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China’s Scourge

There is a strange symmetry to China’s twentieth century, and much of it is linked to the ideological Cold War. At the beginning of the century, China’s republican revolution was overtaken by Communism and conflict. And at the end of the century, Communism was overtaken by money and markets. In between lay a terrible time of destruction and reconstruction, of enthusiasm and cynicism, and of almost never-ending rivers of blood. What marks these Chinese revolutions most of all is their bloodthirst: according to a recent estimate, seventy-seven million Chinese died unnatural deaths as a result of warfare or political mass-murder between the 1920s and the 1980s, and the vast majority of them were killed by other Chinese.[1]

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Communist state that Mao Zedong and his party set up in 1949, had promised peace and development as its main aims. Instead they took their countrymen almost immediately into a new war in Korea, in which it suffered at least eight hundred thousand casualties. By the summer of 1953, when the Korean war ended, China was an exhausted country, which had to face up to a massive task of reconstruction after almost twenty years of continuous warfare. The Chinese leadership had decided that the Soviet Union was to be its model. It was firmly convinced that the future on a global scale belonged to socialism, and that China’s close alliance with the Soviets would help put their country at the forefront of world progress. Mao and his comrades were of course also convinced that Moscow’s military assistance helped them protect their revolution against rapacious US imperialists. The Korean War had proven that to them, even though they had not always been satisfied with the level of Soviet support during the fighting. After all, Mao pointed out, the Chinese were doing the fighting and dying on behalf of the socialist bloc, including the North Koreans and the Soviets themselves.

Communism was to be China’s weapon for modernization, according to the party’s propaganda. It would make the country rich and strong. But Mao’s agenda went further than the creation of a modern, wealthy country. He wanted to transform Chinese society and people’s ways of thinking. It was “old China” that was to blame for the country’s weakness, Mao thought, more than even British, Japanese, or American imperialists. He liked to compare traditional, Confucian forms of thinking to women with bound feet, hobbling along while being disdained by others. His “new China,” on the other hand, should be youthful, progressive, and militant. Those who stood in the way were “pests” to be exterminated; landlords, priests, and capitalists were holding China back on purpose, in order to serve their own interests. They had to go, as did all those forces that blocked the new society the Communists would create. For Mao this was a millennial struggle. It was China’s last chance to redeem itself and retake its rightful position in the world.

At first, in the 1950s, Chairman Mao and his leadership group believed that China’s progress could

only come within the Soviet-led community of Communist states. But by the latter part of the decade, doubts had set in. Soviet-style development seemed all too slow for Mao. He wanted to see China excel in his own lifetime. After 1956, the Chairman believed for a while that Khrushchev's attempts at reforming the Soviet bloc and making it more equal and diverse could satisfy China's needs. But Soviet criticism of China's fast-forward development plans disabused him of such notions. Amid conflicts over domestic development as well as international affairs, the Sino-Soviet alliance floundered. By the early 1960s the concept of "brother states" was gone, to be replaced with an enmity so deep that it almost led to war at the end of the decade.

Most of the 1960s saw China alone, internationally isolated and descending into ever deeper political campaigns to satisfy Mao's thirst for societal transformation. Economic progress suffered. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, proclaimed by Mao in 1966, made politics the judge of all things. "It is better to be Red than to be an expert," was one of its slogans. The result was a chaotic society, in which violence and dislocation were rife. By the end of their second decade in power, the Chinese Communists presided over a country that appeared on the verge of civil war. China's entry into the Cold War seemed to deliver the opposite of what most Chinese had expected.

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST Party (CCP) had been a war-fighting organization for most of its life span. Although it had begun to get some experience in civilian administration as it took over territory during the 1946–50 civil war, it was very unprepared to preside over a complex society with more than six hundred million inhabitants, at least sixty ethnic groups, and a geography that spanned from a dry and cold north to a subtropical south. The Communists had not administered a city until they took Harbin, up by the Soviet border, in 1946, and they were deeply distrustful of places like Shanghai, Wuhan, or Guangzhou—cosmopolitan cities where the Communists, who had been based in the countryside for a generation, had little influence. Some CCP members were so disgusted with the filth—physical and moral—they found in Shanghai when they conquered the city in 1949 that they wanted to abolish it and herd the population into the countryside where they could reform through hard menial labor. Mao in the end decided against such excesses; he wanted to use the cities as showcases for the transformational power of Chinese Communism.

Mao Zedong was sixty years old when the Korean War ended. He reckoned that he had ten more years to influence China, and he wanted progress fast. By 1953 Mao had fully embraced the principles of centralized and structured planning, Soviet-style, that his main colleagues Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai stood for, and was happy to let younger, Soviet-educated experts run the day-to-day aspects of the economy. Though a perfectionist in military campaigning, in peacetime, Mao was never much of a details man. But he did want to impress on younger comrades his concerns about time running out. China needed to catch up with the West, and thereby become a more useful partner of the other Communist countries. Although he mostly refrained from saying it aloud, Mao felt that China should become a leader among Communist parties and countries, and be the closest partner of the Soviet Union itself. After Stalin's death, he was the most senior Communist leader around. But China, and he himself, had to earn such a position, Mao thought. A rapid socialist transformation would be the best proof of China's dedication to the cause.

The Chinese Communists would have to begin in the cities. Although in charge of a peasant-based army, Mao had never doubted that his party would become a proletarian one as the Chinese working class matured. Now, all of a sudden, the Communists found themselves in charge of cities in which they had very little organization among workers. Like in eastern Europe, some of these workers had taken power for themselves in their factories as war and civil war came to a close. The Communists faced the double

task of restoring industrial production and organizing workers in Communist-led trade unions. The strategy they chose, much influenced by their Soviet advisers, was one that combined cajoling and pressure with promises of material rewards for workers as soon as industrial production got going again. All industry had to adhere to the national plan, and the party appointed managers and directors. In cases where the owners had fled or were suspected of having been in league with Japan or Chiang Kai-shek, plants were confiscated by the state. But planning was more important than ownership in the early People's Republic. It took up to the late 1950s before all industry was nationalized.

In their campaigns in the cities, the CCP was much helped by the enthusiasm of many young, urban, middle-class Chinese. Though some of them had joined the party already during the civil war, most had not, and were now eager to make up for that by showing their patriotism and dedication to the Communist cause. They were at the forefront of campaigns dealing with public health, sanitation, or education, or in the party's crusades against social vice such as prostitution, drug use, or gambling. Together with those who had been trained in the party's base areas during the war, these young educated Chinese staffed the PRC government departments and institutions. While more senior cadres stood for purges, arrests, or executions, the young adherents showed off the romantic side of Communism, with their nationalist-infused enthusiasm for reform and reconstruction.

The rapid transformation of China in the 1950s would not have been possible without Soviet aid. The Soviet assistance program for China was not only the biggest Moscow ever undertook outside its own borders. It was also, in relative terms, the biggest such program undertaken by any country anywhere, including the US Marshall Plan for Europe. The total from 1946 to 1960 amounted to around $25 billion in today's prices, a little bit less than 1 percent of the Soviet GDP yearly. But in reality the costs were much higher than this. The sum does not include technology transfers, salaries for Soviet experts in China, or stipends for Chinese students in the USSR. Even if we subtract the roughly 18 percent that came from Soviet allies and around 15 percent that the Chinese eventually paid back, we are still dealing with a program so vast in scope that it had a major impact on both countries.

Even though the first agreements for Soviet aid to the CCP were formed during the Chinese civil war, it was Nikita Khrushchev who really cranked the program up to its unprecedented size. To Khrushchev, Stalin's unwillingness to form a closer relationship with the Chinese was a sign of the old boss's increasing madness. Khrushchev himself saw unlimited opportunity. The alliance of the world's biggest country with the most populous one would propel Communism to global victory, he thought. The potential for cooperation in terms of resources and human talent was boundless. And China could be transformed in the Communist, meaning the Soviet, image, by the free will of its own leaders and its own people. It was an occasion far too good to pass up for Khrushchev.

It was not surprising, then, that the new Soviet leader's first foreign visit in 1954 was to Beijing. The Chinese capital, into which the famously rustic Mao had reluctantly moved after the Communist victory, was made to look its best in preparation for its prominent guest. To Mao, it was important that Khrushchev had chosen China as his first destination. It was also important that the Soviet leader came to see him, rather than the other way around, as had been the case four years earlier under Stalin's rule. But even more significant were the gifts Khrushchev had chosen to bring along. He promised a steep increase in Soviet aid to China, both civilian and military. One-third of all projects under the first Chinese Five Year Plan were to be built and paid for by Soviet or eastern European assistance. But Khrushchev also accepted a more equal relationship between the two countries: Soviet privileges in Chinese border areas would be abolished, and "joint companies," set up at Stalin's insistence, would be transferred to Chinese ownership. He even promised to share Soviet nuclear technology with the Chinese.

Khrushchev also agreed to send more Soviet advisers to China. Throughout the 1950s these advisers

played a key role all over the Chinese central administration, regional and provincial governments, and major industrial enterprises. For young Soviet experts it became popular to go to China. They had good conditions there. But they also filled a real need on the Chinese side to replace the losses from war or exile. Soviet experts advised on every aspect of life in new China—from working with youth and women, national minorities, or law and imprisonment, to education, technology, and military training. Overall the cooperation worked out well. The Chinese looked at the Soviets as models for what they wanted to become: educated, dedicated, and efficient. Of course there were cultural clashes, and sometimes the Chinese resented what they saw as Soviet attempts at lording it over them. But on the whole the Sino-Soviet alliance was a formidable Cold War challenge to the predominance of the West.[2]

One key influence that the Soviets had was in military affairs. More than ten thousand officers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were trained in the Soviet Union, and countless more were trained by Red Army instructors in China. The result was a modern Chinese army that looked increasingly like the Red Army, that served the same purposes internally, and fought wars more or less in the same way. This new PLA served three major purposes. First, it was intended to be an effective fighting force, trained in the latest Soviet military doctrines and equipped with the best weapons the Soviets and eastern Europeans were willing to offer. Second, it was to be a laboratory for educating young Chinese men to serve in a new world of socialism. And third, the army was intended to help build China's civilian development projects, just like the Red Army had in the Soviet Union in the past.

Educational reform was another main Soviet influence. The Chinese wanted to emulate education as it had developed in the Soviet Union, with an emphasis on science and technology, but also with broad grassroots programs for literacy, numeracy, and politics. A main point was to get education to fit in with the Five Year Plan. The government set the aims of how many engineers, chemists, and other specialized groups were needed every year. The candidates for entry were selected according to political, class, and achievement criteria; they had to be both bright and Red. The Education Ministry underlined the need to be able to predict the numbers of people who would be available to send to work in plants and mines every year—just as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, students were often given a specific future work assignment as early as their second year in college (even though the authorities rarely found it necessary to inform the students themselves of what lay in store).

The Soviets were aware of the problems the CCP had with governing the cities. They contributed their advice on urban planning. The socialist city had to be modern, planned, productive, and secure for the Communist elite. Broad avenues and big urban squares facilitated the mobility of workers from home to the factory and back, but they also could come in handy in case the PLA needed to enter a city center to crush a counterrevolutionary rebellion. For Beijing—the new national capital and therefore the showcase for Communist planning—the 1935 General Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow served as a concrete model. On one occasion, somewhat to the horror of Soviet advisers, the Chinese planners simply superimposed a transparency of the Moscow plan on a map of old Beijing. The Ming Dynasty city had to give way to socialist high modernism. The center itself would be rebuilt, with the massively enlarged central plaza at its heart (now known as Tian'anmen Square). A new avenue for military parades—called, with some irony, the Avenue of Eternal Peace—would bisect the old city. In Beijing as a whole, one million old houses should be destroyed each year, and two million new ones built. The city should aim for the same population density as Moscow, with the majority of its inhabitants being industrial workers (a group that had been only 4 percent of the workforce in 1949).

Not only the national center, but also the peripheries would be reconstructed according to Soviet advice. Policy toward minorities or "nationalities" was an area of particular importance to the Chinese Communists. They wanted them counted, categorized, and, first and foremost, controlled. An issue of

particular concern was that more than half of these groups lived in more than one country. The potential for subversion of Chinese interests seemed legion, especially since the CCP's relationship with Tibetans, Mongols, Uighurs, Kazakhs, and others had not always been easy in the past. They wanted to use the experience of the Soviets in handling minority issues to their own advantage. The issue had to be dealt with carefully, though, by both sides, since some of these minorities lived in the borderlands between China and the Soviet Union itself.

The CCP's insistence on "recataloging" its inventory of ethnic groups, combined with the unprecedented period of regional and local autonomy created by the wars of the early twentieth century, made for unexpected results in the 1950s. In the great counting of peoples, local agency sometimes combined with the intricacies of Marxist-Leninist theory to give new opportunities to marginal groups. The breakdown into fifty-six nationalities in China was haphazard and often a product of decisions made across a table in Beijing. But it still meant that some groups who had never had their own institutions suddenly found themselves to be one of China's peoples, with representation all the way up to the National People's Congress (China's parliament). Though Communist political repression could hit anyone within China's borders, recognition as a separate nationality gave some degree of protection from the most vicious aspects of PRC political campaigns, at least until the Cultural Revolution began in 1966.

In spite of having come to power at the head of a peasant army, the CCP took its time in dealing with rural issues. It waited six years, for instance, before taking the leap into the full collectivization of agriculture. There were several reasons for this measured approach. Soviet advice had been to go slow, and not repeat some of the errors of collectivization in USSR and in eastern Europe. Many Chinese peasant leaders were skeptics. They knew full well how peasants had joined the revolution in order to get their own land. Taking it away from them could be politically dangerous. But Mao's impatience, supported by younger CCP members who regarded collectivization as de rigueur for a Communist state, in the end won the day. By 1956 most land in the central areas was collectivized, growing to almost 90 percent of all Chinese agricultural produce. By all indications collectivization in China had been a major success both politically and economically.

Mao Zedong pondered the apparent successes of collectivization, and then drew the wrong lessons from them. He started to believe that the CCP had been too hesitant in carrying out major economic reforms tout court. Maybe, the Chairman thought, China was holding back too much, paying too much heed to the advice of planners and Soviet-trained economists. Perhaps he needed to be bolder, to move more quickly, as the CCP and its army had done in war?[3] For now he held his tongue, at least in public. But after Khrushchev's speech at the Soviet Twentieth Congress in 1956, which criticized the dogmatism of the Soviet past and stressed that all Communist countries had to find their own way to socialism, the Chairman became more and more outspoken in stressing China's unique position and its need to speed up its social and economic transformation.

What jolted Mao into action were the crises in Poland and Hungary in the autumn of 1956. He and many of his advisers thought that the reason workers in eastern Europe had rebelled was that the Communist parties there had not paid attention to local conditions. They had also been too slow and reluctant in offering the forms of advanced socialism that would have won the workers' support. The answer to Hungary was, in other words, not less socialism, but more socialism, especially since the CCP leadership feared that China itself could be vulnerable to the kinds of unrest that had happened in eastern Europe. Workers, especially, were not happy with their lot in China, and reports of strikes came in daily in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution. Among such demonstrations, the party center noted, "some were led by party members and youth league members; chairmen of… unions participated in some; some were… stirred up by anti-revolutionaries. In many cases, the masses' blood was up, with even some

administrative leaders yelling '[we] have to fight till the end.'"[4]

Mao's response was first to open up for criticism of party practices, to "let hundred flowers bloom," as he put it. For a few heady weeks in the spring of 1957, Chinese in all walks of life were allowed—and in some cases encouraged—to give voice to their own opinions. Then, fearful of the barrage of criticism that hit them, the party leaders backtracked and launched an "anti-Rightist" campaign to punish those who had dared to come forward. The "hundred flowers" criticisms had been of three major kinds. Some felt that the party was too bureaucratic and dogmatic. Others attacked the lack of basic political freedoms in China. And the third group claimed that the party was not nationalist enough; the CCP, they said, put Soviet interests over those of China. With the venturesome critics now on their way to labor camps or worse, Chairman Mao began preparing a push for advanced socialism, which he hoped would let the Communists regain the popular enthusiasm of the wartime era.

The Great Leap Forward, as he called it, was to become the most lethal Communist campaign of all time, though it started as shock therapy to increase industrial production. Mao's concern was that China was not catching up with advanced countries fast enough. The steady progress of the first Five Year Plan was good, but it was not sufficient, Mao thought. China could do better if it relied on its own strength and initiative. Other Communist leaders, who ought to have known better—such as President Liu Shaoqi, Premier Zhou Enlai, and the head of the party apparatus, Deng Xiaoping—got caught up in increasingly harebrained development plans that would, the Chairman promised, catapult China into Communism.

The Great Leap was based on Mao's preoccupation with the power of the human will. Never properly materialist in a Marxist sense, Mao always believed that all progress depended on the willingness and ability of people to carry out socialist transformation. If such plans were not successful enough, it was because the full human potential had not yet been mobilized. China could combine a rapid development in agriculture with massively increased industrial output through the use of manpower, Mao decreed. It should "be possible for China to catch up with advanced capitalist countries in industrial and agricultural production in a period shorter than what had previously been predicted," he explained in the spring of 1958. "China could catch up with Britain in ten years, and with the United States in another ten years."[5]

The core units of the Great Leap were the People's Communes, set up all over China in the summer of 1958. The planning methods of previous years were thrown overboard, and the new Communes were given entirely unrealistic production targets. The country's steel production was set to double in a year, and rural Communes had to contribute to the steel targets. Sometimes, out of desperation, they did so simply by melting down their agricultural tools. Millions of peasants were taken away from their fields during the time of sowing and reaping to work on poorly planned building or irrigation projects. Inspired by the Soviet virgin lands campaign, the CCP sometimes forced peasants to leave their own fields and move to new areas where they had no means of survival. Inside the Communes discipline and collectivism were taken to the extreme. Children were housed in separate dormitories so their parents could dedicate themselves entirely to production.

In the winter of 1958 many people went hungry as they slaved away at Mao's new schemes. In the spring of 1959 they started dying of starvation. By the time the nightmare eased, in 1961, at least forty million had died, most of them from a combination of overwork and lack of food. Eyewitnesses described it all. In Xinyang, a formerly rich city in Henan Province, frozen corpses lay in the roads and in the fields. Some of them were mutilated. Surviving locals blamed wild dogs. But the dogs and all other animals had already been eaten. Instead, humans had turned to eating the flesh of their own kind to survive.[6]

Mao refused to back down. When honest party members reported on the disaster, he had them purged. One was the Korean War hero and marshal Peng Dehuai, who spoke up in the summer of 1959. The Soviet advisers, some of whom had at first believed that the Chinese might succeed in their Great Leap, very

soon quietly started to warn about the consequences. Mao brushed them off. “The Soviet Union has been building socialism for 41 years, and it couldn’t make a transition to socialism in 12 years. They are now behind us and already in panic,” the Chairman said.[7] At the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Twenty-first Congress in 1959 Khrushchev warned, “Society cannot jump from capitalism to Communism without experiencing socialist development.… Egalitarianism does not mean transition to Communism. Rather it only damages the reputation of Communism.”[8]

As Mao’s China moved to the Left in search of rapid development and political rectitude, foreign policy issues also started damaging the Sino-Soviet relationship. During the height of the alliance, the Soviets and the Chinese had worked closely together in the international arena. In 1954 they had forced the Vietnamese Communists to accept a settlement at the Geneva Conference. In 1955, China had been the spokesman for the Communist camp at the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference. In 1956 they had not only agreed on the invasion of Hungary but also jointly disciplined North Korea’s Kim Il-sung for his inner-party purges. But Mao’s increasing anti-American rhetoric and his insistence on the inevitability of war had begun to rile the Soviets. They worried that China was out of tune with their own charm-offensive vis-à-vis the West.

One key reason for Moscow’s worry was the Chinese refusal to further integrate into the Soviet bloc, militarily and economically. Up to 1958 it was China that had pressed for such integration, with the Soviets holding back, in part because they feared that China’s enormous population would prove a strain on the Soviet and eastern European economies. But when the Soviet Ministry of Defense in the summer of 1958 had proposed a few relatively routine steps of military coordination, such as Soviet-operated early-warning systems and naval communication transmitters in China, Mao had reacted furiously. “I could not sleep, nor did I have dinner,” he told the surprised Soviet ambassador Pavel Iudin.

> You never trust the Chinese! You only trust the Russians! [To you] the Russians are first-class [people] whereas the Chinese are among the inferior who are dumb and careless.… Well, if you want joint ownership and operation, how about having them all—let us turn into joint ownership and operation our army, navy, air force, industry, agriculture, culture, education. Can we do this? Or [you] may have all of China’s more than ten thousand kilometers of coastline and let us only maintain a guerilla force. With a few atomic bombs, you think you are in a position to control us.[9]

The Soviets were understandably horrified at Mao’s rant. Against the advice of his colleagues, Khrushchev rushed to Beijing to soothe his irate revolutionary colleague. Mao subjected the Soviet leader to lectures on the impotence of US imperialism, but was unwilling to enter into much concrete discussion. Khrushchev returned to Moscow convinced that he had contained the crisis, only to find that the PRC started to shell Guomindang-held offshore islands just two weeks after he left Beijing, deliberately provoking a crisis with the Americans. Even though Mao had alluded to his desire to “liberate” Taiwan, the Chinese military action had not been discussed during the visit. The purpose seems to have been to warn both the Soviets and the Americans that China was capable of independent action. Khrushchev again stood up for the Chinese in public, but inwardly he was furious. Mao called an abrupt end to the confrontation over the islands a couple of months later. He lackadaisically declared that the PRC in the future would shell Guomindang-held territory only every second day, so Chiang Kai-shek’s soldiers could venture outside occasionally for some sun and fresh air. In Moscow, some Soviets started questioning the Chairman’s mental stability.

Other crises followed, even though the alliance still seemed in workable shape, at least from the

outside. In China, Mao Zedong had to deal with the fallout from the Great Leap and had less time for foreign affairs. From the summer of 1959 on, however, it seems as if the Chairman in his own mind began to connect his domestic troubles with his Soviet problem. Those Chinese who were challenging his Great Leap policies, he thought, did so because they were too wedded to the Soviet path of development. If they succeeded in going back to Soviet ways, they could destroy his revolution. Mao therefore began sending his closest associates notes that criticized the Soviets but also took aim at those who doubted the Great Leap. "At the beginning of the construction of the Soviet Union, the speed of industrial development was very high. Later,… [it] has decreased. Soviet planners constantly lowered the speed of development. [This shows] their right-deviationist thinking."[10]

If the Soviets were "Right-deviationists," then the alliance was obviously in some form of trouble. It was one of the most serious charges one could make against a fellow Marxist. Mao followed up with further accusations of the same sort. When Khrushchev, after much preparation, went on the first ever visit of a Soviet leader to the United States in 1959, Chinese media more or less ignored it, while stepping up their anti-American propaganda. Worse, Beijing got itself embroiled in a series of border incidents with India around the same time, giving much ammunition to anti-Communists both in Asia and in Washington. Although Delhi was probably about as much to blame for these clashes as Beijing, Khrushchev was incandescent, both about the timing and about the target. The Soviets had spent much time and many rubles buttering up Nehru and the nonaligned Indians. Now Moscow's Chinese allies seemed intent on throwing it all away.

Very unwisely, Khrushchev again insisted that he himself go to Beijing and set things right. This October 1959 visit backfired badly. Last time he had visited, Mao had tried to humiliate Khrushchev. Among other carefully selected indignities, the Chairman had enticed him into a swimming pool, well aware that the Soviet leader could not swim. This time the humiliation was verbal. Meeting with the whole Chinese top leadership, everyone of them (except Mao himself, of course) took turns at insulting Khrushchev. Foreign Minister Chen Yi called him a term-serving opportunist, someone who supported India and therefore also the bourgeoisie. Khrushchev gave as good as he got. "You should not spit on me from the height of your Marshal title," he fumed at Chen Yi, one of the ten marshals of China's civil war. "You do not have enough spit! We cannot be intimidated! What a pretty situation we have: On one side, you [still] use the formula [the Communist camp] headed by the Soviet Union. On the other you do not let me say a word!"[11] The meetings ended in acrimony.

By late 1959 Mao had concluded that the Sino-Soviet alliance had to go. He noted to himself that Soviet "revisionism" could "last for a very long time (over ten years, for example).… We resisted the fallacies of our friends [the Soviets]…, [but now] our friends together with the imperialists, the counter-revolutionaries, and the Tito revisionists organize an anti-China chorus." But even in isolation, "in eight years China will have finished the initial constriction of [its] industrial system.… The Chinese flag is bright red."[12] At international Communist meetings in the spring of 1960 the Chinese attacked the Soviets openly. That summer, Khrushchev's patience snapped. He abruptly withdrew most Soviet advisers from China. Mao complained publicly, but in private he welcomed his counterpart's rash action. It would remove Soviet influence in China, and enable him to explain to his people why Sino-Soviet cooperation —the principle on which his Communist party had been founded—had broken down.

In the early 1960s it was not easy for the Soviets, the Chinese, or anyone else to see how completely the Sino-Soviet alliance was coming to an end. Most people—except Mao himself and some of his younger followers—expected this to be a temporary quarrel. Both sides were fundamentally Marxist, and would therefore join together again, it was thought. Some cooperation continued for a while. The Soviets offered food assistance when the full extent of the Great Leap disaster was becoming clear in 1961.

Military and intelligence cooperation lasted at least until 1963. But Khrushchev was sulking and found it hard to reach out to the Chinese. Mao, on his side, reveled in China's new isolation. After some hesitation in the wake of the Great Leap, he now declared his own return to setting the party's ideological agenda and moving it further to the Left. As so often before, Mao's poetry indicated where he wanted to go:

Only heroes can quell tigers and leopards
And wild bears never daunt the brave.
Plum blossoms welcome the whirling snow;
Small wonder flies freeze and perish.[13]

Nationalism helped in Mao's plans. His version was that where all other countries had failed, China would succeed. This is what most Chinese liked to hear. Even those who had worked with Mao for almost a generation did not understand that the break with the Soviets would take China in a disastrous direction. Even less did they see that it sealed their own fate. The public hero-worship of the Chairman was intense. Mao was clever enough to push the leaders whom he suspected of wanting a return to the safety of 1950s-style economic planning, like Liu Shaoqi or Deng Xiaoping, to the fore in criticizing the Soviets. By publicly attacking moderation, gradualism, and traditional Marxist economics, these leaders helped dig their own graves, in a few cases quite literally, as China descended into another round of internecine bloodletting in the 1960s.

In the meantime China's foreign policy floundered. Mao spoke about his country leading the Third World, but the real Third World treated China with increasing mistrust, not least because of its constant attempts to teach others how to behave. Beijing's support for minority Communist parties, often in violent conflict with both the "official" Soviet-backed Communists and nationalist regimes, did not help either. Even so, China's Third World strategy initially did pay a few dividends. The Communist regimes in Vietnam and North Korea, and in Cuba, felt that China's emphasis on sovereignty and national development suited them better than the lectures they received from Moscow, and therefore for some time were closer to Beijing's points of view. The suave premier Zhou Enlai visited Africa, handing out aid that post-Leap China could hardly afford, but which Mao insisted had to be given to compete with the Soviets. But by 1965 almost all of China's Third World links had soured. Mao's insistence that cooperating with China meant breaking fully with the Soviets was unacceptable to other leaders. And whoever did not adopt China's views were immediately characterized by Beijing as "very arrogant and conceited," as in the case of Algeria's radical leader Ben Bella in 1965.[14]

But the real disaster for China's Third World relationships was the 1962 border war with India. This was a conflict that had been a long time coming. Although China and India had cooperated for a while after their states were reconstituted in the late 1940s, a decade later they were locked in enmity. The causes were many. China suspected, with some justification, Nehru's government to be sympathetic to Tibetan nationalists. India feared that Chinese control of the Himalayas would put New Delhi at a dangerous strategic disadvantage. But the most basic problem was that the Chinese Communists always viewed Nehru's Indian state simply as a colonial construct, something less than a real country. Nehru, on his side, saw Chinese-style revolution as a threat not just to his wishes for India's development, but to the security of all of Asia. "The Indians," Zhou Enlai had told Khrushchev in 1959, "[have] conducted large-scale anti-Chinese propaganda for forty years."[15]

The war broke out when Indian military mountain patrols moved into disputed areas of the Himalayas in October 1962. Chinese soldiers tried to force them out, and both sides started shooting. The Indians

were on the offensive first, but the PLA managed to get large reinforcements in, which pushed the Indian army back. When the fighting ended the Indians had been thoroughly routed, and the Chinese took control of the disputed region. The war was a shock to all of Asia, and not least to the members of the recently formed Non-Aligned Movement, which had India as one of its principal members. But the main effect was to further isolate China, who, largely because of its bellicose language, was seen as the aggressive party.

Increasingly cut off and exposed to one man's whims, China began its long descent into the Cultural Revolution. First Mao turned on those who had tried to stabilize the situation after the Great Leap and who had not understood the need for a full break with the Soviets. "There was a connection between revisionism at home and abroad," Mao said.[16] In 1962 he lambasted China's president Liu Shaoqi for having started down the revisionist road. Wang Jiaxiang, the veteran diplomat who had dared suggest that China ought not to have too many enemies at the same time, was called "a deviant Rightist."[17] But Mao himself did not know how to reawaken the revolutionary spirit that he now felt to be absent. In 1963 and 1964 the Chairman bided his time. He concentrated on strengthening his personal dictatorship, while reaping the rewards of China's progress in science and technology, most of which had come about as a result of Soviet aid. A major breakthrough was China's first nuclear test in 1964. The man who had derided nuclear weapons as "paper tigers" when China did not itself possess them, now admitted to his colleagues that he felt much safer when others feared China more.

In 1965 Mao first turned to settling old scores. A historian and playwright had written a historical play back in 1959 indicating through allegory that during the Great Leap righteous officials had been persecuted while sycophants had been promoted—a pretty accurate description of reality. Six years later Mao wanted him punished, along with his boss Peng Zhen, the dour mayor of Beijing. Peng, an old revolutionary hard-liner, resisted. A furious Mao decided to "rectify" China's intellectual life and crack down on "deviationists" in the capital. In November 1965 he left Beijing and began traveling around the country, never staying long in one place. He was not to return for nine months. While in Hangzhou, one of his main residences, he lectured people there: "You should gradually get into contact with reality, live for a while in the countryside, learn a bit.… There's no need to read big tomes. It's sufficient to read little books and get a bit of general knowledge."[18]

With Mao out of Beijing, his underlings did their best to guess what his plans were. Peng Zhen was dismissed, as were the heads of the CCP party apparatus and of the PLA's general staff. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and a number of younger associates of Mao got more and more influence over policy-making. Lin Biao, a brilliant but mentally unstable strategist from the civil war, had been made defense minister during the Great Leap. In 1966 he was also made Mao's second in command. Together the new leadership group launched an attack on the old party institutions: "Those representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and various spheres of culture are a bunch of counter-revolutionary revisionists. Once conditions are ripe, they will seize political power and turn the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Some of them we have already seen through; others we have not. Some are still trusted by us and are being trained as our successors, persons like Khrushchev for example, who are still nestling beside us."[19]

It sounded similar to Stalin's postwar purges. But Mao wanted to go further. In July 1966 he was filmed swimming the Yangzi River, probably to show that at the age of seventy-two he was still fit and healthy. Then he returned to Beijing. Schools had been suspended so that students could read the new directives and attack the teachers they suspected of being counterrevolutionaries. Mao's return was triumphant.

Meeting with the students, Mao instructed them to "bombard the headquarters" and form Red Guards to defend the revolution. Those following the capitalist road were planning to take power, he said. But the

most striking instruction from the Chairman was about where these enemies were to be found. They were inside the party, Mao claimed. By the autumn of 1966 senior party leaders, pinpointed by Mao, were attacked in their homes by Red Guard youth. President Liu Shaoqi was dragged through the streets and publicly humiliated. Deng Xiaoping was luckier. He was kept in solitary confinement, and then sent to the south to work as a manual laborer in a tractor factory. Through all of this, the police and the army stood aside, and chaos reigned on the streets.

President Liu Shaoqi's wife, Wang Guangmei, was kidnapped by Red Guards at the height of the chaos and tortured. "We want you to put on the dress that you wore in Indonesia," they shouted at her.

> Wang: That was summer.… Interrogator: Rubbish! We know nothing about such bourgeois stuff as what is good for summer, winter, or spring.… We'll give you ten minutes.… What's your opinion of Liu Shaoqi's fall from grace? Wang: It is an excellent thing. In this way, China will be prevented from going revisionist.… Wait a moment.… (She is pulled to her feet and the dress is slipped on her.) [Red Guards] Reading in unison [from Mao]: "A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing in an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery.…" Wang: You violate Chairman Mao's instructions by saying… (Wang Guangmei is interrupted and forced to wear silk stockings and high heeled shoes and a specially made necklace. She is photographed.…) Interrogator: By wearing that dress to flirt with Sukarno in Indonesia, you have put the Chinese people to shame.… Coercion is called for when dealing with such a reactionary bourgeois element as you.… [Red Guards] reading in unison [from Mao]: "Everything reactionary is the same: if you don't hit it, it won't fall.")[20]

Mao's plan for the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, as he called his new purge, was to deepen the processes of change through removing the old party leadership and appealing directly to the country's youth to make revolution. He wanted to fundamentally remake China and remake the Chinese. His ideal was a new type of man and woman, free from family, religion, and old culture. Only such a person, Mao claimed, would be strong enough to complete the transformation of China. He raged against the party he had led for thirty years. It had held him and the country back. Now time was running out. Mao felt a need to complete the work he had begun as a young man.

The Cultural Revolution looked different seen from the top and the bottom of Chinese society. Seen from above it was a purge like those in eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Leaders were removed from power, ritually humiliated, and killed or sent away. But seen from below it became a carnival of released tension, in which personal grudges and aspirations could be played out after decades of intense change. Some rebelled against authority and authoritarianism, mostly oblivious to the fact that they did so through supporting Mao's rule, the most absolute authority of all. Others could simply show and act upon their dislike for their neighbors, fellow students, or workmates. Factions and factionalism abounded. In Wuhan, in the summer of 1967, for instance, two Red Guard groups fought each other for power, first with slogans, then with fists and knives, and finally with machine guns and 122 mm howitzers looted from army barracks and depots.

One of Mao's intentions in the Cultural Revolution was to set the young against the old. In a country where tradition venerated the elderly, their hold on society needed to be broken for Mao's vision of "new China" to be complete. Red Guards, sometimes as young as twelve or thirteen, were encouraged to report on their parents or grandparents. At times older members of the family were captured as a result of such denunciation, beaten, or sent away to labor camps. One family in Beijing, who I know, saw both the father and the grandfather taken by Red Guards after they had been reported on by the youngest son. The boy,

fourteen at the time, participated in their public humiliation and torture. The grandfather died as a result. The pattern was repeated a million times over across China. Though most of those who were "struggled against" survived, normal family life understandably did not.

Minorities were among the worst hit groups in the Cultural Revolution. In Chinese-ruled Inner Mongolia, at least twenty thousand people were killed as Chinese Red Guards hunted members of the "Inner Mongolian People's Party." This phantom party, which probably never existed at all, was claimed to be a counterrevolutionary, separatist organization, specializing in assassinating Red Guard leaders. In Tibet, Communist atrocities went even further. Monks were beaten or killed. Age-old artwork was thrown on the fire. Red Guards, flown in by helicopter, dynamited or fired missiles against temples and monasteries. Parts of the country were in a state of civil war for years, as Tibetan groups counterattacked. In Guangxi, in the south, Zhuang people (and some Chinese, too) ate their enemies, deemed counterrevolutionaries, in staged cannibalistic events.[21]

As can be imagined, China's descent into chaos during the cultural revolution also led to chaos in foreign policy. Mao believed that diplomats and foreign affairs experts were among the worst sinners in betraying his revolution. All ambassadors were recalled to Beijing for political reeducation, and most of them never returned to their stations. Instead the Foreign Ministry was taken over by younger diplomats and other employees, including a former janitor who had set up a Red Guard unit, who spent their time conducting political study sessions and engaging in "struggle" against senior leaders. China's foreign minister, Chen Yi, was denounced in front of large crowds. The British embassy in Beijing was attacked and set on fire, while the Soviet and eastern European embassies were besieged by thousands of Red Guards, who shouted antirevisionist slogans through loudspeakers night and day. Even China's closest allies, North Vietnam and North Korea, had had enough of the chaos. They summarily arrested Chinese advisers who organized pro–Cultural Revolution marches in their countries and shipped them back to China. After one especially egregious incident in Pyongyang, in which Chinese students had criticized Kim Il-sung for not studying Mao's works well enough, the North Koreans exploded. "Our people are indignant at the arrogant behavior of the Chinese. The Chinese… are behaving like hysterical people… they are not able to avoid responsibility for the criminal actions damaging the interests of the DPRK."[22]

As political relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated, tension at their long border increased. Already in 1962 there had been clashes between border guards as Chinese Kazakhs attempted to flee across to Soviet Kazakhstan to avoid the effects of the Great Leap Forward. Two years later, Mao laid into the Soviets over the border issue. "More than one hundred years ago," he told visiting Japanese Communists, "[the Russians] occupied the entire area east of Lake Baikal, including Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and the Kamchatka Peninsula. That account is difficult to square. We have yet to settle that account."[23] Mao used the conflict with the Soviets to ratchet up support for his domestic positions, even though he did not foresee war with the Soviet Union.

When the Cultural Revolution started, Chinese Red Guards began setting up loudspeakers in the border zones, where they berated the Soviets for following their "revisionist" leaders. But in 1969 these tensions suddenly took a turn for the worse. After Chinese and Soviet soldiers had clashed repeatedly over an island in the middle of the Ussuri River, which both sides claimed, the Chinese ambushed a Soviet border patrol and killed around sixty troops on 2 March. On Moscow's orders, the Red Army counterattacked two weeks later, but were unable to dislodge the Chinese from the still-frozen river region. Large-scale artillery shelling from both sides ensued. In Moscow, there was a real fear of war. Some Soviet military experts recommended taking out the Chinese nuclear installations as a precaution, but the Politburo held back. The Soviet premier tried to call the Chinese leaders, but the young Chinese operator refused to connect him with either Zhou or Mao. The operators were told to shout antirevisionist

slogans down the line whenever the Soviets tried to call.

But Mao's bluster concealed a fear much worse than the one felt in Moscow. The Chinese leader ordered his side to hold fire. But he also worried that the Soviets would launch a full-scale nuclear attack on China. It was one thing to provoke the Red Army at the border in order to show at home how the Cultural Revolution had made the country more powerful. It was something very different to risk the survival of China. As the Soviets sent reinforcements to the border and warned that Moscow would retaliate against further provocations, including with the use of nuclear weapons, a full-scale war scare broke out in Beijing in the fall of 1969. Even though Zhou Enlai and the Soviet premier held talks to moderate the tension, in early October Mao ordered all party, government, and military leaders to leave Beijing. All over China, Communist cadres left the cities to go to the countryside and prepare for war. Lin Biao, in an even more disordered mood than usual, suddenly ordered China's military to move to the highest alert. The crisis passed. But it did remind Mao, forcefully, of how unprepared China was for a real war and how erratic his new leadership group was.

The Chairman had already begun reining in some of the worst Cultural Revolution extremists. The army was sent in to restore order in the cities and on university campuses, and some of the most vocal Red Guards were sent to prison camps or to do manual labor, following the many they themselves had mistreated over the previous three years. The Soviet war scare pushed Mao further in the direction of reducing tension in China. But the Chairman was also fearful of any policy that would "reverse the verdict," as he himself put it, on the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. Both were still good, Mao insisted. He came to depend on advisers who were a mix of Cultural Revolution leaders, such as his own wife, Jiang Qing, or the Shanghai Leftists Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, as well as more traditional CCP figures who paid lip-service to Mao through the disasters of the 1960s, such as the premier, Zhou Enlai. The leaders who had been purged were ordered to stay out of view, while Mao—bizarrely—sometimes would call on them privately for advice in their provincial hideaways.

With China poor and isolated, and with the Cold War having caught up with Mao through the Soviet war scare, the Chinese leader temporarily reduced his revolutionary zeal and agreed that more emphasis had to be put on production and overall economic development. In the early 1970s, as the international climate changed considerably, Chinese managers and officials tried to put things back together again after Mao's campaigns. But the country still drifted from crisis to crisis. The worst was in September 1971, when Vice-Chairman and Defense Minister Lin Biao, Mao's chosen successor, panicked and attempted to flee to the Soviet Union. Convinced that Mao was out to get him, the increasingly deluded "closest comrade-in-arms" of the Chairman boarded a military plane with his wife and son, ordering it to fly toward the border. When asked by Premier Zhou whether the plane should be shot down, Mao shrugged: "Rain has to fall, girls have to marry, these things are immutable; let them go."[24] Lin's plane crashed in Outer Mongolia, killing all onboard.

Lin's betrayal buried any hopes in the population at large that the Cultural Revolution could be turned to any positive effect. What followed was profound cynicism, especially among younger people. Through their whole lives they had joined in Mao's campaigns, one more intense and life-changing than the other. They had learned to revere the Chairman as a god. Their role was to help him create a new and better China. Now all seemed in ruins. Even though few were prepared to rebel, people certainly reverted to old standards where they could. Corruption and nepotism increased considerably. Although orders to intensify the revolution kept coming from Beijing, not many were eager to listen anymore. Mao's vision of a Herculean new Chinese man had turned out to be a monster.

THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION and the Cold War had transformed China, though not always in the

directions its leaders or its people had expected. The most important change was the death of "old China," a patriarchal community of farmers, merchants, and officials that had been in decline since the nineteenth century and was finally killed off by the Communists. Instead had come a hybrid society, with some Chinese and some foreign elements. Marxism, the rulers' political theory, was of course a foreign import, as was the Communist Party. New thinking about family, education, technology, and science came from abroad. What was most distinctly Chinese about the Chinese revolution was its preoccupation with human transformation, willpower, and the need to find "correct" ideas and solutions to society's ills. In ways that were increasingly visible to many Chinese in the 1970s, it was Mao's preoccupation with ethos over practical gain that had led the revolution astray. China's lack of resistance to other forms of foreign influence toward the end of the Cold War was directly linked to this self-inflicted wound.

Seen from above, Mao's campaigns had all the hallmarks of Stalinist purges, similar to what had gone on in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. Leaders of the Communist party were singled out for criticism, publicly humiliated, and executed or exiled through some quasi-legal process. The charges were entirely trumped up and the procedures were aimed at centralizing power. The president of the country, Liu Shaoqi—as loyal a party member as could ever be imagined—was beaten and tortured in public before being sent to Kaifeng during the 1969 war scare. There he died from mistreatment. Mao wanted to be fully in command on his own.

But there was also another side to the Cultural Revolution. As chaos increased on the streets, the authorities started losing control. Mao was of course in favor of Red Guards attacking those he wanted to purge. But by 1966 millions of young people had started traveling the country in the revolutionary cause. Although much of their days were spent chanting moronic slogans or otherwise inconveniencing the peasants, their travels did allow them get a sense of the state of the country. For most, and especially for young women, this was their first time outside of paternal control. Some of them made use of it to begin thinking for themselves, even about taboo topics that could not be raised in public, on issues from sex and gender roles to economics and politics. A part of China's post–Cold War transformation came out of this Red Guard generation and its experiences.

Outside of China, Mao's Cultural Revolution madness was picked up by rebellious students and others who believed it could be used to challenge authority in their countries. China's Stalinist purges are therefore sometimes, without reason, conflated with 1960s youthful rebellions elsewhere. One of the more bizarre twists was in western Europe, where a few intellectuals formed Maoist groups. They believed one could worship Chairman Mao and be antiauthoritarian at the same time. In wealthy Norway, for instance, students formed a group that called itself the Workers' Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). They believed that "the Chinese Communist Party and People's China, both domestically and internationally, are stronger than ever before.… Never has interest in China and friendship with China been so extensive [in Norway]."[25] But even if some intellectuals celebrated China's tragedy, most Europeans could not have cared less. No Maoist party ever got more than 1 percent of the popular vote in elections.

The most important international effect of China's Maoist era was to kill off forever the idea that Communism was monolithic. This had of course already become clear to most when Stalin threw the Yugoslavs out of the eastern bloc in 1948. But China was, quite literally, on a different scale. The enmity between the Chinese Communists and the Soviets had the potential to transform international politics and break Cold War dualism. This could not happen as long as China seemed mainly preoccupied with tearing itself apart in a Cultural Revolution. But as soon as the country started to emerge from that morass, the potential for new global constellations also began to become visible.