
REMAKING THE CHINESE IDENTITY: THE BREAKDOWN OF TRADITIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS UNDER MAO ZEDONG

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Although a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, there has hardly been any discussion specifically about developments concerning identity in the aforementioned period. This general trend points to an imbalance of consideration between selected Chinese topics; it places an inordinate emphasis on political history. A severe deficiency in the study of cultural history is dangerous because it could result in a misrepresentation or misinterpretation of contemporary Chinese affairs. The subject of Chinese Identity is of particular importance because it provides a context, through which, changes in society reflecting changes in political structures, can be understood.

The reforms of Mao Zedong during the 1960s were a paradox. At times, they would nurture traditional Chinese concepts and values; sometimes the traditional culture was even used to disguise the introduction of altogether new policies. But in other instances, they undermined the foundations for a collective Chinese identity. Although the switch from a government that had been ruled by emperors for centuries, to a unique interpretation of communism had surprisingly retained some semblance of uniformity, it was still a radical change. The principle ideology that traditionally constituted Chinese identity was an adherence to Confucian principles. Mao's attempt at eroding this feature of Chinese culture was effected by bans on its teachings and practices. It is mainly this medium, as well as other traditional cultural norms, through which we should observe the development and change in Chinese identity.

Before addressing the changes associated with the Maoist regime, it is important to characterize the period that existed before it. Over the course of its long history, China has encountered many events that have had the potential to alter the state of the Chinese identity, which will be covered later in more detail. While it is quite simple to distinguish the Chinese as a separate ethnic group from the Japanese, the task becomes more difficult when an internal approach is taken. Though not as diverse as India or some other Asian regions, China contains a multitude of races. Besides some varied tribes scattered throughout the Chinese continent, it is home to two groups that have had a tremendous impact on Chinese history—the Manchu and Mongol peoples. Despite the fact that these two foreign ethnicities invaded and occupied the ethnic Chinese Han people in a series of dynasties, Chinese

people matter-of-factly concede the Yuan (1279-1368) and Ching (1644-1911) dynasties were part of their traditional continuity.¹ So, in this respect the greater Chinese identity was still preserved. Further investigation of this would yield some evidence to the contrary, that the Yuan and Ching reigns did affect Chinese identity, but the scale on which they did so was almost relegated to structural shifts as the invaders were careful to strike a balance between assimilation and cultural preservation. Then, in the midst of Western incursions, which began gaining momentum in the 17th century and even resulted in hostile encounters (Opium Wars with Britain from 1839-1842), news from the outside world sparked an interest in modernization projects and even a preemptive self-criticism that might make Mao's policies appear to be recycled. Although these new ideas may have stirred some into a new sense of themselves, the pre-revolutionary period lacked the physical and ideological force that Mao Zedong brought down on China.

There was a general consensus in what it meant to be Chinese. The foundations of Chinese social and political structure was espoused in sacred texts that any learned man would have had to have been proficient in if they were to take part in politics. The civil service examination was a centuries old system that selected the best and the brightest in China through rigorous testing of the classics. A thorough knowledge of the classics was not only a prerequisite to become a degree holder, but also a fundamental aspect of cultivating their spirit. Works like the *Analects* or *Great Learning*² were staples in the diet of the literati and an upwardly mobile class of citizens from the countryside; thus, they were highly influential in shaping the values and beliefs of the people. They reinforced Confucian ideology, dictating the importance of familial ties and education. It even encouraged specific religious rituals, like that of ancestor worship conducted by individual households and clans.³

The traditional models for Chinese identity emphasized strict hierarchical relationships that influenced everything from kinship bonds to domestic organization. Although Heaven, in all its incarnations, sat at the top of the hierarchy, it was usually the Son of Heaven—the emperor, who controlled everything below.⁴ The emperor himself was, in many ways, a deity and he received his “mandate” from Heaven.⁵ His position was one of such integral importance to the conception of Chinese identity that the last emperor of the Ching dynasty, Puyi, who abdicated in 1912, remained in the Forbidden City until 1924, well beyond the period of time in which his actual rule existed. The pervasiveness of Chinese tradition was evident in the existence of offices such as the emperor's and the judicial system, which had not undergone any significant reformation until nearly 1911.⁶ Like all

¹Chai, Ch'u, and Winberg Chai. 1962. *The Changing Society of China*. New York: Mentor. p. 35.

²Ibid, p. 38.

³Lin, William T. 1967. *Chinese Society Under Communism: A Reader*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. p. 36.

⁴Chai, Ch'u, and Winberg Chai. 1962. *The Changing Society of China*. New York: Mentor. p. 37-38.

⁵Ibid, p. 37.

⁶Ibid, p. 106.

else that has been mentioned, this points to an established identity that would not easily change or even tolerate some slight adjustment.

All of this changed, however, under the yoke of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. Perhaps because the reforms came from an indigenous source, rather than some Western element, they were able to transform the Chinese identity. In any case, Mao Zedong did manage to usher in a new concept for identity that rejected “traditional Confucian social and cultural values.”⁷ In September of 1968, an official newspaper of Mao’s Communist party declared the success of the Cultural Revolution, referring to the intended effects of the movement to remove undesirable traces of those Chinese legacies.⁸ The leader of the Communists supposed that the only way to move forward and create the superpower that everyone believed China should have been was by removing the old establishments from Chinese life. One of the most popular terms before and during the Cultural Revolution encompassed what the Communists deemed despicable within China. This was the notion that, in China, there existed “four olds;” they were “old ideology, old culture, old custom, and old habit.”⁹ These establishments were the old customs which Chinese identified themselves with, but the perception that these traditions were at fault for the nation’s woes meant that they had to be done away with. In place of the four olds, Mao sought to establish “four news” which included “new ideology, new culture, new customs, and new habits.”¹⁰

The aptly named Cultural Revolution was just that. The reforms began in the spring of 1966.¹¹ The government of traditional China had been so centralized that, although it was an authoritarian¹² power, it had very little real determination in the activities of the countryside. The political organization that Mao developed was far more totalitarian¹³ in nature, and much more capable of having its policies impact people in all regions. Mao’s policies attacked, on a grass-roots level, the very essence of what it meant to be Chinese. The hierarchically structured relationships that prevailed in Chinese society were turned upside down; seemingly benign behavioral patterns like saving face were not spared the fate that befell the entire array of Confucian principles. On some occasions, Mao indoctrinated the population through the methods of traditional culture, such as art and theatre, but with an entirely new message from the one they previously conveyed. In this manner, the ideology of Mao Zedong proved to be hypocritical at times, especially when it came to his stance on teachers and the Red Guards, who were members of the Communist militia.

⁷ Meisner, Maurice. 1986. *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. New York: The Free Press. p. 4.

⁸ An, Tai Sung. 1972. *Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution*. Pegasus. p. xi.

⁹ Lu, Xing. 2004. *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ An, Tai Sung. 1972. *Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution*. Pegasus. p. 1.

¹² Tsou, Tang. 1986. *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. xxiii.

¹³ *Ibid*

Even in his own speeches, Mao contradicted himself. Though his policies indicated that he would be delighted in the eradication of traditional Chinese culture, he once boasted of China's long history *and culture*.¹⁴ This became a compulsory feature of his rhetoric and his policies. The Red Guards, who were praised early on for their work at deconstructing traditional establishments, eventually became targets of criticism themselves. They were ironically given the label of "old rebels" and denounced for their reckless behavior.¹⁵ Surprisingly, Mao even had a tendency to be similar in some ways at least, to traditional elements. One of the many ways Maoists were able to transmit their propaganda was through traditional arts.¹⁶ New ideas were incorporated into old styles of opera,¹⁷ proving that Mao's guerrilla tactics were not limited to armed warfare. The most obvious contradiction came when Mao apparently propelled Confucius to model citizen status. Though it might be considered a clever way of persuading the old culture to embrace the new ideology, in hindsight it is hard to reconcile the thought of Confucius as a poor, uneducated, peasant¹⁸ and the practice of burning any treatise written by him and eradicating the culture he so greatly influenced.

Confucius, without a doubt, was the single most influential man in Chinese history. His importance, even today, is illustrated by the monuments that stand in his honor even in corners of the world outside of the People's Republic. It was his philosophy that Mao had to overcome in order to establish his own. What Tang Tsou refers to as one of the features of Maoist thought calls for "politicization of almost all spheres of social life."¹⁹ By placing politics above all, the traditional family relationship was endangered. This proved to be an immensely difficult task, but one that was achieved nevertheless. The traditional bureaucratic system, which also operated on hierarchical stratification, created its own challenge to the Communists because it was ineffective at communicating with people.²⁰ Even if they were able to overcome the obstacle of traditional government, they would have been challenged yet again by the common folk because their culture was so unlike the one that Communists wished to impose upon them. Traditionally, Chinese people were reluctant to participate in any activity that involved sharing resources and labor outside of their "kinship network."²¹ This relationship was characterized by a commitment to one another that

¹⁴ An, Tai Sung. 1972. *Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution*. Pegasus. p. 5.

¹⁵ Lifton, Robert Jay. 1968. *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. New York: Random House.

¹⁶ Tsou, Tang. 1986. *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 14.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Meisner, Maurice. 1986. *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. New York: The Free Press. p. 380.

¹⁹ Tsou, Tang. 1986. *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 21.

²⁰ Chu, Godwin C. 1977. *Radical Change Through Communication in Mao's China*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii. p. 10.

²¹ Ibid

discouraged the type of competition that was associated with industry.²² Instead, the only competition they were interested in was in the success of their relatives by means of the aforementioned examination system, which would bring “glory” to their ancestors.²³

Further investigation into the effects of Maoist reform of the traditional Confucian establishments must be made in order to fully realize the pronounced changes they brought about in Chinese identity. The importance of relationships, and correspondingly networks, cannot be overstated; the transformation of them is such an essential component in understanding the reshaping of identity.

Heaven’s relationship to the emperor was only the pinnacle of hierarchy; a long list of ordering subsequently followed it. After the emperor came the state, after the state came the province, after the province came the prefecture, after the prefecture came the county, and the sequence carried on all the way to the household. But it did not stop there, for there were more degrees of relationships within family units. One of the most distinguishing aspects of the traditional Chinese family was the relationship between parents and their children, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. Chairman Mao encouraged rebellion against this established order.²⁴ Children who were once expected to demonstrate an unwavering level of filial piety became entitled, during the Cultural Revolution, to shout and curse at their parents, in some instances, even violence was displayed toward them, such as an incident where a young man drew a pistol and aimed it at his father.²⁵

The central position once occupied by parents in relation to their children was replaced by the relationship between husband and wife;²⁶ but even this bond, as we have already said, was subordinate to loyalty to the CCP and Chairman Mao. This change was carried out not only in the minds of individuals, but in a more real and practical sense as well. The traditional legal system, that protected paternal rights and superiority in the affairs of their children, was also changed so that parents no longer enjoyed the security of government authority.²⁷ The advent of these new trends meant that “size and solidarity” which traditional families once enjoyed was affected; this in turn made it difficult for new family units to carry out the same socio-economic functions that larger families were able to through extended kinship networks.²⁸ In this manner, the “core” of Chinese society had been altered.²⁹

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Lu, Xing. 2004. *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. p. 58.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Liu, William T. 1967. *Chinese Society Under Communism: A Reader*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. p. 413.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid, p. 414.

Decline in the importance of parents was the result of new considerations for age. Age too, occupied a place in the system of hierarchical relationships. What parents were to children in the traditional period simply reflected what elders were to youth. The Communist revolution elevated the status of young people to a level that was above those that used to have authority over them.³⁰ The role reversal that occurred between these relationships stemmed from the perception of the Communist regime that the “traditional older generation with its conservatism” was “an obstacle to progress.”³¹

The four olds were not limited to kinship. For centuries, China had based merit on achievement through the complex and highly organized examination system. In fact, education had been a defining priority of the traditional Chinese practices. The literati and teachers were members of an elite class. And just as the parent-child relationship was subject to a hierarchical bond, so too was the relationship between student and teacher. Outside of the immediate family, or clan, perhaps the most significant figure for individuals was their mentor or instructor. Teachers and other intellectuals embodied the spirit of Confucian rhetoric with their abilities to cultivate moral virtue. It should then, be no surprise that the Communists targeted the members of this community of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution.³² Many of this class were forced to perform self-criticisms and give oral and written confessions of their crimes against the revolution; some intellectuals were also publicly humiliated and subject to violent treatment.³³ One testimonial given by a student talking about his principal indicated that a placard was hung around his neck while people kicked and slapped him and Communist slogans were shouted at him.³⁴ The student who told this story went on to say that he had heard the principal later committed suicide; his reaction to the news was a sense of satisfaction because the principal was responsible for promoting “bourgeois educational values and ideas.”³⁵ These teachers were put through rigorous reeducation programs where it was thought that they might come to value Maoist ideology themselves.

A symbolic gesture that coincided with the mistreatment of intellectuals was the act of book burning. While teachers may have been the spokesmen of traditional wisdom, it was those sacred texts previously mentioned which represented the old culture that teachers were conveying. But books were not alone in the Communist battle against objects. Places of worship were destroyed, as were costumes used in the opera.³⁶ The Red Guards even

³⁰ Ibid, p. 417-419.

³¹ Ibid, p. 420.

³² Meisner, Maurice. 1986. *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. New York: The Free Press. p. 95.

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Lu, Xing. 2004. *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. p. 59.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid, p. 63.

looted family cemeteries, pillaging antiquities in their wake.³⁷ There were many stories about the losses families suffered during the Cultural Revolution; stories about art being destroyed, classics being burned, western-style clothing, as well as traditional dress being taken away, and photo albums stripped from their owners.³⁸ These stories demonstrate the zeal with which the Maoist regime stripped away the traditional edifice of Chinese identity.

Mao's policy saw to it that the four olds in all their incarnations were erased, so even words became the enemies of the Communists. This display occurred in both the names of people and the names of places. Individuals changed their names to demonstrate their loyalty to the revolutionary movement and to Mao Zedong; they adopted names like "defending the red."³⁹ Some streets and stores were forced to undergo name changes because the ones they had sounded too old fashioned.⁴⁰ One street that had been known as "Prosperity Road" became "Antirevisionist Street."⁴¹ Name changing was a testament to the lengths Mao and his supporters were willing to go to eliminate all traces of traditional Chinese identity. Another noteworthy aspect of the Cultural Revolution and the effects it had on Chinese identity was the way in which Communist ideology dealt with the traditional "network of appropriate attitudes, behavior, and emotions" that people used when socializing.⁴² The term used to denote this network was "face," and it was a practice that was abhorred by the Communists because it was impractical for the work of the cadres.⁴³ We now see that, systematically, the composition of Chinese identity was being dismantled.

But all of this information can only be theoretical conclusions without the presence of some other evidence – a human element. The concept that the Cultural Revolution challenged people's conceptions of identity is not a fallacy or a hypothesis; it is a very real event that occurred and can be deduced from the emotions of the people who experienced it. It has been documented that some people had become "frustrated," "disheartened," and unsure of their ability to be reeducated with the new philosophy presented by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁴ Clearly, the Cultural Revolution had taken its toll and many people had become emotionally drained. It seems that the introduction of a new set of values combined with some contradictory policies proved to be more than the Chinese identity could handle. Robert J. Lifton concluded that the reforms of the Cultural Revolu-

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Jia, Weishan. 2001. *The Remaking of the Chinese Character and Identity in the 21st Century: The Chinese Face Practices*. Westport, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing. p. 72.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Chu, Godwin C. 1977. *Radical Change Through Communication in Mao's China*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii. p. 166.

tion had “undoubtedly evoked strong feelings of self-condemnation, encompassing both guilt and shame...Such feelings can culminate in a terrifying anxiety of extinction, related less to biological death per se than to a sense of being cut off from all human connection and rendered inert and insignificant.”⁴⁵

Mao Zedong, and the revolutionary fervor that accompanied his policies, was successful in many ways at replacing the traditional elements of Chinese identity with his brand of communism. Identity, in many respects, goes hand in hand with culture; if this is true then the dramatic changes that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, and later under Mao, are irreversible. It would, however, be wrong to say that the Chinese are free of tradition when quite the opposite is true. Tradition is such a pervasive component in life that it is, I believe, impossible to get rid of altogether.

⁴⁵ Lifton, Robert Jay. 1968. *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. New York: Random House. p. 51.