

The Archetypes Of the Cultural Revolution

Mao Zedong created the Cultural Revolution to ensure his own primacy and purge the Communist Party of dissenters. • The idea was to create a “new” man. • But what kind?

A look back at the popular literature of the period suggests the careful construction of an implausible citizen who straddles the space between working class hero and Superman. • by **Claudia Astarita**

China’s Cultural Revolution was such a complex and geographically disjointed enterprise that it remains difficult to reconstruct its story. Its evolution remains obscure, just as the decade that produced it, the 1960s, remains controversial. Maoists have always hailed the Cultural Revolution as a landmark policy that shored up the legitimacy of their power. Mao’s successors have in turn repeatedly singled it out as the root cause of all the regime’s failures.

With the Cultural Revolution, Mao sought to turn the world “upside down,” “liberating the masses” and “creating a new man,” with the “new” signifying an end to any and all opposition, particular from within his own party. To make the revolution work, Great Helmsman Mao chose relied on party members he knew beyond any doubt were loyal to him, including party Secretary Chen Boda, his wife Jiang Qing, security services chief Kang Sheng, and (at least in the first phase) his faithful right-hand man Lin Biao.

In the 1960s, Mao turned to Jiang Qing, Madame Mao, who was known in the West as the mastermind of the so-called Gang of Four. He entrusted with the daunting task of transforming China’s literary and theatrical culture into one that was proletarian and revolutionary. The idea

was to give the masses concrete examples of how to behave, what and how to think, and to establish a new relationship between citizens and society. The new man would be programmed as loyal.

The task was both cruel and arduous, and judging the full impact of Madame Mao’s efforts isn’t easy, even to this day. But a detailed analysis of the stories that were popular during the revolutionary decade shows the extent to which she was able to literally overturn Chinese culture to suit the needs of the dramatic changes that her husband had in mind.

“To follow the example of the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao and remaining faithful to Marxism-Leninism and Mao,” Jiang Qing told the Chinese people in 1967, “you must create a new socialist revolutionary literature worthy of our great country, our great party, our great nation and our magnificent army.”

While a few translations of works from the period are sufficient, at least superficially, to get a sense of the kind of popular hero in vogue at the time, this kind of superficial reading doesn’t suffice to capture the nuances of national propaganda or to fully understand the zeal and

China’s top Communist leadership photographed in 1967.

Pictured are Zhu Enlai (1898-1975), prime minister from China’s inception in 1949 until his death; Lin Piao (1907-1971) minister of defense and an ardent supporter of the Cultural Revolution; Mao Zedong (1893-1976), China’s president and theorist; and Mao’s third wife, Jiang Qing. Mao launched the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in 1966. It was directed against Communist leaders believed to be edging toward capitalism. His shock troops were the so-called Red Guards, principally middle-school and university students. They were to be guided by the “Cultural Revolution Group” of the Central Committee headed by Jiang Qing.

commitment that Madame Mao brought to bear on her remodeling task. Works written in the period were destined to become “revolutionary models,” some of which, in terms of their impact in a generation, endured for decades.

Some 100 seminal works were published during the Cultural Revolution. The heroes always came from the same stock. They were military men, farmers, workers and students, the four central categories that composed the new virtuousness of Chinese society. Jiang Qing provided authors with specific elements from which they could sculpt images of “noble, wonderful, perfect and brilliant working class actors.”

Who were these revolutionary heroes?

In general, they were young, single people, some of them orphans. The young were a fundamental component in the creation of a new generation of militants who would form the Red Guards and the backbone of the country’s future.

Being single mattered because the Cultural Revolution

outlawed concepts of romantic love and discouraged marriage, which it saw as distracting “from what should be their sole interest, namely to serve the public and the party.” At the same time, it was better to be married than divorced. Adult heroes who were married and had families could always leave them behind, sacrificing personal happiness for the good of the party, something that would be impossible in the case of divorce. As a result, no “positive” role models were divorced.

Emblematic of this view is a dialogue in a period work titled “The Golden Road,” written by Hao Ran and published in 1972, in which neighbors Gao Daquan and Deng Jiukuan, away from home for work reasons, express nostalgia:

GD: “Brother Jiukuan, I miss home.”

DJ: “My brother, this is weakness. Are you thinking about your wife?”

GD: “No.”

DJ: “Are you thinking about your son?”



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GD: “No.”
 DJ: “So what are you thinking?”
 GD: “I’m thinking about our village, Fangcaodi, and all those people who shared moments of joy and sorrow with us.”
 DJ: “So, who among them is most dear to you?”
 GD: “I’m thinking about all of them. I feel them all as equally close to me.”
 DJ: “Brother, what you say makes no sense. I know that you are actually thinking about your wife and your son. You shouldn’t feel uncomfortable confiding in me. In my opinion, one day you’ll be able to apply for permission to return home.”
 GD: “Brother Jiukuan, I’m telling the truth, don’t you understand? I am not just the husband of Lu Ruifen and the father of Lu Xiao Long, but first and foremost a member of the Party, and I belong to the Party in the same way as countrymen do.”
 DJ: “I just don’t understand what you mean.”
 GD: “But you should understand. It is your duty...”
 Being an orphan allowed the heroes of stories to focus

more strongly on the social and Party cause, without the distraction of family members.

Usually, these orphans were portrayed as the children of soldiers who had died in battle defending the interests of the community. Ideally, their mother had also died in a similarly virtuous event. The peasants of the village, therefore, raised the orphan, with the representatives of the local unit of the Party as his or her guardian. In this way, the family is the village.

Despite an emphasis on humble beginnings, it’s curious that no revolutionary hero is ever illiterate. That’s because a basic education is necessary to share the wisdom of the Party. Education is necessary for the revolutionary, who otherwise would be unable to read basic precepts and policy documents.

China’s official news agency released this photo showing Mao’s third wife Jiang Qing (at the center of the photo, smiling and wearing glasses) with other Communist Party officials. It was taken at a performance of the Shanghai “White-Haired Girls” ballet in April 1967.



AFP / Getty Images

Only two roads were available to gain the necessary instruction: Attend army-run schools when possible or enroll in courses organized within the villages by the retired members of the military who, having left direct patriotic duty, continue to do their part by educating the community and ensuring the creation of a new generation of Chinese revolutionaries.

More amusing are the physical stereotypes the Cultural Revolution created and exalted. It sought “strong,” “vigorous” people with “big hands and big feet,” “wide shoulders,” “a simple expression and an honest smile,” “large and bright eyes with bushy eyebrows.” The new race was enjoined to demonstrate “calm and composure, never either vulgar nor humble, energetic enough to inspire confidence.” A few of these descriptions suffice to understand an unrealistic, comic book archetype that was nonetheless useful in capturing the attention and excitement of the masses.

Elsewhere in Hao’s “The Golden Road,” which sold Chinese Mao supporters waving their Little Red Books.

more than four million copies in its first year of issue alone, Gao Daquan cuts down a tree, an action filled with almost super hero-like visceral description: “A group of young people stood speechless before the strength of Gao Daquan. The boys watched the sweat drip from his muscular chest as he arched his big back. They peered into his large dark eyes as they rolled into the sky and then hurtled toward the ground as he slashed the tree trunk, his follow through producing blinding flash and a gust of wind. They felt the shudder of the roots as they crumbled under the force of his blows.” The strength of Hao’s prose was its simplicity and moments of larger-than-life drama.

Similar excitement emerges from an encounter between Liu Wangchun, a hero, Long Youtian, a villain, in the story “The River and the Mountains Shout”: “When he raised clever gaze to peer at Liu Wangchun, Long Youtian saw Liu looking at him closely. Liu’s eyes were like two sharp swords, seemingly able to pierce his vital organs. At that instant, Long Youtian felt his bones freeze.”



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The actors called on to give life to these characters by Madame Mao faced the arduous task of combining countless examples of virtuousness into a single character.

Many trained hard and long to get in character. Even before the Cultural Revolution kicked into full gear, Chinese leadership increasingly called on its artistic stars to portray heroic figures. Included were the famous Chinese opera singer Mei Lanfang, who died in 1961, recalled spending hours and days staring at an open flame in a dark room in an effort to perfect his “sharp and bright” look. He would also watch dancing kites or release pigeons to then follow their movements as they bolted into the sky. Distinctive and highly stereotyped clothing helped bring out the personalities of these superhuman characters, giving viewers visual cues on what kinds of roles to expect before the start of any performance.

Top Communist leaders wave Mao’s Little Red Book during a celebration of Chinese leader’s theories. In the photo are Lin Biao, Zhu Enlai, Kang Cheng and Jiang Qing.

Interestingly, unlike earlier times, in which literature was associated only with the elite, Madame Mao, while carefully monitoring and rigging the content of stories, nonetheless encouraged young writers who lacked a political, family or educational pedigree to make a contribution to revolutionary works.

Young people who came from checkered past, since “re-educated,” were often inspired or encourage to write a revolutionary stories demonstrating the importance and effectiveness of sharing their values with the proletarian community, all in the name of building the foundation



Hulton Archive / Getty Images

Mao fourth wife, former film star Lan Ping, with her mother, in 1936. She was later known as Jiang Qing.

for the “new man.” One such writer, Gu Hua, explained his experience in the following terms, once again in perfect harmony with the tone of the times:

“I am an amateur writer. I decided to spend 10 years in the Chinese countryside to work and study. While there I met a lot of brave people who had learned the lessons of Dazhao of (EDITOR’S NOTE *A poor village in Shanxi Province, where local officials managed to transform an arid and rocky area into arable fields, becoming what Mao himself in 1964 called ‘the red flag of Chinese agriculture.’*). Thanks to the heroic actions of those around me I was re-educated, encouraged and inspired. It is

through them that I found the strength to write my story, ‘A Small Town Called Hibiscus,’ which is my personal contribution to the Cultural Revolution. Using guidance about the revolutionary literature desired by Chairman Mao, I decided to reshape my world view and my way of working to give the people good quality works of the kind that might please peasants, workers and the military.”

For a neo-revolutionary whose past was flawed and dubious, the written-down transformation was even more important than the behavior of invented characters acting out revolutionary morality plays. Real people made for more compelling and effective propaganda.

Fiction was fiction. China’s young much preferred the example of real people apparently making real and concrete choices, something the Gang of Four picked up on and transmitted avidly. ●