

A Personal View of China's Cultural Revolution

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IN SEPTEMBER I attended a scientific meeting in Moscow and then, following an invitation of the Scientific and Technological Association of China, I went to Peking. When my Russian colleagues heard this, and that I was taking my wife, they were aghast. According to their information China was in uproar and certainly not a safe place for any foreigner. They did their best to dissuade us from our foolhardy plan. These gloomy forebodings contrasted strangely with the gorgeous bouquets of flowers that awaited us at Peking airport.

However, as we drove into the city we soon noticed that it was unusually astir. Huge crowds of young people with red arm-bands were milling about in the streets in an atmosphere of general excitement. All available wall space which was not taken up with slogans or portraits of Mao Tse-tung was pasted over with sheets and sheets of paper closely covered with writing. They turned out to be suggestions—proposed by individuals, or groups, or organizations—for changes to be made in the life of the country, ranging over practically all subjects from the renaming of streets to the reduction of income differentials. Soon we were to learn that this was not confined to Peking. Sian in the west, Shanghai in the east, and Canton in the south, all presented the same aspect; and the suggestions were not only in the streets but also in every factory and every agricultural commune. Everywhere they were being studied with great interest, and whatever their outcome may be ultimately, they certainly testify to a new high level of literacy.

young men, who were polite and perfect hosts, offered to answer any questions on the cultural revolution which we would like to ask. We soon dealt with the basic problems such as the eradication of old ideas, old culture, custom, and habits of the bourgeois society, and their replacement by the new concepts of the proletariat. The standard answers came clear and decisive, but when we went over to more specific questions the discussion became really animated.

I asked what should happen to a courtly love poem written a thousand years ago in the T'ang dynasty. The answer was that a court lady could be of no interest to the proletariat. So I varied the problem by making her a beautiful daughter of the people. The student who had been firm about the court lady was now not quite so certain, but was still inclined to think that sentimental love was not much help to the proletariat. But he was immediately overruled by another one who pointed to chapter thirty-two in the book, which states that besides the political criterion the artistic one, too, had to be considered and, he concluded, if the poem was artistically valuable it should stand. He reinforced his argument with another quotation from the same chapter to the effect that disputes on art and science must never be settled in a summary fashion. The whole discussion turned out to be a brisk intellectual exercise, remarkably free from high-sounding sentiment or cheap generalities. We left after about two hours, again with clapping and cheering, now reinforced by many warm handshakes.

Whatever we saw of the cultural revolution gave the impression of a carefully planned and efficiently organized exercise. In such a vast operation there may have been—and probably were—some minor excesses of zeal. For instance, in some of the museums we saw the remainder of paper strips with slogans condemning 'old culture' which some youngsters had pasted on to stone figures of the Ming dynasty. However, now all the museums were closed, except to foreign visitors, and in front of a large pagoda in Chekiang we found a notice saying that this was not a 'bourgeois relic' but a national treasure belonging to, and protected by, the proletariat. We saw no real damage, and any that may have been done is likely to be insignificant in comparison with the vast programme of maintenance and reconstruction of historical monuments carried out by the Communist government, which is still going on.

As October 1 approached, the untidy looking suggestion sheets were removed to make place for more slogans and still more pictures of Mao Tse-tung. The loudspeakers under my hotel window became busier than ever, starting up at 2 a.m. after a rest of less than four hours. The great parade, too, was quite different from previous years. Instead of the colourful displays, there was a huge column of two and a half million Red Guards marching for hours

The cultural revolution was certainly with us wherever we went. The pictures in the hotel rooms had been replaced by quotations from Mao's works, often in his own calligraphy. The air hostess would stand up in the aisle, put on her most angelic face, which contrasted somewhat with the stumps of newly amputated pigtails, and read us a chapter of Mao's thoughts. This was coupled with an assurance that the crew, too, had studied it carefully and that the plane would arrive punctually and safely at the next destination, which it invariably did. On the trains the lesson would be read by the girl who served the tea. In the intervals of a variety show or an acrobatic performance, an announcer before the curtain read passages from Mao which were solemnly repeated by the audience.

Always these quotations are read from a little octavo volume of less than 300 pages which is bound in bright red plastic and which peeps conspicuously out of practically everyone's jacket pocket. Its universality was demonstrated to us on the very first day when we were taken to meet the Red Guards at one of the Peking secondary schools. If we had been a bit apprehensive, any uneasiness was soon dispelled by the rousing welcome, with hand-clapping and waving of the little red book, which awaited us. At present most universities and secondary schools are not in normal session, which does not mean, however, that the young people are idle. We were told that they were busy remoulding their teachers' antiquated outlook. This sounds pretty grim, but, judging by appearances, the teachers, whom we met too, seemed quite happy.

What clearly was being done by both teachers and students, was to read Mao Tse-tung's works and to discuss them. We were now confronted with the result of this effort. The

past the grandstand of Tien An Men, waving their red books at Mao Tse-tung, Lin Piao, and Chou En-lai. The only emblems carried were pictures of Mao. Before and during the holidays there were long queues outside all book-shops which sold nothing else but the works and pictures of Mao Tse-tung.

All these manifestations of the cultural revolution completely focused on one man tend to be incomprehensible and therefore irritating to a westerner. On the other hand, our reaction is a cause for surprise to the Chinese. It seems to me that the trouble is this. Because, like us, Asiatic people now use railways, aircraft, telephones, and the radio, we expect them to think and react also as we do. In fact, they do not. While their reasoning may follow the same lines as ours, their way of expression can be radically different. While to us the boundless adulation accepted by Mao Tse-tung would stamp him as a megalomaniac, to the Chinese it is simply the acknowledgement of that spirit which, after a century of decay and misery, has turned China again into a great and prosperous power.

I am fully conscious of having used the word



'prosperous' because it is the only way in which I can describe the truly miraculous economic advance which China has made in only seventeen years. The progress in agriculture and, above all, in industry which I have seen since my first visit to China early in 1960 is hardly believable. Then, people were struggling with the beginning of industrialization; now, there is practically nothing which the West can produce and China cannot; from merchant ships to motor-cars, from computers to electron microscopes, and from high-grade metal alloys to synthetic insulin. And here, incidentally, is a case where they have out-paced us. To the Chinese the essence of this miracle is the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. To them the thought of Mao Tse-tung means the will and the direction which has guided 700 million pairs of skilful hands, backed by

700 million nimble brains into the single task of making China strong again.

To me it seems utter folly to try to ascribe the cultural revolution to economic difficulties. Coming from the Soviet Union one is astonished by the much greater range and availability of consumer goods in China. In big or small towns and even in the villages the shops are full of goods and we saw no queues, except for Mao Tse-tung's books or pictures. People move through the department stores and markets appraising the goods and making their choice as in any western city. Soft living is at hand, and herein seems to lie one of the main reasons for the cultural revolution.

When I visited China four years ago, luxury goods like high-heeled shoes and elegant brocade dresses were making their appearance. The easy life for a new privileged class seemed to be in sight. And it is here where I think the cultural revolution has struck. It tells the young generation that the struggle, of which they themselves had no direct experience, is by no means ended and that there is a task before them. It warns them that, if they become soft,

the enemy who occupies Taiwan and is fighting in Vietnam will bring back the bad old days. They are asked to study and follow the thought of Mao Tse-tung, which simply means to continue with all their energy the hard work of the previous generation in bringing about improvements.

The main theme appears simple and straightforward, but of course it has a number of aspects. By heritage the Chinese are good and obedient citizens who would follow only too easily the orders of some new privileged class, and they are therefore warned to watch out for, and guard against, its emergence. The revolution is specifically aimed at the bourgeois life which came to China with the western concessions. Hence the young workers are urged to show initiative, to make suggestions for



improvements, and not to be afraid of criticizing somebody whose family background used to impress them. The China of tomorrow will need not just a few leaders but many people who must be able to think for themselves and who have learned to take decisions in all walks of life. The Red Guards are the activists of the young generation, trained in huge numbers to apply the teaching of Mao Tse-tung. They are a militant, but not a militarist, organization. Their weapon is the pen, or rather the brush, and not the rifle.

The ultimate aim is to create a new form of socialist society in which each must give according to his ability and where each will receive according to his need. With it, the young are told, China will lead the world and usher in a new era of mankind.

This facet of the cultural revolution is a development which, one feels, had to come sooner or later. The spirit of the resurgent China was not going to be satisfied by becoming merely a super-Japan, a western-type technological society sustained by Asiatic skill and manpower. From this pattern China had to break away by making her own, specifically Chinese, contribution. As Mao grows old, he may want to make sure that China is set on her own way; and so the break with the past has come now.

The Chinese are realists, and they candidly discuss the fact that Mao will not live for ever. What concerns them now is to ensure that his inspiration of the new China should remain alive. Two things are clearly needed: the right choice of a successor, and to make certain that this choice will be followed. For the first, the party has fallen back on that force which, more than any other, brought victory to them seventeen years ago: the liberation army. The core of this force were the patriotic young students, who, at the time of the Japanese invasion, made their way to Yen-an in north-west China to be trained under Mao Tse-tung's leadership. They were not only trained as soldiers but as responsible revolutionaries whose duty it would be to make friends with the people wherever they went. It was, above all, this spirit which brought them victory in a country where soldiers had only too often behaved like bandits. Lin Piao is the leader of this army, and it is the army which has prepared the little red book.

The raising of one man to a level which no ordinary human being can attain may be alien to us, but it is not new to the eastern mind. From this position which Mao Tse-tung has now reached, his inspiration can direct human society. His choice of a successor cannot and will not be questioned.

I am not a politician, but I went to China as a scientist who had the opportunity of witnessing one of the most remarkable happenings of our age. All I have done is to analyse my observations and to draw conclusions which, of course, may or may not be the correct ones.

—Third Programme