Chapter 1

Introduction: China’s unfinished revolution

China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution sprang to life in May 1966 and lasted through the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. It was proletarian more in aspiration than in reality, given that four-fifths of Chinese were peasants. It was cultural, in that its most consistent targets were the arts and popular beliefs. It was not in itself a great revolution; it made a lot of noise but only shook up the state—it did not overturn it. Like most revolutions, it overstayed its welcome. It is tempting to regard this raucous decade as the last and perhaps final push in a century-long trajectory of Chinese revolution, after which China got down to the serious business of building a modern nation.

China’s present leaders, often former Red Guards themselves, have little interest in examining the link between Maoist China and the country today. They avoid awkward discussions about their own youth, and they adhere to an unspoken understanding to discard recriminations from that period. Western media are tempted to sharpen the contrast between a good China (which fills our stores with products and carries our debt) and a bad China (which once marked the limit of Western power in the world). But accounts that simply proclaim Mao Zedong to be a crazy tyrant, and that China’s real modern history begins only with his death, miss important dimensions of the rapid and penetrating social change that has occurred since the Cultural Revolution’s end.
In contrast, this book draws out the connections between the isolated and beleaguered China of the 1960s and the newly risen global power of today. These two Chinas are not the opposites that we sometimes want them to be. Like other twentieth-century Chinese leaders, Mao wanted a strong, modern China; some Cultural Revolution policies contributed to this goal, others were remarkably unhelpful but even so added to the distinctive direction followed by contemporary China.

Rather than fence off the Cultural Revolution as a historical swamp, one can stress its connections to our present world, situating this rather nationalist Chinese movement within a global context. The Cultural Revolution was part of the global movement of radical youth in the 1960s and 1970s. Western protestors boasted of imagined or emotional links to China’s rebels. During the Cultural Revolution Beijing and Washington tempered their long hostility with Nixon’s 1971 visit, reshaping the international politics of Asia, and sowing seeds for China’s decades of spectacular economic growth. The Cultural Revolution and its subsequent anti-leftist purge battered China’s bureaucracy so severely that there was little cogent questioning of policies that turned the nation into a vast workhouse for the world’s globalized industry.

Modernization and nationalism in China’s revolutions

The iconoclastic revolutionary tradition of modern China begins at least with the failed Taiping Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century, the bloodiest effort to overthrow the weak and corrupt Qing Dynasty, which finally fell in 1911. The Guomindang (Nationalist Party) of Sun Yat-sen and then Chiang Kai-shek gave revolution a more modern face in a sustained effort to unite and modernize China. They were joined by the Communists, first as allies, then as rivals in a civil war to determine how extreme the revolution would be. When the Guomindang
retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the socialist revolution on the mainland was secured.

But the revolution in culture had only begun. Each of the revolutionary waves that swept over twentieth-century China was passionately concerned with transforming culture. Many would say that the Qing Dynasty’s collapse was heralded by its abolition of the classical civil service examination in 1905, sundering a centuries-old nexus of education, upward mobility, social control, and ideological dominion.

In the confused decade following the 1911 establishment of the Chinese Republic, modernizing intellectuals led the May Fourth movement of 1919. Demonstrations on that date protested Japan’s receiving Germany’s former territorial privileges in China at the end of World War I, but May Fourth activists carried a much broader modernist agenda. Dominating China’s intellectual life for decades, the May Fourth movement regarded the major obstacle to social progress and modernity to be Confucian culture with its patriarchy, land tenure system, and opposition to learning foreign ways. The May Fourth modernizers believed in the liberation promised by science, and in the transformative potential of democracy. They also claimed a special mission for intellectuals in leading China, a privileged position not so different from the Confucianism they opposed.

China’s revolutionary politics were also nationalist as well as modernizing, punctuated by strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts against foreign firms, and finally overwhelmed by the enormity of Japan’s invasion. Although critics charged May Fourth activists with Westernizing China away from its own roots, indignation at imperialism kept that from occurring. The Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek organized a “New Life movement” to attack superstition, close temples, destroy statues of feudal gods, and urge a new morality for China, but then backed away from such radicalism.
The new Communist Party, profoundly influenced by the May Fourth movement, early emphasized cultural transformation. But after Mao Zedong’s 1935 ascendency as Party leader culture occupied a new and central strategic role. Mao, one of the founders of the Communist Party in 1921, became the Party’s chief by leading Communist rebels from their South China bases, surrounded by Guomindang forces, to the remote northwestern city of Yan’an, in 1934–35. This year-long strategic retreat, known as the Long March, preserved a core of the Communist troops but forced the Party to rethink its relationship to their local peasant hosts.

As the war with Japan intensified, Mao recognized that the Party needed to win the support and trust of China’s peasants. The Party set up a program to retrain urban intellectuals and former workers to accomplish this. This 1942 rectification movement involved conscious rejection of elitist ways, a sometimes chest-thumping celebration of peasant virtues, and a series of arts productions aimed at spreading revolutionary values by appealing to peasant audiences. The Maoist rectification sharpened the Party’s ability to combat both the Japanese invaders and the Guomindang. At the same time, it suppressed the cosmopolitan tendencies of May Fourth, preferring peasant art to imported music and drama. In 1945 the Communists adapted Chinese opera (*The White-Haired Girl*) and ballet from a well-known peasant dance (*yang-ge*), and it encouraged Party intellectuals to write in accessible, nonliterary ways.

The arts were intended to serve politics. But Mao also argued that higher artistic standards would create more persuasive propaganda. Most of the intellectuals at Yan’an went along with the new nativist line happily enough. They could see its effectiveness when peasant audiences viewing *The White-Haired Girl* wanted to kill the actor singing the role of the evil landlord. But after the Japanese defeat, and after the flight of the Guomindang, many of the Yan’an ways were put aside, as the victorious Red Army marched into China’s cities, and the Communist Party assumed rule over a sophisticated nation, rather
than a guerilla base in the hinterlands. The Party’s cultural agenda broadened, readmitting some of the cosmopolitan instincts put aside at Yan’an. One Communist painter exclaimed excitedly on the eve of the liberation of Beijing: at last we will be able to make oil paintings!

The first seventeen years

Revolutionary China’s first decade was broadly successful. The new People’s Republic restored social order after a devastating civil war. Land reform and new economic programs brought dramatic economic growth. Military success against the United States in the Korean War encouraged new respect for Beijing. Expansion of higher education pleased intellectuals eager to build a better China, and the arts looked both to foreign and to native traditional inspiration.

The first important sign of indecision among Communist Party leaders came with the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956–57. Overly confident in the wake of a smooth “Socialist Transformation” of economic life in 1956, Mao Zedong reached out to non-Party intellectuals, encouraging them to speak out on public affairs, even to criticize the Communist Party. At first hesitant, many intellectuals eventually responded to the appeal to “Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom,” revealing greater bitterness than the Party had anticipated. Changing course abruptly, leaders abandoned the liberalism of the Hundred Flowers for a fierce anti-rightist campaign in 1957, in which a million intellectuals were labeled as “rightist elements,” many losing their jobs and some sent to labor reform camps for the next two decades.

Silencing the critics encouraged the Great Leap Forward of 1958, a massive effort to break through constraints on economic growth by mobilizing China’s greatest resource, its labor power. The Great Leap was visionary, exhilarating, and mistaken. Newly established agricultural cooperatives were combined into larger communes,
aiming to gain productive power through reorganization, including pooling child care and cooking. While the Great Leap did bring important infrastructural changes in the form of new agricultural factories, roads, and bridges, a lack of administrative feedback exacerbated unrealistic production goals. Lower officials, anxious of being judged “rightist,” too quickly assured their bosses of successes in every field. The Party emphasized the contributions that could be made by politically inspired amateurs, denigrating the constraints often posed by professional experts. There were huge public works projects, some of which were successful, and other campaigns that were ultimately harebrained, such as the poorly conceived “backyard” steel smelters or the campaign to destroy sparrows.

The Great Leap resulted in a vast famine as agricultural production collapsed in many provinces. Operating with unfoundedly optimistic production figures, the state increased quotas for grain procurement even as it reduced resources for agricultural production. Disease and malnutrition resulted in perhaps twenty million to thirty million deaths in 1960–61, the greatest famine of the twentieth century.

The Party was slow in comprehending this disaster. Aware that the Great Leap was not going well, in the spring of 1959 Mao withdrew as head of state in favor of Liu Shaoqi, veteran leader of the Communist underground during the revolution. Later that year, several senior Party leaders faulted the Great Leap for being poorly administered, overly ambitious, and out of touch with the people. Marshal Peng Dehuai, the minister of defense and a veteran revolutionary, led the criticism. Mao’s response was fierce and unrelenting. The purge of Marshal Peng reminded all how strong a cult the Party had built around Mao Zedong, and how difficult it was to constrain him.

The economic emergency was exacerbated by the collapse of China’s relations with the Soviet Union. Once China’s “elder...
brother in socialism,” Soviet leaders were suspicious of Chinese assertions of an autonomous developmental path. Past military cooperation in Korea faded when China sought help in building an atomic bomb. A Soviet bomb was readied for shipment to China, only to be held back as Soviet leaders hesitated to build up a potential rival. As conflict intensified, in 1960 the Soviets recalled six thousand technical advisors, who took with them the blueprints for hundreds of unfinished industrial projects, leaving their Chinese comrades in the lurch.

Tensions with the Soviet Union probably strengthened Mao’s hand at a time of great vulnerability, by stoking Chinese nationalism. While Mao retained the Party chairmanship, China tried desperate experiments to repair economic damage from the Great Leap. Local leaders relaxed their Great Leap intolerance of profit-making peasant markets in order to stimulate food production. Supervision of cultural activities lightened, as the Party cultivated the intellectuals and experts whom it had recently punished.

Rekindling the fire of revolution

The political situation was tense as the Party sought to lead the nation beyond the “three bad years” of 1959, 1960, and 1961. Mao Zedong kept his position as Party chairman, although daily administration was in the hands of President Liu Shaoqi and the Party secretary-general Deng Xiaoping. Liu and Deng supported lightening the hand of the Party, mild market reforms, and a looser cultural regime, all within a familiar Leninist framework. Mao and his followers did not accept such liberalization easily, instead advocating greater political work to keep China from abandoning its revolution.

A fundamental principle of Chinese politics is that the political elite maintains an appearance of unity, even when disagreeing strongly. Thus tensions over policy choices were hidden. Indeed, the array of policy options under experimentation were not viewed
as two diametrically opposed policy “lines” except retroactively, after the Cultural Revolution began. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, radicals criticized the “Seventeen Years” since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Their goal was to make the case for a sharp departure from a period they misrepresented as a unity.

One area of contention was rural corruption. A “Socialist Education Campaign,” launched in 1962, sought to boost fading revolutionary spirit within the Party by emphasizing ideological purity and recalling the class struggles that had brought the Communists to power. Disagreement over Maoist approaches to handling local leadership in the countryside elicited resistance from Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other top leaders.

Despairing that administrative campaigns would ever shake up the bureaucracy, Mao lectured his colleagues in 1962 that they should “never forget class struggle.” This meant talking about it “every year, every month, every day, at conferences, at party congresses, at plenary sessions, and at each and every meeting.” Mao hoped to reinvigorate the Chinese revolution by calling upon people to be true to its historical roots in overthrowing capitalists and landlords, and to protect the new status of workers and peasants.

Mao pressed for a revolution within the revolution. In the chairman’s view, the old ruling classes had been overthrown shortly after the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, yet their influence lived on in people’s everyday assumptions and behavior. The revolution had destroyed the material bases for landlord and capitalist power, but their ideologies were embedded within new China’s institutions, especially education, the arts, and popular culture. Mao distinguished between two kinds of counterrevolutionary influence. Feudalism, the product of the old landlord class, was often at odds with the bourgeois ideology adapted by Chinese capitalists, heavily influenced by their foreign ties. However, in defeat, the two defeated social forces joined
hands to confuse and mislead Communists, discouraging their proper ambitions and deflecting them from their goals.

Thus one did not have to be an actual property holder to hold capitalist or landlord beliefs. Indeed, one of the Cultural Revolution’s most common terms of abuse would become “capitalist roader,” applied to veteran Communists who strayed from the Maoist path. Mao’s approach was strikingly nonmaterial for a lifelong Marxist, but it represented his effort to come to grips with the new dynamics of socialist China. And it provided an intellectual foundation for a massive purge of his enemies in the Party.

After the revolution, the Party oscillated between left-leaning periods, when the virtues of workers, peasants, and soldiers were paramount, and conservative phases when the “masses of laboring people” was a more inclusive concept, extending to intellectuals, office workers, shopkeepers, and other such classically “petty bourgeois” citizens. The call to remember class struggle signaled Mao’s leftism at a time when his Party rivals were tolerating or encouraging much more eclectic economic policies. The Maoist ideal of a Party for workers, peasants, and soldiers was counterpoised against the notion of a Party that reached out also to intellectuals, technical experts, religious leaders, overseas Chinese, and former capitalists.

These strains were barely contained in the four years leading up the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong was honored by all in name, but he complained that the Party secretary-general Deng Xiaoping treated him like the corpse at a funeral, respecting his image but ignoring his views. Others were more supportive, especially the new minister of defense, Marshal Lin Biao. Lin, one of the heroes of the revolution, replaced Mao’s critic, Marshal Peng Dehuai. He led a program to expand the army’s prominence and political impact. When China exploded a nuclear bomb in 1964, the prestige of the military increased. Lin molded the army into a bastion of leftist politics. He halted trends toward
professionalization of the officer corps by abolishing titles of military rank and their insignia. China’s army was made up of peasant recruits, and the Ministry of Defense regarded itself in some measure as the political patron and even voice of millions of peasants. Mao turned also to a group of radical intellectuals, and increasingly, to his wife, Jiang Qing.

Jiang Qing’s 1938 marriage to Mao in Yan’an had provoked controversy among top Party leaders. Many remained fond of Mao’s previous wife and distrusted the Shanghai actress who had beguiled their leader. They compelled the new couple to agree that Jiang Qing would stand back from political leadership. Jiang Qing accepted this begrudgingly, taking low-level assignments in cultural organizations in the 1950s. But by the early 1960s she was restive, resentful, and a willing ally for her increasingly angry husband. As tensions mounted in 1966, she linked up with Lin Biao to organize a February conference on the arts within the People’s Liberation Army, marking both her new public role and underscoring that the army was in Mao’s camp.

From 1962 through 1966, Mao and his followers organized many model programs that later became identified with the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s “Little Red Book” (Quotations from the Works of Mao Zedong) was prepared by the army in 1963 to spread radical values among soldiers through required political study. Urban young people began to be resettled in the countryside in a serious program that would be adapted to rid cities of troublesome Red Guards by 1968. Maoist canonization of the model soldier, Lei Feng, began 1963. The Dazhai production brigade, the Maoist model for rural organization, established its political credentials in 1964, as did its twin model for industry, the Daqing oil field. The Third Front economic development campaign, by which new industries were built in secure interior regions, was launched in 1964, albeit with secrecy.

That does not mean to suggest that the Cultural Revolution really began several years earlier than we know. But Mao and
his supporters already had a coherent program for China. The eruption of political turbulence after 1966 was fueled in part by their frustrations in carrying out these leftward initiatives against the resistance of a professional bureaucratic elite, which was busy developing a more stable and routinized system. What Mao added in 1966 to fire up the Cultural Revolution was the mass mobilization of groups who had not previously been active in Chinese politics.

Mao, feeling that the Party organization was controlled by his adversaries, and fearful of his rivals, turned beyond the Party for allies. Just as he recruited new leaders for his cause, he turned to non-Party activists, the “rebels” who answered his call for “a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” Mao’s appeals struck a chord with many who felt that life in China was unfair, that it had not lived up to ideals of revolution.

Mao Zedong met with the visiting novelist and French minister of culture André Malraux, in 1965. Mao told Malraux that “the thought, culture, and customs which brought China to where we found her must disappear, and the thought, customs, and culture of proletarian China, which does not yet exist, must appear.” Mao also believed that the attainment of Communism was a serious issue, not an abstract theoretical quest. He mockingly dismissed the Soviet premier, Andrei Kosygin, for saying that “Communism means the raising of living standards.’ Of course! And swimming is a way of putting on a pair of trunks!”

The rise and fall of the Cultural Revolution, a drama in two acts

Although the eleven years of Cultural Revolution are typically treated as a coherent era, we can better understand it as divided into two very different phases. The movement exploded with a sudden and intense burst of radicalism by Red Guards, frustrated workers, and ambitious junior officials in 1966–67. This mass
The mobilization phase of the Cultural Revolution succeeded in driving Mao's rivals from power. The second phase of the Cultural Revolution lasted from 1968 to 1976 and consolidated a new Maoist order by negotiations and force to bring rebel groups under control. Revolution was thus followed by repression, as a reconstituted Party suppressed the rebels of 1966. This second period was punctuated in 1971 by the violent death of Mao's anointed successor, Lin Biao. This scandal unsettled most Chinese, leading the movement to drag on as an ailing Chairman Mao presided distantly and ineffectually over factional infighting until his death in 1976.

I. Radical Fervor: 1966–67

The Cultural Revolution erupted when Chairman Mao felt shut out by more conservative comrades, and fought to re-impose his influence. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was officially initiated in May 1966 and was different from all of the campaigns of the previous seventeen years because it was directed against the Communist Party-state itself.

As Mao prepared for the Cultural Revolution, he found that Beijing was under the control of his adversaries. He turned to China's second great city, Shanghai, for political support. There, Maoist writers found an outlet for articles that no one in the capital would publish, and several talented and ambitious local figures aligned themselves to the Maoist cause.

At Mao's behest, the Shanghai writer Yao Wenyuan wrote a critique of a 1961 drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Although set in the Ming dynasty, this play could be read allegorically, as a defense of Marshal Peng Dehuai for daring to criticize Mao Zedong over the Great Leap. The author of the drama, Wu Han, was no political novice but a vice-mayor of Beijing. Mao's strategy was to isolate conservative Party leaders by attacking their underlings. Thus when Beijing Party boss Peng Zhen was unable to halt the criticism of Wu Han and shield this member of his political entourage, he fell from power himself. With the Beijing Party office in chaos, Mao could more easily attack Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.
As Mao pushed to put right his Party, he overcame resistance by enlisting new allies from outside normal political life. By enlarging the realm of political participation, Mao turned especially to students. They responded by forming spontaneous organizations of “Red Guards,” eager to confront teachers, local party leaders, and almost anyone in authority. In an authoritarian society where occasions to speak out were few, Mao encouraged the teens to attack his enemies. Red Guards quickly organized mass meetings, published newspapers, posted “big-character posters” in public spaces, raided homes of imagined enemies, and even set up prisons for overthrown officials. Their youth and lack of social responsibilities not only fueled their activism but also encouraged internal divisions and reckless behavior.

As the existing Party organization was shattered, Maoists formed a new and ad hoc Central Cultural Revolution Group. It initially had a hard time establishing its authority beyond Beijing. A “January Storm” in Shanghai overthrew the old local Party organization, but radicals found it difficult to extend this model through the nation. Rival Red Guard organizations, often linked to different backers in the state and Party bureaucracy, warred with one another. Even Mao’s supporters were shocked by the violence and anarchy. The public humiliation of once respected senior officials in mass criticism meetings unnerved many who had been allied with the Chairman. Some expressed their resistance in a series of meetings in early 1967, castigated as the “February Adverse Current.” But they made their point. The army hesitated to intervene in disputes between competing groups claiming to uphold the true revolutionary line, but was inevitably drawn into the conflict. By early 1968, the army intervened to restore order with increasing frequency, especially in areas where Red Guard factions waged local civil war.

II. Establishing Revolutionary Order, 1968–76

Putting a cap on the wilder side of Cultural Revolutionary mass politics began in earnest in 1968. By then, the purge of conservative officials such as President Liu Shaoqi and other
“capitalist roaders” was complete. But continuing conflicts among Red Guard and rebel organizations remained chaotic, disrupting the economy. Maoists also took notice of external pressures. To the north, military tensions with the Soviet Union increased, while to the south, the United States escalated its invasion of Vietnam.

The victorious Maoists took several measures to restore order. First, competing radical organizations were compelled to unite. Negotiating the reconstruction of local authority was complex, and the new political role of the army—Maoists with guns—was critical. The army backed the new “revolutionary committees,” local administrative bodies that drew upon a “triple alliance” of rebel activists, leftist bureaucrats, and military commanders. Military leaders brokered the local arrangements, province by province, and typically held the greatest power. Second, the Red Guards were packed off to the countryside to do agricultural work as participants in the “Up to the Mountains, Down to the Villages” movement. Expanding this existing program cleared the political field by forcing the Red Guards to steel themselves by living and working with peasant activists. Third, a secretive campaign to “clean up class ranks” reviewed individual dossiers and purged many who were unwelcome in the Maoist leadership. These purges were the most violent aspect of the Cultural Revolution, but they were much less visible than the flamboyant rallies in the heyday of the Red Guards.

By May 1968, as the Red Guards were being dispatched to the countryside, the Cultural Revolution’s mass mobilization of social protest came to an end. Mao signaled his shift against continued attacks on authority: “We must believe that more than 90 percent of our cadres are good or comparatively good. The majority of those who have made mistakes can be reformed.”

The Communist Party’s Ninth Congress, in April 1969, marked the reestablishment of a kind of political normality. The purge of conservative leaders opened the way for promotions of loyal Maoists to top Party positions. Nearly 70 percent of the surviving...
members of the eighth Central Committee were not included in
the ninth, which was chosen by the new Party Congress. Some
twenty-five of twenty-nine provincial Party first secretaries lost
their jobs. Jiang Qing and the other civilians who constituted the
Cultural Revolution Group enjoyed a new elevated status. So did
the top leaders of the People’s Liberation Army, especially in the
wake of the border battle with the Soviet Union over a disputed
river island in March 1969. Chief among these was the minister
of defense, Lin Biao, named as vice-chairman of the Communist
Party and, as Mao’s “closest comrade in arms,” treated as his
putative successor.

The remaining years of the movement shared a common rhetoric
and familiar gestures, yet were different in quality, as Maoists were
concerned with consolidating their power, rather than winning it.
Central-level politics were fluid. Although the Party railed against
factionalism, obvious divisions split the civilian radicals, pragmatic
officials under the leadership of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, and
military officers (with their own internal divisions). All competed
for the attention of Chairman Mao, who was the great balancer of
competing voices.

China looked more harmonious from outside than at the heart of
Party headquarters at Zhongnanhai. After five years of political
turbulence, the nation was shocked anew by the violent death of
Lin Biao in September 1971. Lin (or more likely, his subordinates)
had organized a failed coup against Mao Zedong. Many details
of the official story stretch credulity, but the result was a fatal
plane crash in Mongolia as Lin, his wife, and son, attempted to
flee China. The political consequences were a purge of Lin Biao’s
top aides, a public crisis of confidence, and the rehabilitations of
some officials who had been purged in the opening battles of the
Cultural Revolution.

The final years of the Cultural Revolution featured factional
intrigue at the center, as groups jockeyed for position in the court
of an ailing Mao Zedong. In contrast, mass politics were calmer than since 1966, as ordinary people backed away from the more extravagant forms of political involvement. At the ground level, China seemed more normal; at the center, more weird.

The fall of leftist military leaders after the Lin Biao affair strengthened two groups. One was the civilian activists associated with Mao through his wife, Jiang Qing. The second consisted of more moderate career officials, led by Premier Zhou Enlai. At the tenth Communist Party Congress in 1973, forty Central Committee members were rehabilitated Cultural Revolution victims, including Deng Xiaoping, once excoriated as “the number two person in authority taking the capitalist road.” Liu Shaoqi, “China’s Khrushchev,” had died under squalid conditions in 1969. Mao had not viewed Deng so harshly, shielding him from being expelled from the Party along with Liu. After internal exile in Guangxi province, Deng was recalled to Beijing as a vice-prime minister in 1973, working with Zhou to develop a modernization program. In 1975 Deng was reinstated to the inner circle of power, the Communist Party Political Bureau’s Standing Committee, certainly with an eye to Zhou Enlai’s deteriorating health and the need for a seasoned replacement.

Throughout the early 1970s, elite rivalries were played out through public political campaigns. These were often abstruse, and targeted surrogate issues that stood in for conflicts between top leaders. What did a “Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” really mean? Lin Biao had obviously become a villain. And progressive Chinese had been happily damning Confucius as an emblem of the old society since the May Fourth movement. But why link the two? In what coded way was it a Jiang Qing–driven push against Zhou Enlai? In the aftermath of the Lin Biao conspiracy such obscurantism did little to inspire confidence.

Set against these puzzling left-backed political campaigns was Premier Zhou Enlai’s final appeal for the “Four Modernizations”
of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. His rhetoric was suitably Cultural Revolutionary, but the content revealed the economic practicality of Deng Xiaoping and other rehabilitated old cadres.

Zhou Enlai saw to daily administration throughout the Cultural Revolution, and he remains a person of some controversy. Was he the great moderator, who kept Mao’s enthusiasms under some control? Or was he the great opportunist, a sycophant to Mao who protected some underlings while sacrificing others when useful?

Political paranoia was high. Mao’s declining health (he had Parkinson’s and heart disease) disengaged the one central figure who could adjudicate among rival factions. Zhou Enlai died in January 1976; April demonstrations in his memory in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square enabled radicals to persuade Mao to purge Deng Xiaoping a second time. The minister of public security, Hua Guofeng, who had risen with the Cultural Revolution, was named acting premier and first vice chairman of the Party. By June, Mao was too feeble to receive foreign visitors, and both his voice and his handwriting had become very difficult to understand. When the Tangshan earthquake killed a quarter of a million residents of that North China city in July, the superstitious began to wonder about the loss of the traditional “mandate of heaven.”

At Mao’s death on September 9, 1976, there was a quick showdown between rival factions. Hua Guofeng became the chairman of the Party. One group of Mao’s supporters arrested another. The leading civilian radicals—Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing, the literary official Yao Wenyuan, the Shanghai boss and deputy premier Zhang Chunqiao, and the Party vice-chairman Wang Hongwen—were arrested in a coup organized by the heads of the army and Mao’s bodyguard. The radicals, newly designated to be the “Gang of Four,” were initially accused of undermining the Cultural Revolution, but China had in fact began a long process of disavowing Mao’s last great mass movement.
Interpretations

Mao expected the Cultural Revolution to last a year. Many argue with some eloquence that the Cultural Revolution in fact ended with the suppression of Red Guard activism in 1968. Yet Mao and his allies continued to refer to the Cultural Revolution after the end of mass mobilization, and the Party declared the movement to have ended only in 1977. The end date is important. If we limit the Cultural Revolution to 1966–68, many of the events of the following eight years (opening to the West, education expansion, infrastructure investment) look more like precursors of the reform period that did not get under way officially until 1978. If we treat the 1966–76 period as a seamless whole, then the distinction between radical mass mobilization and the reestablishment of Party control is obscured. This book respects the rhetorical unity of the Cultural Revolution decade, but with the caution that in politics, culture, economy, and foreign relations, one must discern sharp differences between its radical opening and its longer consolidation period.

Analysis and critique of the Cultural Revolution began long before the movement ended. Early on, radicals who believed the movement did not go far enough pressed for a broadening of the attack on power-holders. When Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated in the early 1970s, he reviewed Cultural Revolution policies in order to tone them down. But during Mao’s lifetime, both leftist and rightist analyses were defensively couched in the Chairman’s own language.

Three broad explanations appear for the causes of the Cultural Revolution: (1) conflict within the political elite, (2) tensions within Chinese society, and (3) China’s international position.

Among the elite conflict approaches, Mao-centered accounts have been popular with the public, although less with scholars. While the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, many portrayed Mao as
a brilliant battler for the revolutionary masses. After his death, and especially beyond China, he has more often been represented as a monster hell-bent on sowing chaos for his selfish ambitions. An exiled Chinese artist captured this spirit by painting a vast canvas showing Mao being welcomed to hell by a party of dead tyrants, including Hitler, Stalin, and Qin Shihuangdi, the legendarily brutal first unifier of China.

Mao had both heroic and demonic aspects, and he must occupy an important spot in any interpretation. But some popular accounts depict Mao forcing his way on a whole society. These resemble the Hitler-centric views of the Third Reich that left little room for the German people themselves to be imperialistic and anti-Semitic. Mao-as-monster perspectives are also politically handy for current Chinese elites who avoid looking deeply into China’s recent past. They comfort Western audiences, who often like to imagine the Chinese people as victims. But these approaches rest on bad scholarship, ignoring complex relationships for the sake of a simple message.

Like many top politicians in any country, Mao was not a well-adjusted and stable personality. He had to be at the center of things, and the Cultural Revolution made him politically indispensible. It would be foolish to disregard his pivotal role, or to ignore his personal qualities, such as his lack of friendships with other leaders or his serious physical impairments before his death. Yet simply proclaiming that the Cultural Revolution occurred because Mao was evil absolves us of any responsibility to consider other factors.

More nuanced elite studies move beyond Mao to include relations among China’s top leaders. Some look to longtime factional alliances, such as the tensions of the 1930s–40s between Communists who worked together in the Red capital of Yan’an and those who worked underground, behind enemy lines. Some examine personal relationships, such as the pattern of interactions
between the top military command and the Cultural Revolution’s civilian leaders. This kind of analysis avoids reducing the Cultural Revolution to an assault by Mao against all, and admits the role of vengeance but also that of idealism, activism, and serious political and cultural debates. The rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution poses grandly existential questions. What should the revolution become? When and how does a revolution end? At a mundane level, the conflicts also drew in old rivalries among revolutionary comrades, personal grudges accumulated over the courses of long careers, and awkward memories of past mistakes.

A second type of explanation stresses broader social or cultural factors. These approaches presume that Chinese politics has much in common with politics anywhere: people become aware of grievances, look for opportunities to vent, and make new political deals, typically with the help of political intermediaries. Some analysts consider who benefited from the appeal for Cultural Revolution. For example, in mobilizing youth into the Red Guard movement, idealistic appeals rested atop an unspoken recognition that Chinese society had too many young people to satisfy everyone’s career dreams. A baby boom engendered by peace and prosperity bore political ramifications. Some scholars have looked at the impact of previous policy choices, such as the Party’s reliance upon political campaigns and close supervision of its imagined enemies. Others have emphasized the continuing influence of traditional autocracy, often with a Leninist twist. It is easy to see in Cultural Revolutionary ritual and behavior the impact of hierarchical Chinese tradition. Such cultural considerations importantly illuminate the manner in which events were played out but are less helpful in explaining why they happened.

A different kind of argument looks to international forces. For example, when the Cultural Revolution began, many Western analysts explained it as a response to the escalating American invasion of Vietnam, although the depth of the movement soon made this seem mistaken. Yet the broader cold war context,
coupled with China's enforced international isolation, seems to have added pressure to China's political system. The split with the Soviet Union contributed to this isolation. Some have seen Mao's study of the Soviet Union's negative bureaucratic ways as a factor. However, the Soviet mirror probably reflected what Mao wanted to see, and it is hard to imagine that he launched the Cultural Revolution because of developments in a foreign county. The Cultural Revolution first intensified China's isolation, then began to erode it.

Most scholars of the Cultural Revolution would agree that no single approach is sufficient. The great political crisis of the early 1960s fed elite conflict, exacerbated social tensions, and pushed the nation apart from the rest of world society. It seems unfortunate to narrow our focus to a simple account of who did what to whom, ignoring the broader question of how China's decade of tumult might be related to its twenty-first century status in world politics.