pivotal turning point in the Cultural Revolution. It was the first time that the military had refused a direct order, and it became known as the Wuhan Incident.
Mao feared that this Incident might spark a more widespread revolt by the PLA. So in July 1967, he had Zhou send Xie Fuzhi and Wang Li, who were members of the Cultural Revolution Group, to Wuhan. Their desperate mission was to persuade Chen to stop siding with the establishment, and to start following orders to back the radicals.

Xie was the Minister of Public Security. He was staunchly loyal to Mao, and a rabid supporter of the Cultural Revolution. He had given a speech the year before that gave carte blanche to the Red Guards to kill their opponents.

Wang was also a rabid supporter of the Cultural Revolution, and was the lead drafter of the May 16 Notification that marked the start of the Cultural Revolution.

Xie and Wang immediately ordered Chen to switch his allegiance to the radicals. But Chen refused. Chen and his PLA forces feared that by switching sides, they would be tacitly admitting to have taken the wrong side, and that this could be used against them in the future. It would open them up to accusations of being counterrevolutionary.

This is a problem with movements that engage in blame and punishment of others. The fear they generate can lead to resistance. And this resistance quickly hardens to an obstinate and intractable resistance, because to finally give in might lead to as much blame and punishment as refusal to give in. It’s a Catch-22.

On July 20, 1967, both Mao and Zhou flew to the Wuhan area to try to resolve this crisis. Their presence was kept a secret from the public, but Chen was made aware. He felt very impressed that Mao was so close, and was swayed enough to write a self-criticism, and back down from his support for the conservatives.

This emboldened Wang Li to reprimand 200 divisional officers under Chen, accusing them of not having grasped the essence of the Cultural Revolution.
Revolution. And so the blame these officers feared, immediately came true.

They felt alarmed and pissed off about this, and in their ire, they arrested both Xie and Wang. They slapped Xie around and humiliated him. And they held them both for a short while, until they were rescued in a secret military operation. Xie and Wang then returned to Beijing, to a hero’s welcome, having supposedly saved the city from counterrevolutionaries, even though it had been Mao and Zhou’s efforts that had turned Chen around.

On July 26, Chen was brought before the Cultural Revolution Group and a large contingent of senior military and political leaders, and put on trial for supporting the “wrong” group in Wuhan. He was accused of a kludge of crimes, and beaten by security personnel. These accusations, and the beating, left many of the leaders present feeling disgusted, and they left the trial in protest. Clearly, support for the Cultural Revolution was also on trial, and not doing very well.

Mao was beginning to realize that perhaps his revolution had gone too far. So he had Chen dismissed from office, but not imprisoned. But he needed a scapegoat to appease moderate factions of the PLA, so he had Wang Li arrested for being a “bad person” and a “cockroach.” Wang was never charged with a crime, but spent the next 15 years in prison, making his criminal case one of the craziest for historians to try to figure out.

Soon after Wang’s arrest, Mao dialed down on appeals for violent civil war against the establishment, and the Cultural Revolution became just a little less dangerous for everyone. But the Wuhan Incident marked the end of future PLA resistance to the Cultural Revolution. After this, the takeover of local governments by radical Red Guards was ensured. Mao had won his “all-round civil war.”
Chapter 26
Mango Fever

As the Cultural Revolution carried over into 1968, a campaign was launched to enhance Mao’s reputation and firmly establish his cult of personality. Mao’s portrait was plastered everywhere. Billions of Chairman Mao badges were mass produced and distributed to the people, to pin on their clothing. Every Chinese citizen was presented with Mao’s Little Red Book of quotations, and was told to carry it everywhere, study it carefully, and quote from it daily.

Mao was elevated to the status of a living god, and was always presented as an infallible hero and leader who could make no error nor do no wrong. To criticize Mao was to invite violent reprisal and possibly death. To praise Mao was expected, regardless of what he did, and whether it appeared foolish or wise.

Some families even prayed to Mao.

This unquestioning reverence for the Chairman led to the bizarre and comical Mango Fever, that began in August of 1968. On August 4, 1968, Pakistani foreign minister Syed Pierzada, presented Mao with 40 mangoes from Pakistan. It was a nice gesture, but Mao didn’t know what to do with the mangoes. These fruits weren’t native to northern China, and most Chinese there didn’t know what a mango was.

Mao decided to send the box of mangoes to his Mao Zedong Propaganda Team at Tsinghua University. This proved to be a very “fruitful” gesture. On August 7, 1968, they had this article published in the People’s Daily:

“In the afternoon of the Fifth, when the great happy news of Chairman
Mao giving mangoes to the Capital Worker and Peasant Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team reached Tsinghua University campus, people immediately gathered around the gift given by the Great Leader Chairman Mao. They cried out enthusiastically and sang with wild abandonmen, Tears swelled in their eyes, and they again and again sincerely wished that our most beloved Great Leader lived then thousand years without bounds.

Soon after, a poem appeared in the People’s Daily, that read:

“Seeing that golden mango
Was as if seeing the great leader Chairman Mao!
Standing before that golden mango
Was just like standing beside Chairman Mao!
Again and again touching that golden mango:
the golden mango was so warm!
Again and again smelling the mango:
that mango was so fragrant!”

One of the mangoes was sent to the Beijing Textile factory, which organized a rally in its honor. Workers recited quotations from Mao as they celebrated this piece of fruit. But the mango began to rot. So then it was peeled and boiled, and workers filed past the pot of boiled mango water, and each was given a spoonful to drink.

Mango fever took hold of the nation, and factories began producing mass replicas of the fruit. In one case, replicas of mangoes were sent to the city of Changdu, where about a half million people gathered to greet them. Also, wall posters were created, featuring Mao and mangoes.
A Cultural Revolution propaganda poster, produced in 1968, entitled, “Mangoes, the Precious Gift.”

In one notable incident, a dentist in a small town got a glimpse of a mango replica. He was heard to say that it was nothing special, and that it looked just like a sweet potato. People were horrified at such sacrilege. The dentist was arrested and put on trial. He was convicted of malicious slander, paraded publicly throughout the town, and then executed with one shot to the head.

All for insulting a mango.
Chapter 27
The Lost Generation

Mango Fever happened quite by accident, without any planning on Mao’s part. But many other aspects of the Cultural Revolution were carefully planned and instigated by this madman, to effect as much pain as possible on the people he ruled.

On May 25, 1968, Mao launched the Cleansing the Class Ranks campaign, which was the next part of his Cultural Revolution. The stated purpose of this movement was to purge Communist society of traitors, spies, capitalist-roaders, and the Five Black Categories. These five black categories were:

- Landlords
- Rich farmers
- Counterrevolutionaries
- Bad-influencers
- Rightists

The Red Guards stepped up their persecution efforts, Struggle Sessions, and beatings. Lynchings took place. Suspects were tortured, and many massacres were carried out. Around 30 million people were persecuted, and up to 1.5 million perished. Or, that is, they were “cleansed” from the class ranks.

By the summer of 1968, Mao had succeeded in gaining the complete control and cooperation of the military. His reign over China was undisputed. Except from one area. The Red Guards.
Mao decided he no longer needed the Red Guards. And by god, these assholes were wreaking havoc across the country. Things were getting too dangerous and out of hand, so Mao decided it was time for them to disband.

But the fervor and zeal of these young radicals was hard to contain. They refused to disband.

This was a big problem. How do you get 12 million people to go home? But the ever ingenious Mao finally came up with a solution. In December 1968, he launched the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement.

Mao declared that privileged urban youth must be sent to rural areas to learn from workers and farmers. These privileged urban youth were high school and college graduates.

Mao proclaimed that by moving to the countryside, youths could “develop their talents to the full” through education among the rural population. According to Mao, “the countryside is a vast expanse of heaven and earth where we can flourish.” These lofty words became the slogan for the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement.

This program effectively dispersed the Red Guards, who mostly consisted of privileged urban youth. They moved to less populated areas where they would cause less disruption, and be reeducated. This program went on for the next 10 years, displacing a total of 17 million youths.

Conditions for them were often harsh, and those who could not handle the grueling labor and tough lifestyle often died. They’re referred to in China as the Lost Generation, as some never returned from this exile. However, one who did return was Xi Jinping, the current Communist Party General Secretary, and leader of China.

Xi has revived some aspects of the Cultural Revolution, such as by imprisoning and reeducating millions of ethnic Uighurs, while subjecting them to hard labor. But this is not a tale about Xi. It’s about someone whose cruelty has not yet been eclipsed by Xi. It’s about Xi’s inspiration from the past, Chairman Mao.
By the middle of 1969, the Red Guards had been completely disbanded. Now, with all opposition crushed and order finally returning to his nation, Mao could focus on rebuilding China in his own image.

Lin Biao was officially the new leader of China, after the purging of Liu Shaoqi, even though Mao controlled Lin. Mao ensured that Lin was constitutionally confirmed to be his successor, and that Maoism was made the official ideology of the Communist Party.

But this doesn’t mean the Cultural Revolution was over. No, not by a longshot. The Cultural Revolution was part of Mao’s vision of continuous revolution, and as such the revolution had to continue on. No, it wasn’t over, but it was entering a new phase.

This new phase was a safer phase for most citizens. It was a phase of new order, where they could rebuild their country out of the ashes of the chaos they had just survived.

But for the leaders of the Communist Party and government, things weren’t so safe. A tension lingered. Everyone near the top maintained a hyperconsciousness of the one at the very top. Mao was the man, and he was not one to be challenged in any manner. Everyone knew, or should have known, that they had to walk on eggshells if they wanted successful careers and good, long lives.

But one day someone forgot about this and slipped up. And that person was none other than the man directly below Chairman Mao himself. It was Lin Biao. Lin Biao, who was instrumental in the sacking of Liu Shaoqi,
and who took his place as the official leader of China, suddenly found himself in the hot seat.

Lin had been a very effective general in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), during the civil war. He had led the PLA to decisive victories in Manchuria, and in the taking of coastal provinces in Southeast China. His many successes had led him to the number three ranking among generals in the PLA.

So he had great influence within the PLA, and enjoyed its strong support. And although this was helpful for Lin, it was also problematic, since the PLA had many members in the Politburo. It left Mao feeling a little wary about what Lin could do with his political power, should he choose to usurp Mao.

But Lin knew it was wise to stay on Mao’s good side. And he tried. But this was not always easy to do, especially because of China’s deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union.

When the Cultural Revolution began, China isolated itself after declaring that both the Soviet Union and the United States were its enemies. The Soviets had once been allies of China, but Mao rejected them after he came to believe they were adopting revisionism and straying from the pure teachings of Marx and Engels.

Friction between China and the USSR increased, and they almost went to war in March of 1969, after a border clash near Siberia. By October 1969, war seemed inevitable and senior leaders evacuated Beijing, expecting hostilities to break out at any moment. So on October 18, Lin Biao issued an executive order to the PLA to prepare for war.

This seemed like a routine order one would expect from any ordinary leader of a country in a similar situation. But the problem for Lin Biao was that he was no ordinary leader. Even though it was a routine executive order, he had to pass it through Mao first, to gain his approval. Mao had him on that short of a leash. And he failed to pass it through him. Whoops.

The ever-paranoid Mao felt alarmed, and worried Lin was trying to usurp his authority. And he also worried that war would make the PLA even more powerful within the Politburo, and closer to Lin, thus increasing Lin’s stature at the expense of Mao’s.

Tension developed between Mao and Lin. Mao’s ruminating mind saw Lin as possibly allied with the Soviets, secretly plotting a small war with
the USSR as a ruse to gain enough popular support to depose Mao from power. This may sound crazy, but Mao was no stranger to complex plots, so it was easy for his imagination to run so wild.

Lin, on the other hand, feared Mao, and wanted to avoid getting on his bad side. He realized he’d screwed up big time, with that executive order, and he wasn’t sure how to get out of it. So for the next few years, he worried he was going to suffer the same fate as his predecessor, Liu Shaoqi.

In 1971, Mao invited U.S. President Richard Nixon to visit China. It’s speculated by some historians that one reason behind this invitation was to ally himself with the United States, in order to deter the Soviet Union from attacking China and assisting any coup plot Lin might be planning against him. But while this is speculation, it does make sense, due to Mao’s habitual manner of thinking in terms of complex plots to gain power.

In July 1971, Mao’s paranoia took him over the edge. He decided it was time to purge Lin and his supporters. What happened after this was bizarre, and has been subject to much debate, and has never been completely resolved.

The official Chinese government explanation is that Lin tried to assassinate Mao on September 11, 1971. First he tried to sabotage Mao’s train. But Mao unexpectedly changed his route and bypassed the saboteurs. Then he tried a couple of other assassination attempts, but Mao’s bodyguards intervened.

By the official explanation, it seemed Mao had incredible luck that day, perhaps bringing to mind the luck of Inspector Clouseau.

The official account goes on to say that Lin tried to flee the country after his repeated failures to kill Mao. On September 13, 1971, he boarded an airplane with his wife and son, and headed for the Soviet Union to seek

asylum. But he never made it. His plane got as far as Mongolia, where it crashed, killing all onboard.

That was the official explanation.

But in the late-1970’s, the Chinese government destroyed records related to their investigation of Lin’s death, lending concerns of some sort of cover-up. Analysts and experts outside China have expressed a lot of skepticism about China’s version of events. This is not only because the investigative records were destroyed, but also because the explanation seems improbable and somewhat nonsensical.

However historians do agree that Lin was killed in a plane crash in Mongolia on September 13, 1971. But they have never figured out how or why he would have flown to that location in the first place. Much of it makes no sense, and the details of Lin’s death remain a mystery to this day.
Chapter 29
Successors

China kept Lin Biao’s death a secret for awhile, and the public was not informed of it until two months later. Meanwhile, Lin’s supporters were either quietly purged or managed to find refuge in Hong Kong.

When the public was finally notified of his death, and of Lin’s assassination attempts on Mao, people were left feeling shocked and bewildered. Lin had been Mao’s hand-picked successor. It seemed impossible that their revered leader, whom they had worshiped like a god, could make a mistake. And this mistake was a biggie. A real biggie. Suddenly Mao seemed human and fallible in the eyes of the public, and not like a god, after all.

Mao himself felt bummed out about these events. He slipped into a cafard and secluded himself. His health deteriorated, and in January 1972, he suffered a stroke.

Mao wanted a successor who would continue his legacy, but now he didn’t know who to trust for that job. He grew nostalgic for the good old days, and for his old comrades who’d been purged at the start of the Cultural Revolution.

Zhou Enlai was still the premier, in spite of attempts by Jiang Qing to have him purged along with the rest of Mao’s old buddies. And Zhou encouraged Mao to rehabilitate some of his old comrades that Jiang and Lin Biao had purged. Zhou openly blamed the excesses of the Cultural Revolution on Lin, and used that as his excuse for trying to correct these excesses. Encouraging Mao to rehabilitate his old cronies was part of
Zhou’s effort to repair the damage.

Up to this point, Mao had been suspicious that Zhou wanted to reverse the Cultural Revolution. But now Mao saw Zhou in a new light, and his suspicions eased for a short while. And so he decided to choose him as his successor, much to the chagrin of his wife, Jiang Qing. Jiang wanted to be the chosen one.

Now Jiang would have to plot much more seriously to discredit Zhou and push him out of her way.

At Zhou’s urging, Mao rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping. Deng was an old comrade of Mao’s, who was a veteran of the Long March and the Civil War. Deng had also worked under Liu Shaoqi, and he’d been purged at the start of the Cultural Revolution, at the same time as Liu.

Mao now had Zhou as his successor. But Zhou also needed a successor. So he chose Deng, and in 1974, convinced Mao to appoint Deng as Vice Premier. This put Deng in the position to not only succeed Zhou, but also to succeed Mao, after both Mao and Zhou’s death.

This further angered Jiang, since she had been behind Deng’s purging in 1966. She regarded Deng as competition for power, and as a counterrevolutionary. She controlled the propaganda apparatus of the Communist Party, so she decided to use her power to do something about him. In 1975 she began a campaign to discredit him.

Around this time, Mao appointed Wang Hongwen, a national hero of the Cultural Revolution, to a highly powerful position in the Politburo. Wang soon allied himself with Jiang, and against Zhou and Deng. Jiang now had three strong allies in a political clique that included herself, Wang, Yao Wenyuan, and Zhang Chunqiao. They were all members of the Politburo’s very influential Standing Committee, and wielded tremendous political power.

Mao dubbed them the Gang of Four.
Chapter 30
The Death of Zhou Enlai

Zhou Enlai had been a stabilizing force in the Communist Party, and a big reason why the government was able to survive the Cultural Revolution. He was also very popular with the people. Almost as popular as Mao.

Zhou and Mao also had a history of working well together. Their history went way back to the hardscrabble, bloody days of the Civil War. Zhou had masterminded the Long March of 1934-1935, and during that march, Mao got into a power struggle against two other Communist leaders. Zhou backed Mao, and helped him to emerge victorious.

Mao’s victory in the power struggle of the Long March put Mao on top as the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and established Zhou as Vice-Chairman, in second rank behind Mao. They would both maintain high-ranking positions for the rest of their lives.

Zhou was very popular in China. He was a highly regarded national hero, and this made him almost as untouchable as Mao. Not only had he been a longtime ally of Mao, but Mao must have realized that going after him could easily backfire.
Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing, were both fearful and jealous of Zhou’s popularity. Mao wisely laid off of him, but during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang was determined to somehow get to Zhou. Since she couldn’t safely attack him directly, she decided to punish him indirectly, by going after those closest to him.

She had his adopted daughter, Sun Weishi, arrested by the Red Guards. They raped and tortured her for seven months, before she finally died in prison in 1968. That same year, Jiang had the Red Guards torture and murder his adopted son, Sun Yang, in the basement of Renmin University. And again that year, Jiang forced Zhou to sign an arrest warrant for his own brother.

This must have been hell for Zhou, but he somehow survived. And he managed to maintain his sanity, as well as his commitment to the Chinese people. He did his best to mitigate the effects of the Cultural Revolution, but only met with very limited success. But it was enough success to keep the fabric of society from completely unraveling, and to maintain a small, simulacrum of moderation within the Communist Party.

Jiang hated Zhou, and the feeling was probably mutual. So after Mao named Zhou to be his successor, Jiang and her Gang of Four stepped up efforts to persecute him. In 1973 and 1974 they directed the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign. This propaganda campaign cast Confucius in an unflattering light, and attempted to equate Zhou with Confucius, in order to turn public opinion against him.

In 1975, Jiang and the Gang of Four began a new campaign called, Criticizing Song Jiang, Evaluating the Water Margin. This too was an elaborate attempt to paint Zhou as a bad politician.

But these campaigns were not very successful. Zhou was almost as beloved as Mao, and the people didn’t buy into it. He was like Teflon and seemed immune to any of Jiang’s nefarious propaganda campaigns.

Mao’s opinion of Zhou had very briefly warmed in 1972, leading him to name him as his successor. But it cooled to him soon after, because he didn’t like how Zhou had been trying to reverse and modify some of the effects of the Cultural Revolution. But he knew it was too dangerous to go after him directly. Instead, he would have to wait for some sort of chance to take him out sneakily.

That opportunity presented itself in November 1972. That’s when
Zhou was diagnosed with bladder cancer. But his medical team was required to report this news to Mao first. In their report, they told Mao that Zhou had an 80-90% chance of survival, with treatment, which would include immediate surgery. But Mao ordered that Zhou should not be told of this diagnosis, and that there should be no treatment nor further examinations.

By the middle of 1974, Zhou was pissing blood and probably wondering what the hell was going on. It was now impossible to hide his diagnosis, so Mao ordered surgery in June, 1974. But it was too late to be very helpful. The cancer had metastasized.

Zhou made his last public appearance in January 1975. His health went steadily downhill after that, and he died of cancer in January 1976, at the age of 77.
Chapter 31
The Tiananmen Incident

After his death, Mao worried that if Zhou was publicly mourned, people would turn against him and his Cultural Revolution policies, which they knew Zhou had been trying to reverse or moderate. So only one official memorial ceremony was held, on January 15, 1976, at the Great Hall of the People, at Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

At that ceremony, Zhou’s friend and designated successor, First Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, delivered the eulogy, which included this personal tribute to Zhou’s character:

“He was open and aboveboard, paid attention to the interests of the whole, observed Party discipline, was strict in dissecting himself and good at uniting the mass of cadres, and upheld the unity and solidarity of the Party. He maintained broad and close ties with the masses and showed boundless warmheartedness towards all comrades and the people . . . We should learn from his fine style—being modest and prudent, unassuming and approachable, setting an example by his conduct, and living in a plain and hard-working way.”

This statement was interpreted by the suspicious Mao as a subtle way to criticize him and the Gang of Four, because their characters did not come anywhere close to that of Zhou’s. Deng had already been a target of their persecution, and after this eulogy they stepped up their efforts against him.

With Mao’s permission, the Gang of Four launched a Criticize Deng campaign. It was successful. First Vice Premier Deng had been expected to succeed Zhou as Premier, but instead, on February 4, 1976, another
Vice Premier, Hua Guofeng, was chosen for the job.

After Zhou’s funeral, Jiang and her Gang of Four launched the Five No’s Campaign, to prevent public displays of grieving. This campaign forbade honoring Zhou’s death, and instructed that there was to be: no wearing black armbands, no mourning wreaths, no mourning halls, no memorial activities, and no handing out photos of Zhou.

You can only push people so far, and the Chinese people had had enough. Resentment over the Cultural Revolution had been building. The Five No’s backfired, as the public turned against Mao and the Gang of Four. They said no to the Five No’s, and refused to comply. So more propaganda campaigns were attempted by the Gang against Zhou’s memory. But these only led to stronger resentment toward Mao and the Gang.

Tensions boiled over in what became known as the Tiananmen Incident. April 4, 1976, was the eve of the annual Qingming Festival, where Chinese pay homage to their deceased ancestors. That morning, thousands of people spontaneously gathered around the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square, and commemorated the life and death of Zhou Enlai. They laid wreaths, banners, placards, written homages, and flowers at the base of the monument.

This mass of common people also criticized Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four for their attacks on Zhou, and there were even a few brickbats slung at Mao and his Cultural Revolution.

By day’s end, up to two million people visited Tiananmen Square to pay tribute, from the lowest peasants to high-ranking military officials. It seemed a popular revolt was underway, yet it was completely spontaneous, with no coordination from any leadership.
Similar spontaneous mourning incidents occurred elsewhere in China, including Zhengzhou, Kunming, Tiyuan, Changchun, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangzhou (Canton).

The next day more crowds arrived at Tiananmen Square, only to discover that the police had removed all the tributes that had been left by the masses the day before. A riot ensued, and police cars were set on fire. Over 100,000 people forced their way into government buildings that surrounded the square.

The crowd finally dispersed that evening, and the police managed to arrest hundreds of those rioters who had lingered on the scene. They were sentenced to hard labor, but were later pardoned by Deng Xiaoping, after he finally managed to rise to power.

But at this point, Deng was running out of power. Mao wrongly suspected that Deng had organized the Tiananmen uprising, and on April 7, 1976, he was stripped of all his leadership positions. Deng feared for his life and fled Beijing for the relative safety of Guangzhou Province.
Jiang Qing, or Madame Mao, as she was also called, was ambitious to succeed her husband, Mao, upon his death. She wanted to be the next leader of China. But she was not very concerned about Mao’s selection of Hua Guofeng as his successor. Hua seemed like a placable, biddable pushover of a man. And this was probably why Mao had selected him. Mao preferred puppets.

When the time came for a showdown, Jiang felt confident she could easily depose Hua, or become his new marionettist.

And Mao’s health was failing, so it seemed a succession showdown could come at any time. He’d been a chain-smoker most of his adult life, and he had heart and lung disease. He’d suffered a stroke in 1972. And in March 1976, he had a major heart attack.

His last public appearance occurred on May 27, 1976. In July 1976, he suffered a second major heart attack. Then on September 5, 1976, his third major heart attack of the year left him hospitalized as an invalid.

Jiang, the ringleader of the Gang of Four, came to visit him in the hospital. But there was no sincere wish for his well-being. They had been separated for several years now, and their marriage was on the rocks, although few people knew about this.

She was allowed to tend to him, but the way she tended to him raised eyebrows with the medical staff. They warned her she was causing more harm than good, but she insisted on continuing this form of “care.”

Mao’s organs began to fail soon after Jiang’s arrival. His condition deteriorated rapidly. And shortly after midnight, on September 9, 1976,
Chairman Mao Zedong passed away from this Earth on a trajectory for wherever the souls of calloused, murderous tyrants are delivered. He was 82 years old.

He was still a hero with the people, in spite of the events since Zhou’s death, so many Chinese were deeply saddened by the news of Mao’s passing. His body lay in state at the Great hall of the People for one week, giving one million Chinese a chance to pay their respects. Many openly wept.

On September 18, 1976, a three-minute silence was observed nationwide, in Mao’s honor. However during this time, some people chose to fire guns, blow whistles, and sound horns. A million people packed into Tiananmen Square, where a band played the socialist standard, The Internationale. Finally, Hua Guofeng, the new leader of China, stood atop Tiananmen Gate and delivered a eulogy.

Mao had wanted cremation, but Jiang Qing demanded that he be embalmed and put on public display, similar to Lenin’s body. So his corpse was preserved in formaldehyde and eventually put on permanent display in 1977, in a mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. It remains there to this day, in a dimly lit chamber, watched by a military honor guard, and with an orange light shining upon his head.
Chapter 33
The Coup

Hua Guofeng was Mao’s chosen successor, but he had only held the number two position for seven months before Mao died. He was the new kid on the block, and so his influence among top Party members had not had time to gel. His position was tenuous, and he knew he was in for a tough power struggle with Jiang Qing and her powerful Gang of Four.

Jiang thought Hua was weak, and figured she’d quickly topple him. And she wasted no time in her efforts. The Gang of Four controlled state media, and shortly after Mao died, articles appeared in state-run publications about “principles” that Mao had supposedly laid down shortly before his death.

Also, urban militia groups commanded by supporters of the Gang were placed on high alert.

A meeting of the Politburo took place in late September, a few weeks after Mao’s death. Here Hua and Jiang openly clashed. Hua attacked the “principles” that had been appearing in state media. Jiang emphatically disagreed, stood up for the principles, and insisted that she be named the new Party Chairman. The Politburo was unable to decide which way to go, and ended the meeting without a ruling.
On October 4, 1976, an article appeared in state media warning that any revisionist who interfered with the principles would “come to no good end.” This was the Gang of Four telling Hua and his supporters to back off.

But for Hua, this was a life or death struggle. After all, he was up against one of the main leaders of the Cultural Revolution. He knew he had to win, or else risk persecution, imprisonment, and death by torture. A few days after Mao’s death, Hua had made contact with General Ye Jianying to discuss what to do about the Gang of Four. Ye was a powerful man. He was a member of the Politburo, the Defense Minister, and the Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. And Ye didn’t like the Gang, so he and Hua quickly agreed to conspire against it.

They reached out to Wang Dongxing, commander of an elite unit of the Secret Service. Wang had once been the chief of Mao’s personal bodyguard force, and was thought to be an ally of the Gang. The Gang trusted him, so if anyone could help out with a coup, Wang was their man.

Fortunately, he agreed to be part of the effort.

The conspiracy grew larger when Politburo members, Wu De and Chen Xilian joined the group. The cabal met secretly and passed notes to each other, rather than speaking out loud, in case they were being bugged. They quickly dismissed the idea of using official Party procedure to remove the Gang from power. This seemed like too much of a longshot, because the Gang had too many supporters within the Party. So they concluded that their best chances lay with using force.

They planned a coup, with all their note passing, and on October 6, 1976, they put this plan into motion. It was a Mission Impossible. A dangerous idea. But with Wang Dongxing’s invaluable help, perhaps they could pull it off.

Hua summoned three members of the Gang of Four to Zhongnanhai, which is a complex forming the central headquarters of the Communist Party of China, located adjacent to the Forbidden City. These three members were Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen.

Hua’s reason given for requesting their presence was to discuss the publication of Mao’s latest works, and the building of Mao’s Mausoleum. Meanwhile, Wang Dongxing had organized a group of Secret Service officers, who were made to swear an oath of loyalty and secrecy. They
were to arrest these three Gang members at the meeting, and were instructed to shoot to kill if any resisted.

Hua and General Ye awaited their arrival. And they each showed up, one-by-one, at separate times. When they passed through the swinging door of the entrance lobby, Wang Dongxing’s men arrested them, while Hua read off the charges against them. Then they were held at a lower level of the Zhongnanhai.

Zhang and Yao gave up without a fight. However, according to one historian, Wang Hongwen pulled out a gun and shot and killed two of Wang Dongxing’s men, before he was wounded and taken into custody. This could be true, as Wang Hongwen had gained national fame during the Cultural Revolution for his feats of bravery while fighting establishment forces in Shanghai.

Now all that was left was Mao’s widow, Jiang. She was also at the Zhongnanhai, in a different area, and oblivious to what was happening to her fellow Gang members. She was conducting a “Study Mao’s Work” session with her aides. After the study session ended, she took a few aides over to nearby Jingshan Park to pick apples. Here she was apprehended and arrested by Zhang Yaoci, one of Wang Dongxing’s men.

The arrest was easy, almost anticlimactic. She didn’t put up a fight. Nor did she say much. But as she was being led away, one of her servants spat at her. Apparently, Madame Mao was not well liked by those who worked for her.

That same evening, a task force was sent to occupy the Party’s propaganda headquarters, and take over the broadcast and TV stations of Beijing. Another group was sent to Shanghai, which was the Gang of Four’s main power base, to ensure nobody there rebelled against the coup.

The Gang of Four was sent to Qicheng prison in northwestern Beijing, where they would spend the next four years awaiting trial.

The next day, October 7, 1976, the Politburo met, and Hua Guofeng was named to the posts of Chairman of the Communist Party Central Committee, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. The coup was complete. Hua was now safe as Mao’s successor, and the Cultural Revolution was finally brought to an end.
Chapter 34
Trial of the Gang of Four

When the arrest of the Gang of Four was made public, spontaneous celebrations broke out all over China. The Chinese people were fed up with Jiang Qing and the Cultural Revolution. It was clear that their arrest was a very popular move, so the Communist Party jumped on the bandwagon.

The government-run media laid it on thick, denouncing the Gang, and calling them traitors. It linked them with Lin Biao, and blamed them for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. And a new movement was begun, called the Movement of Exposition, Criticism and Uncovering, where millions of former Red Guards were publicly criticized for having committed atrocities for the Gang of Four.

The trial of the Gang began in November 1980, and was televised so the public could see for themselves how the Party had turned against the Cultural Revolution. This trial was sometimes marked by outbursts from Jiang, who would protest loudly and sometimes burst into tears. She would then be hauled out of the courtroom.

Jiang represented herself, and was the only member of the Gang who bothered to argue against the charges. Her defense was that she was always obeying the orders of Chairman Mao Zedong, and from this trial she has been famously quoted as saying, “I was Chairman Mao’s dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite.”

But her defense fell flat. And it was bound to fall flat. It was a fait accompli. The Politburo had already determined everyone’s fate, and this trial was for show only.
While Jiang presented a defense, Zhang Chunqiao did not. He simply refused to admit he’d done anything wrong. However, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen confessed to their crimes and made a show of repentance. But confession or no, repentance or no, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. The outcome had been predetermined. They were all found guilty of various crimes related to the Cultural Revolution and alleged attempted coups.

On January 25, 1981, Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao were sentenced to death. Wang Hongwen was handed a life sentence, and Yao Wenyuan got 20 years.

Exactly two years later, on January 25, 1983, Jiang and Zhang’s death sentences were commuted to life.

But while Jiang was serving her life sentence, she was diagnosed with throat cancer. She refused an operation. Naturally her condition worsened, and in 1991 she was released from prison, on medical grounds, and admitted to a hospital. Then on May 14, 1991, at age 77, she hanged herself in a bathroom of the hospital.

She left a suicide note that read, “Today the revolution has been stolen by the revisionist clique of Deng, Peng Zhen, and Yang Shangkun. Chairman Mao exterminated Liu Shaoqi, but not Deng, and the result of this omission is that unending evils have been unleashed on the Chinese people and nation. Chairman, your student and fighter is coming to see you!”
Chapter 35
The Rise of Deng Xiaoping

The Deng that Jiang Qing so disparagingly referred to in her suicide note was Deng Xiaoping. Deng had been persecuted by Mao and Jiang Qing’s reviled Gang of Four. The arrest of the Gang was followed by widespread celebration and calls to restore Deng to power. Ironically, part of his popularity was just the fact that Jiang hated him so much.

In 1977, the year after the Gang’s arrest, Hua Guofeng relented to popular demand. He pardoned Deng and restored him to some of his former leadership posts.

Hua had been struggling as the leader of China, and he hoped pardoning Deng would help improve his popularity. But nothing could save Hua from himself, because he was stodgy, uncharismatic, and unimaginative. In another desperate attempt to improve his standing with the people, he aligned himself with Mao’s memory.

He instructed that his picture be placed side-by-side with Mao’s, in public buildings. And he adopted a policy published in the People’s Daily on February 7, 1977, stating, “We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave.”

But Hua had miscalculated. It so happened that the people were sick and tired of Mao’s old ways and were hoping for change. They were put off by this policy, and derisively referred to it as the Two Whatevers. The out-of-touch Hua lost a lot of popular support over this.

This presented an opportunity for Deng, and in “gratitude” for being
pardoned, Deng plotted against Hua to take control of China. In 1978, Hua favored a plain-old, milk-and-water, Soviet-style economic system, whereas Deng pushed for a more exciting market-based economic system. Party leaders supported Deng over Hua, and this further weakened Hua’s power.

By 1980, Deng’s political maneuvering had gradually ousted Hua from all his top leadership positions, and Deng became the undisputed leader of China. But he allowed Hua to quietly retire, thus establishing a new precedent in his country, where an ousted leader could lose a political struggle without suffering physical harm.

Deng would maintain leadership of China until the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protesters, in 1989. And during his time of leadership, China was transformed into a nation that barely resembled anything Mao had created. Deng believed China was in need of deep reform, and the reforms he enacted quickly and dramatically changed Chinese society and the economy.

For this, Deng Xiaoping has been referred to as the “Architect of Modern China.”

And as for continuous revolution, Deng put a scotch to that. He encouraged open criticism of the Cultural Revolution. He avoided any effort to completely destroy Mao’s reputation, but he did knock him off his god-like pedestal, by pointing out his mistakes. He famously described the late Chairman as fallible, being “seven parts good, three parts bad.”

His economic reforms were probably the most notable. He dismantled the commune system and allowed peasants to manage their own land the way they wanted, and to sell their goods in a free market. Thus, he allowed for the return of capitalism to China. The country quickly modernized, and the economy began to thrive.

On January 1, 1979, the United States officially recognized the
People’s Republic of China, and foreign trade between China and the West began to grow. Deng even visited the United States in 1979, meeting with President Carter and other dignitaries.

Deng improved relations with Japan, and set Japan’s economic system up as an example for China to follow. He also restored relations with the Soviet Union. And he negotiated with Great Britain and Portugal for the return of the colonies of Hong Kong and Macau to China, by promising a policy of “one country, two systems.”

In short, Deng Xiaoping was the fulfillment of Mao Zedong’s worst fears. Mao had justified his various persecution campaigns on the grounds that the Communist Party was full of capitalist-roaders, revisionists, and other counterrevolutionaries. Deng was guilty of all these things, because he certainly put China on a road to capitalism, he revised interpretations of Marxism, and he reversed the Cultural Revolution.

Deng proved Mao right, in a sense, but he also showed just how mistaken Mao was. Mao was a purist, always pushing for a Communist system free of capitalist notions. Mao took things to the extreme, and expected everyone to live that extreme, without moderation.

But the only way Mao was able to accomplish his extreme dream was to persecute and kill millions of his own people. That’s the problem with extremism that allows for no dissent or compromise. It can only survive behind the point of a gun. And when it eventually and inevitably collapses, it’s overwhelmed by a flood of pent-up resentment that quickly carries society in the opposite direction.

Ultimately, extremism is counterproductive, and thus both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary at the same time.
Chapter 36
Final Thoughts

Mao is considered by most historians to be the bloodiest dictator of the 20th century. He’s said to be responsible for the deaths of between 40 and 80 million Chinese, through starvation, persecution, prison labor, and mass executions.

Hitler comes in a distant second, with about 17 million lives lost under his policies and leadership. Stalin is thought by many to be right behind Hitler, or perhaps ahead, but this is an old notion, in vogue before the Soviet Union collapsed and its archives were opened to historians.

No, the distinction of third place now goes to King Leopold II of Belgium, who ruled until 1909. He and his Force Publique enslaved and killed roughly 10 million Congolese in Africa, and amputated the hands and feet of millions more, as a sick form of punishment.

But Stalin rates a close fourth place, right behind Leopold, with an estimated 9 million deaths under his belt, along with other related atrocities.

But I’m dabbling in controversy. These numbers vary in estimation, from one historian to another, and it’s impossible to get an exact count because these tyrants killed so damned many people, and record keeping was often spotty. So maybe Stalin beats Leopold, or Hitler actually loses to Stalin. Who knows? Who cares? They’re all assholes.

But as we can see, it’s likely that nobody came even close to matching Mao, for pure, bloodthirsty assholery. And in addition to all those deaths, he’s also blamed for the permanent crippling of millions more, from beatings and torture. Untold amounts of hardship, grief, and pain followed
in his wake. And all for a “good cause” where, in his mind, the end justified the means.

And on that note, some historians do argue that Mao did more good than harm. They contend that under his leadership, life expectancy, education, and health care improved, and the Chinese population increased from 550 million to 900 million. In this way, they try to help Mao justify the means, by pointing out a rosy end result.

I think it’s reasonable to say that some good did come out of Mao’s rule. However, I also think it’s reasonable to say that those good things could have been accomplished without all the murder and mayhem that Mao unleashed. Deng Xiaoping proved this.

The Cultural Revolution alone, killed up to 20 million people. And it idled universities for several years, while students went on a rampage of mass murder and persecution, thus setting back the advancement of knowledge, and allowing for the spread of ignorance.

It set the economy back also, as production fell by double-digits during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. And the emotional terror and trauma that people suffered was immeasurable.

The “greater good” was an excuse by Mao to inflict maximum torment on as many people as he could. It’s a warning to everyone, to beware of leaders who promise great things at great sacrifice.

Often, they’re not really looking out for the greater good. No, they have an ulterior motive. They have a sadistic streak that they want to take out on everyone. They just need popular support, so that they can inflict their campaigns of pain and suffering on innocent people whom they choose to villainize.

“Cultural Revolution” is a grand sounding, promising label applied to one of the greatest travesties in human history. It’s helpful to remember this when we consider other revolutions, as they arise and present themselves.

When we see demonstrators in the streets, bearing starry-eyed, glorious messages of profound social change, we are wise to be cautious. For everyone’s safety, we should consider their messages with a grain of salt. And it helps to measure the worth of their movement by the level of peace, and respect for dissent, that accompanies their cause.

I believe that only then can human society evolve and progress in a
direction that respects human life, and guarantees those necessary ingredients for quality of life. Which are peace and freedom. Only then can the greater good be achieved, with revolutions that benefit every individual.
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