

What did the Cultural Revolution accomplish?

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Greetings!!

We are gathering here today to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the launching of the Cultural Revolution. The question is: what did the Cultural Revolution accomplish that made it worth celebrating half a century later?

First of all, if it had not been for the Cultural Revolution, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping would have been able to carry out their capitalist development a decade earlier. The Cultural Revolution blocked the capitalist roaders from carrying out their plan, so it provided ten additional years to develop socialism and demonstrated its superiority. China's socialist construction from 1956 to 1976, a period of merely 20 years, showed us that socialism was not just an abstract concept, but a shining example of what could be accomplished when the proletarian class was in charge.

Before the Cultural Revolution was launched in 1966 the Revisionists in China were gathering strength to attack socialism on all fronts. They furiously attacked the Great Leap Forward and the formation of the People's Communes. After the Communes were established in 1958, they employed many different strategies to sabotage China's collectivized agriculture including schemes such as the "Three-self" and "One contract" campaign, designed to use profit motive to encourage peasants to leave the Commune. In the industrial sector after public ownership was established in 1956, the Revisionists worked relentlessly to dissolve the workers' permanent employment system in industrial enterprises and used various material incentives including the piece wage rates and bonuses to divide workers. They argued that the permanent employment system prevented industrial enterprises from recruiting workers from the countryside to keep wages low and profits high. The Revisionists also encouraged individual enterprises to impose rigid work rules to increase labor intensity in order to raise labor productivity and profits.¹

In hindsight we can understand more clearly how the Revisionists strategized to subvert socialist construction. The Peoples' Republic of China won the revolution against feudal landlords, foreign capitalists, and compradors by building a close alliance between workers and peasants. The socialist construction could only succeed by consolidating the worker-peasant alliance on a new material basis. The ownership by the whole people in the industrial sector and the collective ownership of agriculture provided the necessary conditions for this new material basis. However, the Revisionists tried at every turn to prevent this alliance from being consolidated.

Before the Cultural Revolution, there were fierce struggles between the socialist line and the capitalist line within the Communist Party – but most people in China were not aware of it. After Liberation the attitude of workers and peasants toward the Communist Party was generally one of overwhelming gratitude. They were grateful to the Communist Party for leading them to their liberation. The peasants were grateful to the Communist Party for leading the Land Reform that ended their exploitation under feudal landlords and the collectivization of agriculture. After the Communes were formed and stabilized agricultural production went up so the peasants enjoyed significant improvements in the standard of living, including better diet, healthcare, and education. Workers were grateful for the rights and benefits they received including job security, decent housing, healthcare, education, and a secure retirement. However, workers and peasants were not aware that what seemed to be the endowment of the Party could be easily taken away, unless they could engage in struggles to protect them. Mao Zedong saw that the only way for the revolutionary line to win was to expose the revisionists and to mobilize the masses to struggle against them.

The Cultural Revolution successfully exposed the Revisionists' plan; the masses learned how Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping attempted to carry out their Revisionist line in all spheres of the society. However, it was not enough for the masses to understand the struggles within the Party – they also had to learn how to struggle against the Revisionists themselves. The Cultural Revolution mobilized the masses and Mao and those in the Party who supported the revolutionary line gave direction to the struggle. When the Revisionists enticed workers and peasants with material bribes to divide them, the campaigns in the Cultural Revolution broke through their capitalist logic by putting politics in command. The launching of the Cultural Revolution delayed the capitalist reform for a whole decade. I think that was the first accomplishment of the Cultural Revolution.

The second accomplishment of the Cultural Revolution was the several unprecedented breakthroughs during the 10 years period. Mao understood that the transfer of the ownership of means of production from private to public was not sufficient to transform the Chinese society; society had to be transformed on all fronts – economically, politically, socially, ideologically and culturally. The launching of the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to transform the whole Chinese society, and it made several important breakthroughs. Even though these breakthroughs were still in their budding stage when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, their value is forever impactful because they were proven to be essential in transforming a society during the socialist transition. These major breakthroughs were the second accomplishment of the Cultural Revolution. I would like to briefly explain three of these breakthroughs.

The first breakthrough was major changes in industrial organization. As early as 1958, workers and cadres in the Anshan Iron and Steel Factory took initiative to innovate new ways of involving workers in decision making in running the factory. By March 1960 Mao Zedong had seen that the changes they made were profound and fundamental, and named their initiatives the Angang Constitution, which included five principles: (1) Put politics in command, (2) Strengthen Party leadership, (3) Launch vigorous mass movement, (4) Systematically promote the participation of cadres in production labor and of workers in management and (5) Reform unreasonable disciplinary rules; ensure close cooperation among workers, cadres, and technicians; and energetically promote technological innovations. Mao urged all factories to put the Angang Constitution principles into practice, but his call did not receive an enthusiastic response until the Cultural Revolution, when workers struggled to change their factories by instituting the Angang Constitution as part of their overall struggle to change society. Changes in the factories inspired by the Angang Constitution blocked the Revisionists' efforts to turn workers into replaceable wage labor. This new industrial organization was a remarkable breakthrough, a necessary change to establish the new relations of production during socialist transition.

Another significant breakthrough during the Cultural Revolution was Mao's education reform. This reform fundamentally changed the rules of selecting who could receive higher education. During China's 3000 years under feudalism, education was reserved for the privileged few. These elites, whose education was supported by the surpluses produced by the working people then used their education to rule the working people. Actually this has always been true in all societies divided by class. Education reform during the Cultural Revolution turned this system upside down for the first time in Chinese history and in the history of the world. The education reform instituted a new system of selecting workers, peasants and revolutionary soldiers for higher education by their co-workers. The State paid for their education and living expenses and a monthly stipend while they were in school. Upon graduation they went back to work in the same factory, collective or military unit. The Education Reform also revolutionized the content of college courses and with much more emphasis on practice. Students learned science and technology as well as Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought in order to change the material world and to transform themselves with the goal of serving the people. From this new education system sprouted a new generation of integrated working class intellectuals ready to take leadership in running the Worker State. The new education system that emerged from the Cultural Revolution demonstrated concretely how the next generation of proletarian leadership could be trained and cultivated to continue the revolution.

Another major breakthrough was the practice of the broadest and most comprehensive democracy. Democracy was something completely alien in China because of its long history of feudalism. The ordinary people had to pledge their absolute loyalty and obedience toward the emperor and to all his officials. During the Revolutionary War, democracy was practiced to a limited extent in the revolutionary bases; people were encouraged to speak their mind and made suggestions and posed criticisms to the revolutionary leaders. Cadres also engaged in the practice of criticism and self-criticism. The revolution succeeded because peasants and workers trusted the Communist Party and recognized that Party leaders were qualitatively different from past rulers. After Liberation all major changes in China were made by first mobilizing the masses: from the mass movement in Land Reform, to the Anti-graft and Anti-rightist Movements, to the campaign to eliminate pests and diseases, and to the Great Leap Forward, launched to establish the Peoples Communes and industrialize China's countryside. Then in 1966 the launch of the Cultural Revolution brought mass movement to an even higher level when people freely practiced what was called the "Big Four Freedoms": the freedom to a Big Voice, Big Openness, Big Debates, and the freedom to put up Big Character Posters. The "Big Four Freedoms", together with the freedom for workers to strike, were written into China's new Constitution in 1975. These freedoms expanded democracy to the broadest scope. The practice of democracy was another breakthrough of the Cultural Revolution. Broad democracy was supported and encouraged, because the Communist Party trusted the masses and believed change was only possible with their participation and validation. The masses returned their trust to the Communist Party and together they fought to build a new society.

These major breakthroughs were the second major accomplishment of the Cultural Revolution. Through understanding these major breakthroughs we learn not only that class struggle continues during the socialist transition, but the Cultural Revolution also has also given us the concrete content of class struggle in all the spheres of the society necessary to move society forward. Although these changes were only carried out for one short decade, they became fundamental and deep-rooted in Chinese society.

I conclude my talk with a third important accomplishment of the Cultural Revolution.

A vast number of people from all walks of life participated in the Cultural Revolution. Through their participation in the complicated struggle, they began to understand the fundamental differences between capitalist development and socialist development. This understanding has been deepened by the effects of the Capitalist Reform and Opening up policies over the past thirty some years. Because of the Cultural Revolution, ordinary people in China have been able to compare and contrast socialism of the past and capitalism in the current time. They understand that the current regime is not here to

“serve the people.” They understand that the current regime does not stand with the workers and peasants and stands instead with the business owners who oppress them. Government officials have become corrupt, placing their interest first just as rulers did before Liberation. The Chinese “Communist Party” has been unrelenting in its assault against the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, precisely because that legacy makes it difficult for them to carry out capitalism under the guise of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

We are celebrating the Cultural Revolution today because it gave socialism the chance to develop ten additional years. We are celebrating the Cultural Revolution, because of these major breakthroughs I just talked about. We are also celebrating the Cultural Revolution because it is extremely relevant to the current and future struggles in China. The counterrevolutionaries today regard the Cultural Revolution as their number one enemy by viciously attacking and distorting it. They can hate it as much as they want but they cannot erase the impact of the Cultural Revolution from the Chinese society.

In China today the Cultural Revolution is a stark dividing line between the Left and the Right. The Left in China was defeated 40 years ago when counterrevolutionaries seized political power and began its Capitalist Reform. However, the Left has not faded away. On the contrary, forces on the Left have revived and have been fighting furiously and relentlessly against the Right, who now hold political and economic power. As the contradictions in Chinese society intensify, forces on the Left are further strengthened. They have fought those in power in every way possible – by engaging in ideological, economic, and political struggles. They have published books and articles in print and online; held public forums on critical issues; engaged in struggles against environmental pollution and against Genetically Modified foods; formed study groups to discuss Marx, Lenin and Mao; organized students to learn from workers and to investigate and publicize poor working conditions in factories; conducted mass rallies where they delivered speeches and sang revolutionary songs; and tested all conceivable means to organize workers. Now with the most serious economic crisis impending, and with rising numbers and increasing scale of labor and environmental and other protests, the Left is ready to battle. These current experiences are a testimony to the enduring legacy of Mao, his teaching, and the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese revolution and its socialist construction transformed China from a poor underdeveloped country exploited by imperialist powers to become an independent country free from foreign domination and exploitation. During the socialist transition working people in China commanded the highest respect ever in human history, and they exerted their utmost efforts to build a new society for future generations. It was a country full of hope, pride, and aspiration. The Cultural Revolution’s major breakthroughs clarified and articulated the fundamental differences between socialist development and

capitalist development and showed us the concrete path to continuing class struggle during the socialist transition. We can say with confidence, “Socialism has not failed”. The counterrevolutionaries seized power from the proletariat. We just have to take the power back and WE WILL.

¹ See chapter III in Pao-yu Ching, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: China's Continuing Class Struggle Since Liberation*, Institute of Political Economy, Manila, 2012