Education: the cause and results of the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was designed by Chairman Mao Zedong, and was organized and carried out by students across China. During this time there were drastic changes to Chinese life and education. Historians show through political, cultural and economic spheres that students took a major role in the formation of the Cultural Revolution; and by studying the reason for the revolution and its psychological impact a better understanding of why the students and politicians acted under Mao can be found.

Education during the Cultural Revolution was a product of cultural change caused by the Red Guard. In Julia Kwong’s book Cultural Revolution in China’s Schools, Kwong argues that the revolution was a revolt against the schools; these revolts lead the students to create their own culture, and organize the Red Guard.

She points to the students dislike of the school staff as one of the reasons for the revolution. The Red Guard were created as a way for students to be more united in their actions. The culture of the school system was changed as the schools were taken over by students. The students created their own sub-culture within the school system; which grew as the government gave their support.

The Red Guard grew rapidly because students realized the shift in culture and wanted protection; while others joined because they wanted power. The Red Guard changed the culture of society by fighting against the four olds: “old thought, old culture, old customs, old habits of the exploiting class, and all the superstructures that do not fit the infrastructure of the socialist
economy.”\(^1\) With the fight against the four olds the Red Guards found a new target to aim their youthful energy at.

Kwong discusses how the educational culture of China was significantly shaped by the Mao’s writings. Students took Mao’s writings as their own personal religions and gave Mao credit for all their successes. The Maoist way of thinking brought cultural change that shaped the students thinking. Mao’s writings brought them together, and shaped the Red Guard to become a force of change.

Kwong ties the student involvement in the Cultural Revolution to the government giving their support and pushing the revolution onwards. As the Red Guard gained more control and power the local governments lost grandeur, thus the political culture shifted in favor of the Red Guard.

In Lu Xiuyuan’s article “Understanding Popular Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution.” Lu takes responsibility off the politicians of China and puts blame for the Cultural Revolution on the people. Lu argues that the Cultural Revolution would not have been able to last as long as it did without the support from the bottom.

Instead of viewing the Cultural Revolution as something started among the upper levels of government Lu believes that the students were the main catalyst for the Cultural Revolution. Lu’s idea is that as the students sought for upward momentum and more power the students culture influenced the political culture.

The Red Guard was an idealist society with different levels of involvement, much of the movement revolved around the self interest of students who were seeking power while others

were not heavily involved in the movement but became Red Guards because it was the social norm.

Jung Chang in her book *Wild Swans* describes her experiences as a Red Guard. Chang states that much of her reason for joining the Red Guard was because of peer pressure and to gain protection. Chang looks at education during the Cultural Revolution as a waste of time; they only studied political propaganda and were not given a real education.² Her depictions of Cultural Revolution life help the reader gain an understanding of how the peer pressures of the Cultural Revolution caused students to act against the social norm.

Chang discusses how Education changed the family life of students during the Cultural Revolution. Due to the political pressures of the Red Guard, family background took on a different meaning. A student’s family background would either help them or hinder them in getting into the Red Guard, and many students were condemned by the Red Guard on the basis of family background.

Political involvement had a major influence on Cultural Revolution education, whether the revolution is seen as starting in the schools or in the upper echelons of the government it was a political movement. In Suzzanne Pepper’s book *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*. Pepper places the blame for the Cultural Revolution on Mao Zedong and his motivated drive for power after the Great Leap Forward. The education reforms during the Cultural Revolution were Mao’s way of destroying the capitalist roaders and turn the country back to Socialism.

Pepper argues that Education reforms originated in the upper levels of government. These reforms came as students gathered to the call of Communist officials to get rid of the four

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olds. In this battle, education reform shaped the way students were taught, and who taught them; many teachers were overthrown because of their bourgeoisie teachings.³

Pepper believes that the political motives behind the Cultural Revolution included the mass mobilization of students so that they could cause the changes Mao wanted in the political system. The Cultural Revolution also caused mass criticisms of everyone except Mao and Lin Biao.⁴ This caused massive political upheaval in all aspects of culture. the means of upheaval was the students.

Tang Tsou in the book *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms* summarizes the politics of the Cultural Revolution when he states that the Cultural Revolution redefined “The role of those in positions of authority, and by changing their attitudes and values so that the line between domination and subjection is blurred and a new type of relationship between the two groups will be obtained.”⁵ The Cultural Revolution blurred the lines between politicians and students to a point where it was difficult to tell who was in control of the system. the teachers lost political power as the power of the students was expanded. This power gave the students authority and caused the teachers to be subservient to their former pupils.

Tang points out how the Red Guard were the political vessel that Mao used to bring forth the change he wanted during the Cultural Revolution. As lines were blurred the students were given power to act according to their own desires which caused violence. This violence gave Mao the chance he needed to cause political change.⁶ Tang points out that the students were an excellent political vessel because they were ignorant of the consequences of Maoist thought.⁷

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⁴ *ibid*, 368.
⁶ *ibid*, 92.
⁷ *ibid*, 91.
They were raised in a world where Mao was the Emperor, and they were driven by political propaganda that caused them to act according to their Emperor’s word.

In Chalmers Johnson’s essay “China: the Cultural Revolution in Structural Perspective” Johnson brings up that the students in the revolution were used as shock troops. While school was canceled they were used to bring about Mao’s goal for an equal socialist society.8

The political upheaval of the Cultural Revolution stopped education and was a recipe for future disaster. The lack of education created by the Cultural Revolution had a deep economic impact on China. In Xin Meng and R. G. Gregory essay “The Impact of Interrupted Education on Subsequent Educational Attainment” the authors take a look at how the economic growth of China was hindered by the Cultural Revolution, with students during the revolution loosing about two or three years of school there was a negative impact upon students gaining advanced degrees, thus there was a drop in the socioeconomic status of many of the people in the country.9

The amount of students who got university degrees during the Cultural Revolution went down by fifty-five percent.10 Which caused a drop in the level of professionalism in the country and with fewer professionals the country fell into economic troubles due to the rising generation lacking in education.

Xueguang Zhou and Liren Hou argue in the article “Children of the Cultural Revolution” argue that the Cultural Revolution deepened the gap between the upper class politicians children and the lower and middle classes. The lower and middle class children were sent to the country where they were not allowed to leave while the upper class children stayed in the city and were

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10 ibid, 953.
able to gain power.\textsuperscript{11} This move created a large gap in-between the upper and the middle class students.

Much research has been done on the students involvement during the Cultural Revolution. As seen through the cultural and political perspectives the student involvement was the root of the Cultural Revolution; the economic perspective helps one to view the end results and the impact of the students who did not get an education due to the revolution. But what about a psychological perspective of what happened? What kind of mental impact did the Cultural Revolution have on the students?

This study would show how the thought of Mao had a lasting impact on education in China; it would show the psychological impact of propaganda education on the students, and search for any lasting impact that this propaganda had on the Chinese people. This would mainly be a study of the lasting impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese education. It would also show thorough a psychological view how the education reforms began.

A psychological-cultural perspective would show the motive behind the student’s action, how they acted together and why they acted in the manner that they did. A political perspective would show why the politicians had the students turn against their communities. It would show the psyche behind their thought. The psychological history of the Cultural Revolution would give a better understanding of why people acted irrationally during the Cultural Revolution, the motives behind political action and the impact of the Red Guards on the Cadres.

As we look at the Cultural Revolution in a cultural, political and economic perspective we can view the relationship between the people and the government. If we study the psychology behind their actions a greater understanding of why the revolution happened and the

lasting impact that it has had on the Chinese people. through using these four methods, the reasons for the Cultural Revolution become visible wherein it was a cultural movement caused by Mao who used students to gain back his power.
BIBLIOGRAPHY