

# **Speech at the Forum on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and Lessons for the Working Class Movement on April 1, 2007 at The Hague, the Netherlands**

I hope that this paper will be a contribution to a deeper understanding of the Cultural Revolution, the struggle against revisionism and their lessons for the future.

## **A. Mao Zedong's Struggle against Soviet revisionism in the 1950s and 1960s**

The Cultural Revolution could not have been successfully launched without the polemics that Mao initiated against Khrushchev and the revisionist leadership of the CP of the Soviet Union. After Khrushchev's "secret speech" at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in 1956 that attacked Joseph Stalin as a dictator and worse, Mao wrote that Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin was an attack on the whole period of socialism in the Soviet Union. As the polemics developed in the early 1960s with the publication of "Long Live Leninism," and the nine-part "Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement," Mao and the CCP launched a withering attack on Khrushchev's "three peacefuls."

The Chinese Communist Party stated that the "peaceful transition to socialism" was a poisonous arrow aimed at killing off the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the capitalist state and the necessity for its overthrow by force of arms. In "Apologists for Neo-Colonialism" and other articles written in 1963 and 1964, the CCP argued that Khrushchev's advocacy of peaceful competition and peaceful coexistence with U.S. imperialism was providing political cover for Soviet collusion with the U.S. and for the Soviet Union's lack of support for national liberation struggles in Algeria, the Congo and elsewhere.

In fact, Khruschev was not only promoting fear of and collusion with U.S. imperialism, he was leading the reversal from socialism back to capitalism, while still operating under the sign-board of socialism. How did this happen? This restoration of capitalism was not due to old pre-revolutionary remnants of the Russian bourgeoisie hiding and regrouping, biding their time and lying in wait for a good moment, and then making a grab for power. And it had not occurred as the result of an imperialist

invasion, nor by external forces sneaking agents into the Soviet Union. No, Khrushchev had organized a coup as the leader of a new capitalist class that had grown up in the conditions of Soviet socialism, based on class privileges that were newly generated in a society focused on the development of productive forces.

Taking a close look at this process, Mao Zedong analyzed Stalin's conception of socialism as a period when all internal class contradictions had come to an end with the formal socialist ownership of the means of production. Mao looked at the emphasis that Stalin laid on external threats and the absence of attention to internal contradictions. With this as the leading view in the Soviet period, people who had criticisms of the party and its policies were considered enemies of socialism--agents of external imperialism. Honest differences among the people were suppressed and many were unjustly victimized. This caused great damage to the whole historic project of socialism and communism. Mao recognized that these errors in theory and practice left a festering sore which contributed to the formation of revisionist lines and a new capitalist class inside the CPSU, largely unrecognized and unchallenged, growing until it could seize and consolidate its power under Khrushchev's leadership, in 1956 and 1957.

As early as 1957, Mao asserted in "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People" that classes and class struggle continue to exist in socialist society. Moreover, Mao understood that there were capitalist roaders like Khrushchev at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party as well. These new understandings of the nature of revisionism were essential bricks in the ideological and political foundations of the Cultural Revolution.

## B. The Theoretical Breakthroughs of the Cultural Revolution

On a theoretical level, Mao Zedong's understanding of the nature of socialist society and the need to continue the revolution under working class rule was a qualitative leap in how to wage the decades long, even centuries long, struggle to reach communism all over the world.

Mao not only demonstrated that classes and class struggle continue to exist in socialist society, he understood that socialism is a system in constant motion and struggle between two roads--the socialist road to communism and the capitalist road of restoring bourgeois rule.

This struggle between the two roads has a material basis. In one of his books on the Chinese revolution, William Hinton explained how some of the inequalities of capitalism are reproduced, in new forms, in socialist society:

“These inequalities are inherited from the old society, such things as pay differentials between skilled and unskilled work and between mental and manual work, and differences between the economic, educational, and cultural opportunities available in the city and in the countryside. As long as these inequalities exist, they generate privilege, individualism, careerism and bourgeois ideology.... They can and do create new bourgeois individuals who gather as a new privileged elite and ultimately as a new exploiting class. Thus socialism can be peacefully transformed back into capitalism.”

As these newly formed bourgeois elements coalesce around a revisionist political line in leading positions in the party, they form a new bourgeoisie. Thus, socialism is characterized by intense and at times open class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, concentrated in the communist party itself.

How would you know a capitalist roader if you saw one? How would you recognize a revisionist line? Based on the experience of the Cultural Revolution, we can now say that in a socialist society, a revisionist political line (1) asserts that the primary task of socialism is economic development, promotes political passivity, and negates the decisive role that consciousness plays in enabling the working classes to more directly determine the overall direction of society; (2) a revisionist line defends and widens inequalities in wealth, education, and access to information and decision making power that continue to exist in socialist society; and (3) a revisionist line obscures the existence of classes and class struggle in socialist society, and denies that intense and continuing class struggle is essential to reach communism.

Revolutionary Maoists reject this revisionist line and its view of socialism as a static system. Maoists fight for a dynamic political line that unleashes mass initiative, participation and debate in all areas of society, that revolutionizes the relations of production, that overcomes economic, social and political inequalities to the greatest degree possible, that promotes internationalism and leads mass campaigns to support revolution in other countries, that combats “me first” capitalist ideology, and uproots national oppression and male supremacy.

## C. The Achievements of the Cultural Revolution

On a practical level, the achievements of the Cultural Revolution deserve recognition as the most advanced forms of socialist transformation achieved in the world to date. There isn't time today to talk in detail about these achievements, but it is important to highlight some of them.

- First, the Cultural Revolution knocked a whole stratum of revisionist party leaders and hacks, led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, out of the political boxing ring. In one of the best known popular uprisings, the 1967 January Storm in Shanghai, hundreds of thousands of workers overthrew the whole Shanghai party committee and replaced them by a city-wide revolutionary committee composed of workers, revolutionary cadre and soldiers. Similar 3-in-1 combinations were set up in the factories to implement a new system in which workers participated in management and cadre spent some of the time working on the shop floor.
- In the countryside, with the encouragement of Red Guards from local middle schools, peasants subjected abusive and bureaucratic party cadre to mass criticism. In many areas, a new power structure began to replace the old party apparatus. Mass associations of peasants chose representatives to sit on newly organized village revolutionary committees.
- Women made substantial gains during the Cultural Revolution. Many broke into higher-paying jobs in industry, developed as political leaders, challenged ideas of women's inferiority, and began to dig up the Confucian-patriarchal roots of women's oppression in China. At the same time, during the Cultural Revolution there was an underestimation of the need for political mobilizations and campaigns to root out male supremacist ideas and develop powerful women's leadership in all areas of society. The full liberation of women must be a central battlefield of struggle both before and after the seizure of power.
- The Cultural Revolution produced a multi-media explosion of revolutionary culture--music, plays, ballets, paintings, short stories and poetry that served the building of socialism. Imperial court dramas were swept off the stage and replaced by musical works that portrayed scenes from the Chinese revolution. Many of these revolutionary operas and ballets had strong, independent leading women characters.
- In all areas of Chinese society, people were called on to reject narrow self-interest and embrace their collective interests. "Serve the people" was more than a slogan. Students turned away from chasing

privileged careers to use their knowledge to serve the workers and peasants, and doctors left the cities and settled in the countryside. Political study was a part of daily life using a variety of materials. The 312 page Red Book introduced hundreds of millions of people in China and around the world to Marxism-Leninism and Mao's political thinking.

- There was a vast expansion of education in the countryside, which Mobo Gao and Dongping Han describe in their books from first hand experience. The schools had the goal of producing graduates who were both "red and expert." Students were expected to gain knowledge and skills that could be used to solve society's pressing problems. Textbooks and teaching methods at all levels were changed to discourage rote learning, encourage critical thinking and promote socialist values. Nationwide admission exams were abolished, making it possible for many more workers, peasants and soldiers to attend the universities.
- One of the most dynamic innovations of the Cultural Revolution was the system of "barefoot doctors" that helped narrow the gap in health services between rural and urban areas. By the mid-1970s, more than a million of these paramedics were working in the countryside. Many of them were educated urban youth who were part of the movement "down to the villages." Their guidelines were to place prevention of diseases first, and to combine mental and manual labor. Their slogan was "calluses on hands, mud on feet, medicine kit on shoulder, poor and lower-middle peasants in mind."
- The Cultural Revolution promoted an internationalist spirit and support for people's struggles around the world. China sent billions of dollars in military aid and over 300,000 troops to North Vietnam to operate anti-aircraft batteries and perform logistical work. The People's Republic provided training to guerillas fighting against apartheid South Africa, neo-colonialist regimes in France's former colonies, and against the Zionist settler state of Israel. Massive rallies were held in 1968 to support the students and workers in France and the Black liberation movement in the U.S. in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The CCP denounced the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and inspired the formation of new anti-revisionist communist parties and organizations in India, the Philippines, Turkey, and many other countries including bastions of imperialism such as the U.S.

These "socialist new things" were inspiring, but they were not universal. They faced stubborn resistance, and did not take firm root in many areas across China's huge territory. Thus, it is important to avoid an

idealized picture of the Cultural Revolution. This does not come to grips with the immense difficulties the Cultural Revolution had to overcome, and it does not lead to a deeper understanding of the factors that led to its eventual defeat.

## **D. The Objective Conditions Facing the Cultural Revolution**

In order to understand the inability of the Cultural Revolution to consolidate its achievements, two kinds of questions must be addressed. The first concern the objective factors, internal and external to China, that existed in the 1960s and 1970s. The second set of questions concern shortcomings in how it was conducted and unintended but still negative consequences.

To begin with, the Cultural Revolution was an uphill battle. The Chinese revolution had gone through an extended period of new democratic revolution beginning in the 1920s. Even taking into consideration the social transformations in the liberated areas and after nationwide victory in 1949, it was not possible to completely eradicate feudal and bourgeois ideology in a few years, or even in one or two generations.

In addition, there was a relatively short period of socialist construction before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Much of that was conducted on the basis of the experience of building socialism in the Soviet Union, which had many weaknesses even prior to the rise of Khrushchev and state capitalism in the mid-1950s. As noted earlier, by the early 1960s, much of the top CCP leadership was implementing a pro-Soviet revisionist line with Chinese characteristics, and their network of party and government officials was firmly entrenched.

In 1966, international conditions were favorable for such an unprecedented revolution within a socialist society. It was no exaggeration to say that revolution was the main trend in the world. U.S. imperialism was bogged down in South Vietnam due to the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people, and national liberation struggles were on the rise in Asia, Africa, Latin America and within the imperialist countries. The Chinese Communist Party had launched a bold challenge to the revisionist CPSU and to its undisputed leadership over the international communist movement.

However, just three years into the Cultural Revolution, the military intervention of the Soviet imperialists in Czechoslovakia and the threat of a Soviet nuclear attack on China in 1969 produced a radically different international playing field for the People's Republic. This forced Mao and

the party leadership to make an opening to the West in order to avoid fighting on two fronts. This shift also provided a political opening to and strengthened the position of pro-Western sections of the party leadership.

When combined with the political defection of Lin Biao in 1971, these events led to a shift to the right on the part of a large number of party and government officials grouped around Premier Zhou Enlai. With Zhou's backing, many revisionist leaders who had been knocked down in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated, including Deng Xiaoping. This set the stage for a full-scale counter-attack on the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps most importantly, the Cultural Revolution was an uphill battle because of a lack of historical experience. Just as Lenin, Stalin and the Soviet Union had no prior experience to draw on in building a socialist society in the 1920s and 30s, Mao had to develop a new understanding of the nature of class struggle in socialist society and a political line and mechanisms for keeping China on the socialist road. People sitting here today know how hard it can be to figure out how best to struggle for revolution in situations where there isn't much in the way of historical experience. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, it is understandable that even dedicated revolutionary activists made mistakes.

## E. The Cultural Revolution's Problems and Shortcomings

**One:** At times, factionalism—in the sense of groups placing their own narrow interests above political principle-- was a difficult problem to resolve. In the course of the Cultural Revolution, rightist and leftist groupings all claimed to be following “Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line.” In this complex and confusing situation, party members and the masses of people could only distinguish between correct and incorrect lines by engaging in political and ideological study, discussion and struggle. Further advances in the Cultural Revolution and consolidation of its achievements would have required a higher level of political consciousness and willingness to put collective interests first in order to reduce the level of unprincipled factional struggle.

**Two:** The unleashing of millions of Red Guards in the spring of 1966 brought with it a set of unanticipated problems. Many Red Guard organizations ignored the policy of using reason, not force, in conducting political struggle against revisionist officials. Some of the Red Guard groups said, “doubt everything and overthrow everything.” Mao responded

that 95% of the people could be united, and that the method of “curing the disease to save the patient” should be applied with people who had made mistakes.

Mao’s instructions were simply ignored and openly violated by some of the forces that joined in the at times chaotic mass upsurges of the Cultural Revolution. The rise in the level of violence in 1967 and 1968 was serious enough for Mao to call it “all around civil war.” This caused many people to withdraw from political life and made it impossible to undertake social transformations in these areas. It also gave discredited revisionist forces ammunition to call a halt to the Cultural Revolution and stand in the way of its social transformations.

**Three:** In spite of the August 1966 directive that the principal target of the Cultural Revolution was high-ranking party officials taking the capitalist road, intellectuals, especially those trained in the pre-Liberation era, were repeated, high-profile targets. At some points, nearly all teachers, writers and other intellectuals came under fire from Red Guard groups. When the policy on intellectuals was applied in a more focused way, Rightist intellectuals were challenged and criticized in public. Many intellectuals were won over to the goals of the Cultural Revolution and returned to their positions with a new outlook. Thus, the principles of struggle and unity must be correctly applied with intellectuals and other non-proletarian strata in socialist society.

**Four:** One of the problems of the Cultural Revolution that was most difficult to resolve was the inability of Mao and the leftists in the CCP to find the means to subject rightist commanders in the People’s Liberation Army to mass criticism, to ferret out their connections to revisionist forces outside the army, and to remove them from power where necessary. The development of widespread factional and at times armed struggle in 1967 created a political crisis. To have called for the Cultural Revolution to be carried out in the military at this point would have risked splintering the PLA and civil war. In addition, the buildup of military forces by the U.S. and the Soviet Union required vigilance by the PLA. These threats practically exempted revisionist military officers from the scrutiny and challenges which their counterparts in the party were facing.

In spite of these obstacles, there was a great need to carry out the Cultural Revolution and make revolutionary transformations in the PLA after the acute danger of civil war had passed. This necessity became apparent in 1976. When the Chief of Staff of the PLA and other top

commanders carried out the arrest of the Four, there was opposition to the coup in the militia in some areas, but virtually none in the PLA.

As long as socialist states face imperialist and hostile powers, they will need standing militaries for defensive purposes. But if mass campaigns against revisionism are not carried out in the armed forces of socialist states, the generals can accomplish *from within* what the imperialist armies have not yet been able to do from without—overthrow working class rule.

**Five:** One of the most vexing problems faced by the Cultural Revolution was that the development of new revolutionary leadership in the top levels of the party was incomplete and was difficult to consolidate. Other than Mao himself, the Four—Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen, Yao Wenyuan and Jiang Qing—were the most prominent representatives of the leftist forces in the party who opposed Deng and defended the accomplishments of the Cultural Revolution. All of them had played a leading role in the Cultural Revolution’s early upsurges.

In assessing the role of the Four in the early 1970s, their promotion of leftist campaigns such as “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” and “Criticize Deng and Beat Back the Right Deviationist Wind” are well known. Less is known about their policies for China’s socialist transformation and how they put them into practice. In making an assessment it is important to remember that the Four’s work was blocked and sabotaged at every turn by Deng and his supporters.

This question of bringing forward new revolutionary leadership is part of the larger question of what it would have taken to turn back the rightist offensive in the early 1970s. One thing is clear: it would have required a new revolutionary upsurge *among the masses*. It may have been impossible to conduct a struggle on the scale and intensity of the early years of the Cultural Revolution, but by the time a campaign to explicitly criticize Deng and his “general program” was launched in 1976, it was too late to turn it into a powerful revolutionary force.

Some have argued that Mao was too lenient with Deng and other revisionist leaders, as Mao did agree to Deng’s rehabilitation in 1973, But it wasn’t just Mao—the balance of forces in the leadership of the party had shifted sharply to the right. The fundamental issue, concerning which further investigation and discussion is needed, is *how and to what extent* Mao and his leftist supporters mobilized the masses and the revolutionary forces in the party to defend the achievements of the Cultural Revolution. This effort

would have required targeting, exposing and neutralizing revisionist leaders who were taking China off the socialist road.

**Six:** On the question of a so-called “personality cult” around Mao: This view doesn’t understand the relationship between Mao and the Chinese people. To them, Mao led the Communist Party in decades of revolutionary warfare to uproot the power of the landlords and the capitalists who had sold out China to the imperialist powers. This produced deep feelings of respect and even reverence among the Chinese people.

In addition, during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, it was a political necessity for Mao to use his revolutionary stature to appeal to the Chinese people above the heads of Liu, Deng and the other entrenched revisionists in the party and government. Later in the Cultural Revolution, Mao expressed his disapproval of practices that treated him like an icon and references to him as “Great Helmsman” and so on disappeared.

While individual leaders such as Mao and Lenin have played a decisive role in charting a path to revolution and developing Marxist theory, they haven’t done this in isolation. Correct ideas are most effectively brought from and then back to the masses through the democratic centralist channels of a communist party with a tempered collective leadership.

**Seven:** In the early 1970s, Mao, Zhou and most of the Chinese leadership advocated a “three worlds perspective” for China’s foreign policy. This was adopted by pro-China communist parties and organizations in many other countries. (It is important to understand that Mao’s perspective was very different from Deng Xiaoping’s counter-revolutionary Three Worlds Theory, which advocated a strategic alliance with the Western imperialist powers.)

According to the “three worlds perspective,” the neo-colonial governments of the third world and the less powerful imperialist countries of the “second world” could serve as reliable allies against one or both superpowers. In fact, this position undermined the view—which was held by the CCP leadership earlier in the Cultural Revolution-- that it was essential to provide aid to revolutionary movements in these countries.

This issue remains crucial today. Similar sentiments are heard about the central importance of struggles for national sovereignty—referring to Venezuela, Bolivia, Iran, Zimbabwe and a number of other countries. They should be defended against attacks by the U.S. and other forces. However, these countries---even if led by social-democrats like Hugo Chavez and Evo

Morales—are still caught in the web of imperialist economic relations. While these countries may implement progressive reforms--and even some features of a social welfare state with enough oil revenues-- this is not a substitute for the development of a mass-based revolutionary movement, which history shows is the only pathway to socialism.

This process of looking back at the Cultural Revolution has produced a number of thought-provoking proposals looking forward to the establishment of new socialist states and what these socialist societies might look like. These proposals focus on the relationship between the party and the masses of people, on democratic forms of organization, and the role of mass debate and dissent in socialist society. Due to lack of time, I will have to refer you to a section in a paper by the MLM Revolutionary Study Group in the U.S. that is available [here](#).

## F. Concluding Remarks

Given the uphill nature of the battle, the lack of historical experience, the unfavorable objective situation that developed in the early 1970s, and the difficulties encountered by Mao and other revolutionaries in leading the Cultural Revolution, it was not possible to consolidate it and keep China on the socialist road.

More important, what is remarkable about the Cultural Revolution is that it accomplished so much in a few short years. We should ask what the world would be like without the experience of 1966 to 1976 in socialist China. We would not have the experience of a *revolutionary* socialist society, of millions of people awakening to political struggle and creating many “socialist new things.” Today’s revolutionaries around the world would not have the necessary tools to explain the reversals of socialism, first in the Soviet Union, and then in China. Without the divergent roads of revisionism and revolution having been clearly marked, the difficulties of charting the course forward from here would be daunting, and the pull toward discarding the socialist project would be massive.

Instead, the Cultural Revolution has passed down a precious legacy of theoretical understanding and revolutionary practice for future generations. Future socialist societies will reach for a higher level of revolutionary consciousness and efforts by the working class to exercise more direct control over all of society.

Just as successful revolutions never repeat themselves, future cultural revolutions in socialist societies, even in China itself, will not simply

replicate the Chinese experience from 1966 to 1976. In the future, informed by the historic lessons of the Cultural Revolution, genuine communists will be more aware of this threat and will exert every effort to mobilize the masses to expose and remove bourgeois elements in the party *before* they become strong enough to challenge proletarian rule.

We now know that in every socialist society there will be intense class struggle, and repeated tests of strength between those who seek to stay on the socialist road and revisionists who advocate policies that will restore capitalism sooner or later. The forms that these periodic tests of strength will take will be varied, but they will undoubtedly include mass upheavals such as the Cultural Revolution.

In addition, fundamental principles of the Cultural Revolution remain relevant in today's revolutionary movements, such as continuously revolutionizing the party, encouraging the masses to criticize mistakes made by party members and leaders, and the importance of struggle over culture and ideas, including the study of revolutionary theory to guide practice. Finally, the polemics of the Chinese Communist Party against the Soviet revisionists refuting the idea of a peaceful transition to socialism, hold critical lessons for revolutionaries today, especially in evaluating recent developments in Nepal.

The situation in Nepal requires serious investigation and discussion in its own right. However, to conclude this paper, I will make a few comments on the new political strategy of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which is arguably the most important question facing the international communist movement today. As is well known by this audience, by 2005 the CPN(M) had freed 4/5ths of the country through people's war, and was poised to take the strategic offensive—to launch a series of military campaigns, coordinated with popular uprisings in Kathmandu and other major cities, in order to seize nationwide power and establish a new democratic state.

At this key juncture, the leadership of the CPN(M) determined that there was another path to power that didn't require overthrowing the old reactionary state and defeating its army. In 2006, it negotiated a peace agreement with seven parliamentary parties that represent the interests of the landlord and bureaucratic capitalists in Nepal in order to set up a Western-style parliamentary system. As part of this agreement, the CPN(M) dissolved its liberated areas, sequestered its troops and arms under UN supervision, and agreed to merge the People's Liberation Army with the renamed Royal Nepalese Army.

In my view, this is not a creative application of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to new conditions, but an all too familiar rejection of the Leninist understanding of the state—that the radical transformation of Nepalese society cannot take place without the defeat of the reactionary army and the construction of a new revolutionary state.

Since serious investigation and debate concerning this question has already begun among revolutionaries around the world, I recommend that you pick up a copy of the bibliography compiled by the MLM Revolutionary Study Group. This includes two statements by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) on the new strategy of the Nepalese comrades. This study group has also written an article on the integrated political, military and negotiating strategy of the Chinese Communist Party from 1937 to 1946, and its relevance to the situation in Nepal today.

One of the bourgeoisie's most potent ideological weapons against revolutionary movements is the suffocating claim that socialism is a “failed system,” and that in the present day world, socialism, much less communism, is unattainable through revolutionary struggle. This must be answered with a powerful affirmation of the fundamental teachings of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism on the nature of the state and revolution, and how the masses of people in socialist countries can use the lessons of the Cultural Revolution to stay on the socialist road to communism.

With a deeper understanding of the positive and negative lessons of the first wave of socialist revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, communist ideology, politics and organization will emerge as a stronger and more vibrant force in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thank you. In the spirit of the Cultural Revolution, I hope that this presentation stirs up some useful discussion.