

POLITICIZATION OF CULTURE: CHINA'S ATTEMPT AT RECLAIMING CULTURAL LEGITIMACY AFTER MAO'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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The Cultural Revolution in China was Mao Zedong's attempt to redefine China within a new historical and traditional context by removing elements of Chinese heritage and traditions deemed unproductive in pursuit of a socialist utopia. The Cultural Revolution was a way to revitalize the legitimacy of his leadership after the disastrous failure of the Great Leap Forward. However, in China's post-Mao history, the country's heritage and traditions became imperative and integral in China's attempt to re-brand itself politically, domestically, and internationally. The perception of culture and heritage evolves in accordance to the specific dominant political views within specific dominant ideologies. Therefore, culture and tradition become political tools—in both their eradication and subsequent proliferation—utilized by the state to assert cultural dominance and influence on its citizens and other countries.

The Cultural Revolution in China left indelible consequences on the country's cultural and historical trajectory, as centuries of pre-modern culture and traditions were destroyed or appropriated for the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This cultural and historical interregnum not only attempted to delegitimize China's pre-revolution past but also created a state constructed out of a cultural and historical void. The rise of modern China in the 1970s is the country's re-genesis in medias res,¹ or without any preceding context and reference points, as it is severed from its connection to its past heritage and traditions. According to the rhetoric propagated by Mao Zedong, China's traditional culture and heritage were impediments to

1 Encyclopædia Britannica, "In Medias Res," last modified December 1, 2015, <https://global.britannica.com/art/in-medias-res-literature>.

the formation of a socialist utopia because they were constant reminders of China's humiliating history of subjugation. China's culture, in contrast to that of nations that had invaded and occupied the country in its modern history, was considered backward and incompatible with the values needed to create Mao's socialist vision.

However, after Mao's death, there was a significant shift in the perception towards culture, and it became re-conceptualized within the new political rhetoric and environment. Therefore, cultural and traditional elements that were previously destroyed during Mao's Cultural Revolution were revived and imbued with the purpose of creating a new and strengthened national identity. The state did this through several concerted efforts to reconstruct China: from a new and unknown entity to one with a legitimate history. The state intended to create a softer national image that was not hostile and offensive to other countries. In contrast to Mao's vision of China as a socialist utopia, later generations of leaders wanted to resituate China into its traditional and pre-modern historical trajectory and to re-establish its former status as the apex of cultural superiority, as it had during the period of the Middle Kingdom. The Chinese state continues to encourage efforts to rebuild the country's image as the cultural center of the world, thus enforcing its prestige and status as a regional and international power. Post-Mao China's attempts to reclaim ownership of traditional cultural identity is in response to not only recovering from the previous generation's devastating Cultural Revolution but also achieving regional cultural dominance and hegemony. Therefore, culture and tradition in China have become tools of rhetoric, and its context evolved depending on the dominant ideology that shaped the political environment at specific junctures of Chinese history.

A State, *in medias res*

Mao found it necessary to remove political, social, and cultural elements that would threaten his vision of a socialist utopia, in which past notions of wealth and class were irrelevant.² This necessitated the Cultural Revolution from 1966 till 1976, at the peak of Mao's political control, which instead produced a litany of disturbing and long-lasting consequences. The event

2 Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 2008), 52.

created a society without any discernible social structure in its wake and resulted in the displacement and deaths of millions of Chinese, all for the Party elite's own political agenda.³ Elements of traditional Chinese culture and heritage were systematically eradicated and destroyed, resulting in the loss of China's ancient civilizations.⁴ Thus, the state was inadvertently re-conceptualized and underwent a new national identity formation in medias res without any historical context; all vestiges of traditional culture, heritage, and individual self-expression were violently removed from social and public consciousness.

The Cultural Revolution

The destruction of traditional culture and heritage in the Cultural Revolution-era of China further entrenched Mao's personality cult, legitimizing his leadership and control over the Party and the state. The Cultural Revolution was used to remove dissidence and political threats within the Party and to rid Chinese egalitarian society of any elements containing subversive sentiments, reinforcing the people's loyalty to Mao and the Party.⁵ Mao's leadership and position within the Party had experienced a backlash after the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), which was an attempt to boost the country's economy through agriculture and industrialization. The Great Leap Forward failed because it resulted in famine, resulting in public disillusionment in Mao's political legitimacy.⁶ To deflect the scrutiny and criticism from his political rivals and the masses, Mao targeted China's pre-modern history and society's non-socialist characteristics as being the source for the Great Leap Forward's failure. Therefore, Mao and his allies could justify the identification and removal of elements and individuals that were perceived to be threats to his political control.⁷ By encouraging Chinese youth to turn violently against intellect and traditional culture as a display of unwavering loyalty to him, Mao was able to regain public support by developing a cult of

3 Lucian W. Pye, "Reassessing the Cultural Revolution," *The China Quarterly*, no. 108 (1986): 597.

4 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 118–20.

5 Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 68.

6 Jeremy Brown, "Great Leap City: Surviving the Famine in Tianjin," in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, eds. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 227.

7 "Cultural Revolution," University of Washington, accessed December 24, 2016, <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/graph/9wenge.htm>.

personality.⁸ By denouncing China's traditional history and cultural heritage, Chinese society was politically reconstructed, with no historical precedent, allowing Mao to manipulate the loyalty of the people for his personal pursuit of power and legitimacy.

The Cultural Revolution involved institutional deliberation of which aspects of Chinese culture, if any, were conducive to the development of a socialist state and how to treat characteristics that did not advance the values that Mao wanted for the country. According to Mao's perspective, traditional culture and history were reminders of historical elements (e.g. traditional art and history) that did not have any utilitarian value and were pervasive symbols of capitalism and the country's dynastic history.⁹ With Mao's encouragement, Chinese traditional art and architecture were destroyed by youths, leaving behind a cultural landscape devoid of vestiges of the past. Under Mao, China had become a country liberated from its history of political humiliation and economic stagnation.¹⁰ Without the cultural burdens of the past defining Chinese identity, the Party had the opportunity to create a new form of history and national identity according to its own specifications, instead of following the evolutionary historical trajectory of identity formation. However, because the Cultural Revolution occurred without precedence, the Chinese state during and after this event is severed from its own historical trajectory and remains an outlier.¹¹ Therefore, Chinese national identity during this period, and the one that succeeded it, is an anomaly. It is the product of a conscious process by the Party to separate the Chinese state from its past, thus removing the essence of a rich history and heritage within the context of Chinese history.

Cultural elements that could be appropriated by the Party for its political agenda became mediums for reinforcement and propagated the Party's ideology and norms for the population to adhere and exemplify in their daily life. Aspects of culture and heritage that had no utilitarian value, or considered too subversive in content and context, were destroyed to ensure that these undesirable elements of China's imperial past could not be revived, thus minimizing the threat of the past on the Party's desired

8 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 102–04.

9 Yomi Braester, "Mansions of Uneven Rhyme: Beijing Courtyards and the Instant City," in *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99–100.

10 Suzanne Ogden, *China's Unresolved Issues: Politics, Development, and Culture* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 64.

11 Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 50–51.

formation of the egalitarian culture and identity.¹² Rather than remaining as mediums of self-expression and historical significance, these cultural products were appropriated and reframed by the Party to promote its own values and utilitarian agenda.¹³ For example, Peking opera, which was once a form of narrating traditional Chinese myths and stories of past dynasties, was reinvented to proliferate the tenets and ideologies of the Party.¹⁴

After the failure of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution was Mao's overt political attempt to regain legitimacy and credibility and to solidify the loyalty of the Chinese people for the socialist cause. By removing non-socialist and traditional elements that did not align with state rhetoric, Mao and his loyalists were able to reconstruct China's political and social history that Mao desired. Furthermore, Mao was adamant about how his legacy would be remembered by future generations, which needed to be mitigated after the failure of his earlier economic and political reforms. To reconstruct the histories of China and the Party, Mao was required to castigate the country's non-socialist past as detrimental to state development. This led to the eventual destruction of China's past and traditional cultures and thus removed them from the anticipated social and political trajectory. The iteration of China constructed during and after the Cultural Revolution appeared in medias res and cannot match the country's historical contexts before and after the events.

Reclaiming National History and Culture in China after Mao

After the demise of Mao and the appointment of more practical leaders within the CCP, the Party could not immediately dismantle Mao's cult of personality because they could not fully discredit the extent of his influence and control over the masses.¹⁵ However, in order to delineate the Party from its tumultuous Cultural Revolution past and to gain power, it was imperative to reposition China back into its predicted historical trajectory.¹⁶

12 Chris Berry, "Entering Forbidden Zones and Exposing Wounds," in *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*, ed. Edward Beauchamp (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.

13 Michael J. Lynch, *Mao* (London: Routledge, 2004), 177–202.

14 Ruru Li, "Mao's Chair: Revolutionizing Chinese Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 27, no. 1 (2002): 4.

15 Lynch, *Mao*, 177–202.

16 Heidi Yu Huang, "Gramsci and Cultural Hegemony in Post-Mao China," *Literature Compass* 12, no. 8 (2015): 410.

By reclaiming ownership of the same non-socialist culture and heritage that it had once denounced, the Party legitimized its position in national history by reinforcing the notion that it was responsible for the liberation of the masses, when contrasting the quality of life of the liberated proletariat to the capitalist oppression. By resituating the Chinese state back into a natural, evolutionary history, the state would be able to justify its cultural dominance and enhance its global position. As such, increased interest in state and international politics facilitated the Party's position to reclaim a sense of national heritage and culture, furthering the role of the state in China's cultural development.

As more individuals expressed interest in the country's pre-socialist history, the CCP saw the need to meet these demands by reviving cultural and heritage products that were once considered symbols of the country's shameful capitalist and bourgeois past.¹⁷ As Chinese society became more open and receptive, the people became more critical of the conditions in Chinese history that precipitated the Cultural Revolution and focused on the prevention of such an event from reoccurring.¹⁸ Rather than claiming that its history was problematic and a hindrance to social development, Chinese society and the CCP fully recognized that the country's past and cultures are part of the cause and the solution to healing from national trauma.¹⁹ Therefore, the revival of traditional culture and heritage was a conscientious means for the country to confront and reconcile with its past.

Whose National Culture?

The authenticity of the national culture being propagated by the post-Mao CCP needs to be questioned. In the context of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultured China, which culture receives the privilege of becoming the national identity, and how are other cultures represented in this new context? Since the inception of the Han dynasty, ethnic Han culture and philosophy underlies China's national and cultural identity, and the country's cultural policies continue to feed into this hegemonic national identity.²⁰

17 Lisa Bixenstine Safford, "Cultural Heritage Preservation in Modern China: Problems, Perspectives, and Potentials," *ASIA Network Exchange* 21, no. 1 (2013): 8.

18 Pye, "Reassessing the Cultural Revolution," 602.

19 Ban Wang, "Postrevolutionary History in a Traumatic Key," in *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*, eds. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 94–95.

20 Michael Barr, *Who's Afraid of China?: The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power* (London: Zed Books,

Since China's population comprises over fifty minority ethnic groups, with insignificant population sizes in inaccessible locations, it would be essentialist to conflate the cultural hegemony of one dominant ethnic group to represent the entirety of China's population.²¹ Therefore, the Party faces issues of equal representation and protection of all ethnicities and cultures, which threatens the country's cultural diversity.

In a socialist state like China, the question of ethnic and cultural minorities is a predicament that democratic multi-cultural and multi-ethnic countries do not have to answer; their political systems preclude unmediated cultural representation as a condition to democracy.²² The CCP displays some benevolence to indicate that it acknowledges the presence of minority ethnic groups in the country's social and cultural identity, but groups must exist within boundaries constructed by the Party's political agendas.²³ There is a precarious balance between the will of the socialist state and the protection of ethnic minority rights, as the Party maintains political control to prevent a volatile multi-ethnic and cultural environment.²⁴ Even though the Party has policies that encourage the development of minority cultures and ethnicities, the hegemonic relationship between the dominant culture and minority cultures perpetuates a singular national cultural identity.

The CCP's Present Goal

The Party's efforts to revive national history and culture stems from its attempt to construct the country's political legitimacy in an international context and to justify its position as a dominant global figure. Through an overt display of soft power to its neighbors and other international powers, the CCP spares no political or economic resources in enhancing its global status and promoting Chinese culture within China and abroad.²⁵ For example, the proliferation of Confucius Institutes in other countries legitimizes China's status in the world, allowing China to market itself as

2011), 45; Ke Fan, "Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Socialist China," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 12 (2016): 2103.

21 Qian Zheng, *China's Ethnic Groups and Religions* (Singapore: Cengage Learning, 2011), 33–34.

22 Jostein Gripsrud, "The Cultural Dimension of Democracy," in *Media, Democracy and European Culture*, eds. Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Madsen (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 197–214.

23 Fan, "Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Socialist China," 2097.

24 Wenshan Jia et al., "Ethno-Political Conflicts in China: Toward Building Interethnic Harmony," in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, eds. Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert (New York: Springer, 2012), 188–89.

25 Barr, *Who's Afraid of China*, 19.

having adequate solutions for the social and cultural problems that plague Western countries.²⁶ The 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing provided the perfect platform for the country to shed its hostile, offensive image and to establish a softer, more welcoming environment for foreigners.²⁷ Disassociating itself from its recent hostile past, the state reconnects with its national history and culture to prove its pacifist and virtuous nature, with the goal of building relations and dominance through mutual trust instead of force.²⁸

Conclusion

Under the sole control of Mao Zedong, the CCP launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to improve the country's egalitarian economic goals and to legitimize the CCP's social and political authority in China that had suffered from the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward. It was imperative for Mao to tighten his political control by removing elements that would impede the construction of his vision of a socialist utopia. Even though the Cultural Revolution's purpose makes retrospective sense in the specific historical context, Mao's policies and the events that transpired created a China that appears in medias res; it does not follow the projected trajectory of Chinese political and social development.

To understand Chinese society that was the consequence of this unprecedented event, researchers must situate it within the context of the preceding historical, socio-political, and economic conditions of China. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the Kuomintang, Chinese society was not prepared for the propagation of socialist economic policies, which resulted in the failed Great Leap Forward—a blow to Mao's political authority—and led to the disillusionment with this political and economic model. In Mao's perception, it was imperative to destroy these cultural and socio-political structures that continued to promote capitalist values and ideals. Therefore, the destruction of national culture was not a spontaneous event but a careful political maneuvering to secure the political position of Mao and his

26 Joe Tin-yau Lo and Suyan Pan, "Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power: Practices and Paradoxes," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46, no. 4 (2016): 515.

27 "The Beijing Olympics: Focus on Chinese Diplomacy," *Strategic Comments* 14, no. 2 (2008): 1–2.

28 Christopher A. Ford, "Realpolitik with Chinese Characteristics: Chinese Strategic Culture and the Modern Communist Party-State," in *Strategic Asia 2016-17: Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific*, eds. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016), 29–30.

loyal supporters.

However, after Mao's death, the CCP, although it could not fully discredit Mao's legacy, did alter its cultural policies to encourage diversity and the country's soft power image for the benefit of its political position. The Party altered its position regarding traditional Chinese culture to enhance political legitimacy to change perceptions regarding Chinese society and culture, within China and abroad. Therefore, the CCP's post-Mao culture policies are set not to deny its pre-modern and pre-socialist history and culture but to embrace and incorporate them into the identity of modern China, creating a new national cultural identity.