In 1966 China was convulsed by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It began in April and May as an ideological purification movement among the intellectuals and was centred on Peking University. But in June and July it was clear that many prominent political figures had been dismissed: Peng Chen, the Mayor of Peking, Lu Ting-yi, the former propaganda chief, Chou Yang, a prominent literary organizer, and Lo Jui-ching, the Army Chief of Staff, were among them.

In August the Central Committee of the Communist Party met in plenary session for the first time since 1962 and issued a directive on the Great Cultural Revolution. It stated that ‘The aim of the Great Cultural Revolution is to revolutionize people’s ideology’, and to combat old ideas and those in authority who were ‘taking the capitalist road’. It emphasized the need for study of the Thought of Mao Tse-tung, for mass action, and for army participation in the Cultural Revolution. These all became important features of subsequent events: Mao’s Thought was issued in the form of a little red book of quotations, and, following a mass demonstration by revolutionary youth on 18 August, young intellectuals, students, and workers were organized into the ‘Red Guards’. This was accompanied by the emergence of Lin Piao, the Minister of Defence, as the ‘close comrade-in-arms’ of Mao Tse-tung, ‘the great helmsman’; and it later emerged that the group of ‘capitalist roaders’ against whom the Cultural Revolution was aimed included Liu Shao-chi, the President of China, Teng Hsiao-ping, the Secretary of the Party, and many less prominent officials in government and the Party.
THE MEANING OF THE ‘CULTURAL REVOLUTION’

As one reads the endless official reports on the ‘cultural upsurge of the masses’ in China one may be tempted to dismiss the upsurge as mere farce. The Chinese News Agency has described in detail the ‘fierce offensive against all old ideas, culture, customs, and habits’ that the ‘Red Guards have taken to the streets of Peking since 20 August’. But one looks in vain for any positive indication of what the new ideas and the new cultural customs and habits are. In the name of Marxism and Leninism the Guards have denounced Balzac and Hugo, and Shakespeare and Beethoven, as the products of a rotting bourgeois culture; they have defaced Pushkin’s monument in Shanghai, and have vented their contempt for the works of Chernyshevsky and Herzen, the progenitors of the Russian revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century. Peking’s ‘cultural revolutionaries’ are, it seems, quite unaware of Marx’s lifelong admiration for Shakespeare and Balzac, of Lenin’s love for Pushkin and Beethoven, and of the decisive formative influence Chernyshevsky had on him. We have been presented with long lists of streets and boulevards, the names of which have been changed from ‘Eternal Peace’ to ‘The East is Red’, from ‘Well of the Prince’s Palace’ to ‘Prevent Revisionism’, from ‘Glorious Square’ to ‘Support Vietnam’, from ‘Eastern Peace Market’ to ‘East Wind Market’, and so on. We are asked to rejoice in the fact that certain culinary establishments are no longer called ‘Collection of All Virtues’, but ‘Peking Roast Duck Restaurants’. Hosts of hairdressers and dressmakers have pledged themselves to produce no more outlandish haircuts, such as ‘duck tail’ and ‘spiralling’ hairdoes, or cowboy jeans and tight-fitting shirts and blouses and various kinds of Hongkong-style skirts. ‘We should not regard these matters lightly’, the Chinese Agency says gravely, ‘because it is here that the gates to capitalist restoration are wide open’. And so the floodwaters of the great proletarian cultural revolution are now pounding the various positions of the bourgeoisie; and the hotbeds of capitalism are no longer safe. Poor Karl Marx—he had no inkling, when, exactly a hundred years ago, he was preparing Das
Kapital for publication, where the real 'hotbeds of capitalism' were to be found.

Undertaking the all-too-easy task of ridiculing these exploits the Soviet press has recalled Proletkult, the Russian literary and artistic movement of the early years of the revolution, which renounced bourgeois art and promised to create a proletarian culture. A writer in Pravda has described Trotsky as Proletkult's inspirer, which should presumably be enough to make both Proletkult and the Chinese 'cultural revolution' stink in our nostrils. The truth is that, by comparison with the Chinese riot, the Russian Proletkult, which was akin to Western European Futurism fashionable in those years, was a harmless and almost civilized affair; it was supported by Bukharin and Lunacharsky, while Trotsky, far from being its inspirer, wrote a whole book, Literature and Revolution, to repudiate it. Pravda could have found a much closer parallel to the latest events in China nearer home: in the Stalinist Russia of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Stalin, Zhdanov, and Pravda's writers 'disciplined' the intelligentsia, thundered against 'kowtowing to decadent Western culture', banned the works of Einstein, Freud, Mendel, and many other foreign thinkers, and indulged in a hysterical glorification of all things Russian. Pravda avoids drawing this parallel because even now Russia has not yet fully lived down the legacy of that period, and quite a few of the old bans are still in force. But the parallel is close enough; and it suggests that the Maoist 'cultural revolution' is a deadly serious affair. Its effect on China's spiritual and intellectual life is, in all probability, going to be just as devastating and lasting as were the consequences of the Stalinist witch-hunts. Its political meaning is also comparable. Like Russia in the last years of the Stalin era, so China has now plunged headlong into a self-centred isolationism and nationalism and has shut herself off more hermetically than ever from the outside world and from all its political and cultural influences. To achieve this Mao had to organize a pogrom of the intelligentsia, whom he suspects of being vulnerable to foreign especially 'revisionist' influences.

This is not to say that these developments foreshadow any new aggressive phase in China's foreign policy. True, in the last few weeks Peking and Shanghai have resounded with the cry for the liberation of Taiwan, Macao, and Hongkong. But
nothing indicates that Marshal Lin Piao is preparing marching orders for the liberation campaigns (even though all Chinese, communists and anti-communists, Maoists and anti-Maoists alike, consider these territories as belonging to their country by right). China is even less ready than Russia was in Stalin’s last years for war-like adventures or territorial expansion. Her ideological aggressiveness and her shrill contempt for Western cultural values are manifestations, no doubt morbid ones, of her intensely self-defensive mood and of her sense of complete isolation in a hostile world. Since Khrushchev withdrew, with utter ruthlessness, all economic assistance from China in 1960, that sense of isolation has grown heavy and stifling; and recent setbacks—above all the collapse of the pro-Maoist Communist Party of Indonesia and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of its members—have aggravated it to the utmost. Despite Peking’s thunderous rhetoric about the ‘rising wave of revolution in Asia’, the Indonesian events mark a deep ebb of revolution and a disaster for Maoism. The defection of the Japanese and North Korean Communist Parties from the Chinese camp have been further setbacks; and the ambiguous behaviour of the North Vietnamese, who are more than ever dependent on Soviet aid, is causing much discomfiture to Peking. Above all, the Chinese believe that the threat of an American attack on their country is real and imminent.

One way of getting out of the isolation would be to try a reconciliation with Khrushchev’s successors in Moscow. But since Mao Tse-tung has ruled this out, he has had to contrive some extra-powerful booster to national morale. Three nuclear explosions have demonstrated China’s new technological capacity to the nation and the world. But this feat is not enough to dispel the malaise; for many Chinese realize at what cost, and under what back-breaking handicaps their nation has entered, so belatedly, the nuclear arms race. Nor does Maoism offer China the pride in rapid industrialization that Stalinism once offered Russia—China’s tempo of economic advance is relatively much slower. The ‘cultural revolution’ and an almost mystical apotheosis of Maoism are to provide a moral compensation for all these disappointments and frustrations.

It can be said in advance that the ‘positive’ effect of this booster on national morale will be short-lived, but that its
adverse consequences will be felt for a long time. The Party, its hierarchy and cadres, will not recover quickly from the humiliation the ‘Red Guards’ have inflicted on them. The old intelligentsia—the scientists and the technicians, but more especially the writers and artists—who have been associated with the broad current of the Maoist revolution and have directed the educational work among the masses since 1949, are being degraded and ousted from their posts. They have not been destroyed as their counterparts were in Stalinist Russia; but they are forced to make room for a new intelligentsia, who have been brought up since the revolution and have far fewer ties either with their own native cultural tradition or with the cultural heritage of the outside world. To some extent this change of generations is inevitable in any post-revolutionary society. But when it is carried out as abruptly, brutally, and demagogically as it was in Stalinist Russia and as it is now being effected in China, the change entails an irreparable loss to the nation: a gap in its cultural consciousness, a lowering of standards, and an impoverishment of spiritual life. Post-Stalinist Russia is still smarting under the loss, and so will Maoist and post-Maoist China.

What next? It remains to be seen whether Mao will proceed to stage purges in the Stalinist style or whether he will find a less bloody way of dealing with inner Party opposition. Beyond these immediate issues there loom the great unresolved problems of China’s domestic and foreign policy. Dwelling on the dangers threatening the country from American imperialism, Mao is calling the nation to live the kind of Spartan life that the Red Partisans led during the heroic Yenan period. The newspapers have been quoting this sentence from the diary of a Maoist hero: ‘I must remember Mao’s teachings to set myself high political standards and low living standards’; and the mass of citizens are called upon to follow this maxim. The phrase sums up a programme. Yet it must be doubted whether the sentiment it expresses, admirable though it may be in heroic individuals, can animate an entire people and form the basis of national policy. It is an unwitting confession of how little Maoism has now to offer China. The countryside, though it no longer suffers from the mass famines so familiar under the ancien régime, remains backward, primitive, and terribly over-
populated; and in the cities industrialization is not progressing fast enough to absorb the surplus. This year a new Five Year Plan, the first since the economic disasters of 1958–62, has been put into effect; but its industrial targets have not been announced. Is it because production statistics are considered a military secret? Or because the targets are not inspiring enough for the propagandists to make much play of them? Either explanation may be correct.

In any case, the government is now placing far less emphasis on rapid economic development than it did in the 1950s and than Soviet governments have always done. Mao has not shown anything like Stalin’s ruthlessness in harnessing the nation’s manpower and resources and in forcing town and country alike to make the most terrible sacrifices for the sake of industrialization. Ever since the partial failure of the Great Leap, he has kept to the view that China’s industrialization and modernization is a matter of many, many decades and that it may take the lifetime of two, three, or four generations to accomplish it. He does not call China ‘to catch up with and to surpass the capitalist West’, and he does not seek to dazzle the people with promises of quick successes. Realistic though this view may be basically, it holds out no solution to China’s pressing needs, no method for dealing with her over-population, her open or latent unemployment, with the social antagonisms between town and country, and with the demands that the international situation places on China’s economy.

Behind the call for ‘high political standards and low living standards’ is the desire and the hope of settling within the framework of what the Russians once described as ‘War Communism’—on the basis, that is, of a roughly egalitarian distribution of extremely scarce economic resources. In Russia this policy led to an impasse and had to be abandoned only three years after the October Revolution. China is practising it—true, with considerable modifications—seventeen years after her revolution. But for how long can Party and government adhere to a policy which does not offer the people sufficient material incentives for development and growth? Yet, if China’s rulers do not wish to embark upon forcible industrialization, they cannot initiate a more ambitious policy as long as China remains isolated and is denied foreign, especially Soviet, aid.
But this only means that all issues of policy, domestic as well as foreign, lead back to the same question, namely, whether China has any possibility of emerging from isolation in the foreseeable future. Has she any chance of resuming contact with the Soviet Union and regaining massive Soviet aid? We have seen that Mao has answered these questions in the negative, and that he urges China to ‘go it alone’ economically, politically, and militarily. This, however, implies virtual reconciliation with China’s economic and social backwardness.

It is difficult to believe that political stabilization can be achieved on such a basis. Pressures for a more ambitious policy of economic progress will make themselves felt. A few years ago such pressures caused Mao and his colleagues to undertake the Great Leap. But the resulting disappointments brought about a pause in industrialization. Yet the slow tempo creates its own insurmountable difficulties and is certain to revive the demand for a more forward policy. Mao may then call for another Great Leap or else his entire approach will have to come under review. The fact is that, as a dynamic revolutionary power, China cannot ‘go it alone’; and that the Maoist policy, committed as it is to isolationism, will be unable to cope with the crises to come. Whether these will develop in Mao’s lifetime or later must, of course, remain an open question.

In the inner Party struggle the problem of the succession to Mao has loomed large behind the more topical issues. For the time being Lin Piao has emerged as the winner, and Liu Shao-chi looks like the loser. But it is perhaps too early to take the outcome of the struggle for granted. For one thing, in post-revolutionary regimes the heir apparent appointed in the dictator’s lifetime is not necessarily the man who exercises power after the dictator’s death. Stalin’s heir apparent—Malenkov—did not succeed in imposing himself upon his colleagues; he had to yield his place to Khrushchev who had been well below him in the Party hierarchy. But even if Lin Piao were to be Mao’s real successor, it does not follow that he will necessarily continue the policy with which he is at present associated. When the call for a revision and change of Mao’s policy, the call now so furiously silenced, rises again, Lin Piao may well have to yield to it. Mao’s departure, even though he may still be able to swim the Yangtse, is not likely to be far off;
and with it some reaction against the latest version of Maoism is all too likely to set in. The reaction need not be as severe as was the Russian revulsion against Stalinism, for Mao’s place in the history of the Chinese revolution, whose presiding spirit he has been for so long, is much more solidly assured than Stalin’s place was in Moscow’s mausoleum. Mao has been in one person China’s Lenin and Stalin. But at the end of his road he shows more and more similarity to Stalin; and the latest orgy of his personality cult underlines the likeness. It is as if he had outlived himself and is already a relic of the past, an embodiment of China’s backwardness and isolationism. When the reaction against these aspects of Maoism comes, his successor or successors, whoever they are, will have to act as its mouthpieces and agents. *À la longue* China cannot keep up her ideological aspirations and ‘go it alone’.

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