

Timeline – Cultural Revolution

In an effort to return China to its communist roots, Chairman Mao Tse-Tung turned to the youth of the country to help start the “Cultural Revolution.” Mao called on young people to take down leading intellectuals, party leaders, and their own parents. These teenagers came together to form the Red Guards.

- October 1949:** Mao declared victory in the Communist revolution and established the People’s Republic of China.
- May 1966:** Articles in the state controlled papers introduced the idea of a “Cultural Revolution.”
- Red Guard groups, made up of Chinese youth, emerged throughout China.
- Aug. 1966:** Mao officially launched the “Cultural Revolution” with a speech at the Chinese Communist Party.
- Oct. 1966:** Mao called for the Red Guards to destroy the “Four Olds”: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.
- Jan. 1967:** Red Guards achieved the overthrow of provincial party committee officials and replaced them with radicals.
- Feb. 1967:** Top-level Communist Party officials called for an end of the Cultural Revolution, but Mao continued to support it.
- Summer 1967:** Mao replaced pre-Cultural Revolution party officials with radicals who supported the revolution.
- 1968:** On Mao’s orders, the Red Guards were broken up in the “rustification movement,” where individual teenagers were “sent down” to villages throughout China to “learn from the peasants.”
- April 1969:** Mao declared “victory” of the Cultural Revolution and supported Lin Biao as his new successor.

Document A: Mao's "Little Red Book"

Mao's "Little Red Book" is a collection of Mao Tse-Tung's quotations that were used as a source of inspiration and guidance for members of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. These are two excerpts from the book.

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed in you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you.

Mao, 1957

We must help all our young people to understand that ours is still a very poor country, that we cannot change this situation radically in a short time, and that only through the united efforts of our younger generation and all our people, working with their own hands, can China be made strong and prosperous within a period of several decades. The establishment of our socialist system has opened the road leading to the ideal society of the future, but to translate this ideal into reality needs hard work.

Mao, 1957

Source: Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. 1964

Document B: Red Guard Song

Patriotic songs and slogans were common characteristics of the Cultural Revolution. This song was written by the People's Liberation Army Songs Editorial Department sometime around 1967.

Red Guards, Red Guards.
Burning with revolutionary zeal,
Tested by the storm of class struggle,
Tempered for battle our hearts are red,
Standing firm, direction clear, our vigor for revolution strong,
We follow the party with full devotion,
We are Chairman Mao's Red Guards.

Red Guards, Red Guards.
We want to be the successors to Communism.
The revolutionary red banner passes on from generation to generation,
We want to try on the glorious tradition.
Loving the country, loving the people, loving the collective, loving to work.
Connecting with the workers and the peasants,
We are Chairman Mao's Red Guards.

Document C: At the Center of the Storm

Rae Yang was a young girl in the spring of 1966, when she became a part of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. In 1997, she published a memoir retelling the story of her life and her family in China throughout the political turmoil of the 1950s through the 1980s. In this excerpt she writes about her early experience in the Red Guards.

When the Cultural Revolution broke out in late May 1966, I felt like the legendary monkey Sun Wukong, freed from the dungeon that had held him under a huge mountain for five hundred years. It was Chairman Mao who set us free by allowing us to rebel against authorities. As a student, the first authority I wanted to rebel against was Teacher Lin, our homeroom teacher. A big part of her duty was to make sure that we behaved and thought correctly.

Now the time had come for the underdogs to speak up, to seek justice! Immediately I took up a brush pen, dipped it in black ink and wrote a long dazibao. Using some of the rhetorical devices Teacher Lin had taught us, I accused her of lacking proletarian feeling toward her students, of treating them as her enemies, of being high-handed, and of suppressing different opinions. My classmates supported me by signing their names to it. Next, we took the dazibao to Teacher Lin's home nearby and pasted it on the wall of her bedroom for her to read carefully day and night. This, of course, was not personal revenge. It was answering Chairman Mao's call to combat the revisionist educational line.

Within a few days, dazibao written by students, teachers, administrators, workers, and librarians, were popping up everywhere like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. Secrets dark and dirty were exposed. Every day we made shocking discoveries. The sacred halo around the teachers' heads that dated back two thousand five hundred years to the time of Confucius disappeared. Now teachers must learn a few things from their students. Parents would be taught by their kids instead of vice versa, as Chairman Mao pointed out. Government officials would have to wash their ears to listen to the ordinary people....

Source: Rae Young, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir*, 1997.

Vocabulary

dazibao –propaganda posters written to denounce counter-revolutionaries

high-handed– bossy

proletarian –working class

revisionist—in this case, someone opposing Mao's position

Document D: Under the Red Sun Memoir

Under the Red Sun is a memoir written by Fan Cao about her experiences during the Cultural Revolution published in 2005. Here is an excerpt from the memoir.

I was a 7th grader when the Great Cultural Revolution broke out. Growing up in the “New China” we were fed with revolutionary ideas bathed in the red sunlight of Mao. We worshiped Mao the same way pious Christians worship their God, and we were completely devoted to him. I, myself, really believed that we were working for a paradise on earth, and we were going to save the entire world. How glorious it was to have the great destiny of liberating all humanity! In fact, we did not even understand what revolution was and how other people in the world really lived...

I was not allowed to join the Red Guards simply because my grandparents were rich before the communists took away their land, and my parents were considered “intellectuals,” which automatically made them anti-revolutionists regardless of the fact that they had been following Mao’s idealism since their early adulthood. As members of the university faculty, my parents were obviously in trouble. I, of course, was guilty by association. Only a 13-year-old girl, I became a target of the revolution. After that, I lost all my friends and lived in perpetual fear for several years. Despite this unbearable life, I did not dare challenge my belief in the revolution. Instead, I wondered if it might be my parents who had done something wrong. I wrote a dazibao denouncing them to show my loyalty to Mao. My naivety deeply wounded the feelings between my parents and me.

As I grew up, I slowly learned the truth behind the so-called “revolution.” I also realized that my family and I were relatively lucky compared with hundreds and thousands of innocent people who died in the endless political movements. I am very remorseful, and I still feel shaken as I think back on what happened during the Cultural Revolution.

Source: Fan Cao, *Under the Red Sun*, 2005

Name: _____

Why did Chinese youth support the Cultural Revolution?

Document A – Mao’s Little Red Book

1. (Sourcing) What was the purpose of Mao’s Little Red Book?
2. (Close Reading) What are two reasons that Mao thought young people were important to China’s future?
3. How might a young person living in 1964 have felt upon reading these quotes?

Document B – Red Guard Song

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote the song? Why do you think the song was written?
2. (Close reading) What is the main message of the song?
3. Why might a young person in 1966 want to sing this song?

Memoirs: Documents C and D

1. (Sourcing) How are Documents C and D similar types of sources?
2. (Sourcing) Do you find these accounts reliable? Why or why not? Explain using evidence from the documents.
3. (Close reading) Rae Yang (Doc. C) and Fan Cau (Doc. D) both wrote dazibao. Yang denounced her teacher and Fan denounced her parents. Explain one way that their actions were similar and one way that their actions differed.
4. (Context) According to these two documents, what are some reasons why young people joined the Red Guards?

Use evidence from the documents and the timeline to answer the overall question:

Why did Chinese youth get swept up in the Cultural Revolution?