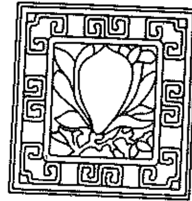

15. 'Destroy First, and Construction Will Look After Itself'— The Cultural Revolution Begins

(1965–1966)

At the beginning of the 1960s, in spite of all the disasters Mao had caused, he was still China's supreme leader, idolized by the population. But because the pragmatists were actually running the country, there was relative literary and artistic freedom. A host of plays, operas, films, and novels emerged after long hibernation. None attacked the Party openly, and contemporary themes were rare. At this time Mao was on the defensive, and he turned more and more to his wife, Jiang Qing, who had been an actress in the 1930s. They decided that historical themes were being used to convey insinuations against the regime and against Mao himself.

In China, there was a strong tradition of using historical allusion to voice opposition, and even apparently esoteric allusions were widely understood as coded references to the present day. In April 1963 Mao banned all 'Ghost Dramas,' a genre rich in ancient tales of revenge by dead

victims' spirits on those who had persecuted them. To him, these ghost avengers were uncomfortably close to the class enemies who had perished under his rule.

The Maos also turned their attention to another genre, the 'Dramas of the Ming Mandarin,' the protagonist of which was Hai Rui, a mandarin from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). A famous personification of justice and courage, the Ming Mandarin remonstrated with the emperor on behalf of the suffering ordinary people, at the risk of his own life. He was dismissed and exiled. The Maos suspected that the Ming Mandarin was being used to represent Marshal Peng Dehuai, the former defense minister who in 1959 had spoken out against Mao's disastrous policies which had caused the famine. Almost immediately after Peng's dismissal, there was a noticeable resurgence of the Ming Mandarin genre. Mme Mao tried to get the plays denounced, but when she approached the writers and ministers in charge of the arts they turned a deaf ear.

In 1964, Mao drew up a list of thirty-nine artists, writers, and scholars for denunciation. He branded them 'reactionary bourgeois authorities,' a new category of class enemies. Prominent names on the list included the most famous playwright in the Ming Mandarin genre, Wu Han, and Professor Ma Yin-chu, who had been the first leading economist to advocate birth control. For this he had already been named a rightist in 1957. Mao had subsequently realized that birth control was necessary, but he resented Professor Ma for showing him up and making it clear that he was wrong.

The list was not made public, and the thirty-nine people were not purged by their Party organizations. Mao had the list circulated to officials down to my mother's level with instructions to catch other 'reactionary bourgeois authorities.' In the winter of 1964–65, my mother was sent as the head of a work team to a school named 'Ox Market.' She was told to look for suspects among prominent

teachers and those who had written books or articles.

My mother was appalled, particularly as the purge threatened the very people she most admired. Besides, she could plainly see that even if she were to look for 'enemies' she would not find any. Apart from anything else, with the memory of all the recent persecutions few had dared to open their mouths at all. She told her superior, Mr Pao, who was in charge of the campaign in Chengdu, how she felt.

Nineteen sixty-five passed, and my mother did nothing. Mr Pao did not exert any pressure on her. Their inaction reflected the general mood among Party officials. Most of them were fed up with persecutions, and wanted to get on with improving living standards and building a normal life. But they did not openly oppose Mao, and indeed went on promoting his personality cult. The few who watched Mao's deification with apprehension knew there was nothing they could do to stop it: Mao had such power and prestige that his cult was irresistible. The most they could do was engage in some kind of passive resistance.

Mao interpreted the reaction from the Party officials to his call for a witch-hunt as an indication that their loyalty to him was weakening and that their hearts were with the policies being pursued by President Liu and Deng. His suspicion was confirmed when the Party newspapers refused to publish an article he had authorized denouncing Wu Han and his play about the Ming Mandarin. Mao's purpose in getting the article published was to involve the population in the witch-hunt. Now he found he was cut off from his subjects by the Party system, which had been the intermediary between himself and the people. He had, in effect, lost control. The Party Committee of Peking, where Wu Han was deputy mayor, and the Central Department of Public Affairs, which looked after the media and the arts, stood up to Mao, refusing either to denounce Wu Han or to dismiss him.

Mao felt threatened. He saw himself as a Stalin figure,

about to be denounced by a Khrushchev while he was still alive. He wanted to make a preemptive strike and destroy the man he regarded as 'China's Khrushchev,' Liu Shaoqi, and his colleague Deng, as well as their followers in the Party. This he deceptively termed the 'Cultural Revolution.' He knew his would be a lone battle, but this gave him the majestic satisfaction of feeling that he was challenging nothing less than the whole world, and maneuvering on a grand scale. There was even a tinge of self-pity as he portrayed himself as the tragic hero taking on a mighty enemy – the huge Party machine.

On 10 November 1965, having repeatedly failed to have the article condemning Wu Han's play published in Peking, Mao was at last able to get it printed in Shanghai, where his followers were in charge. It was in this article that the term 'Cultural Revolution' first appeared. The Party's own newspaper, the *People's Daily*, refused to reprint the article, as did the *Peking Daily*, the voice of the Party organization in the capital. In the provinces, some papers did carry the article. At the time, my father was overseeing the provincial Party newspaper, the *Sichuan Daily*, and was against reprinting the article, which he could sense was an attack on Marshal Peng and a call for a witch-hunt. He went to see the man in charge of cultural affairs for the province, who suggested they telephone Deng Xiaoping. Deng was not in his office, and the call was taken by Marshal Ho Lung, a close friend of Deng's, and a member of the Politburo. It was he whom my father had overheard saying in 1959: 'It really should be him [Deng] on the throne.' Ho said not to reprint the article.

Sichuan was one of the last provinces to run the article, doing so only on 18 December, well after the *People's Daily* finally printed it on 30 November. The article appeared in the *People's Daily* only after Zhou Enlai, the premier, who had emerged as the peacekeeper in the power struggle, added a note to it, in the name of 'the editor,' saying that the Cultural Revolution was to be an 'academic' discussion,

meaning that it should be nonpolitical and should not lead to political condemnations.

Over the next three months there was intense maneuvering, with Mao's opponents, as well as Zhou, trying to head off Mao's witch-hunt. In February 1966, while Mao was away from Peking, the Politburo passed a resolution that 'academic discussions' must not degenerate into persecutions. Mao had objected to this resolution, but he was ignored.

In April my father was asked to prepare a document in the spirit of the Politburo's February resolution to guide the Cultural Revolution in Sichuan. What he wrote became known as the 'April Document.' It said: The debates must be strictly academic. No wild accusations should be allowed. Everyone is equal before the truth. The Party must not use force to suppress intellectuals.

Just as this document was about to be published in May, it was suddenly blocked. There was a new Politburo decision. This time, Mao had been present and had got the upper hand, with Zhou Enlai's complicity. Mao tore up the February resolution and declared that all dissident scholars and their ideas must be 'eliminated.' He emphasized that it was officials in the Communist Party who had been protecting the dissident scholars and other class enemies. He termed these officials 'those in power following the capitalist road,' and declared war on them. They became known as 'capitalist-roaders.' The mammoth Cultural Revolution was formally launched.

Who exactly were these 'capitalist-roaders'? Mao himself was not sure. He knew he wanted to replace the whole of the Peking Party Committee, which he did. He also knew he wanted to get rid of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and 'the bourgeois headquarters in the Party.' But he did not know who in the vast Party system were loyal to him and who were followers of Liu and Deng and their 'capitalist road.' He calculated that he controlled only a third of the Party. In order not to let a single one of his

enemies escape, he resolved to overthrow the entire Communist Party. Those faithful to him would survive the upheaval. In his own words: 'Destroy first, and construction will look after itself.' Mao was not worried about the possible destruction of the Party: Mao the Emperor always overrode Mao the Communist. Nor was he fainthearted about hurting anyone unduly, even those most loyal to him. One of his great heroes, the ancient general Tsao Tsao, had spoken an immortal line which Mao openly admired: 'I would rather wrong all people under Heaven; and no one under Heaven must ever wrong me.' The general proclaimed this when he discovered that he had murdered an elderly couple by mistake – the old man and woman, whom he had suspected of betraying him, had in fact saved his life.

Mao's vague battle calls threw the population and the majority of Party officials into profound confusion. Few knew what he was driving at, or who exactly were the enemies this time. My father and mother, like other senior Party people, could see that Mao had decided to punish some officials. But they had no idea who these would be. It could well be themselves. Apprehension and bewilderment overwhelmed them.

Meanwhile, Mao made his single most important organizational move: he set up his own personal chain of command that operated outside the Party apparatus, although – by formally claiming it was under the Politburo and the Central Committee – he was able to pretend it was acting on Party orders.

First, he picked as his deputy Marshal Lin Biao, who had succeeded Peng Dehuai as defense minister in 1959 and had greatly boosted Mao's personality cult in the armed forces. He also set up a new body, the Cultural Revolution Authority, under his former secretary Chen Boda, with his intelligence chief Kang Sheng and Mme Mao as its *de facto* leaders. It became the core of the leadership of the Cultural Revolution.

Next, Mao moved in on the media, primarily the *People's Daily*, which carried the most authority as it was the official Party newspaper and the population had become accustomed to it being the voice of the regime. He appointed Chen Boda to take it over on 31 May, thus securing a channel through which he could speak directly to hundreds of millions of Chinese.

Starting in June 1966, the *People's Daily* showered the country with one strident editorial after another, calling for 'establishing Chairman Mao's absolute authority,' 'sweeping away all the ox devils and snake demons' (class enemies), and exhorting people to follow Mao and join the vast, unprecedented undertaking of a Cultural Revolution.

In my school, teaching stopped completely from the beginning of June, though we had to continue to go there. Loudspeakers blasted out *People's Daily* editorials, and the front page of the newspaper, which we had to study every day, was frequently taken up entirely by a full-page portrait of Mao. There was a daily column of Mao's quotations. I still remember the slogans in bold type, which, through reading in class over and over again, were engraved into the deepest folds of my brain: 'Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts!' 'Mao Zedong Thought is our lifeline!' 'We will smash whoever opposes Chairman Mao!' 'People all over the world love our Great Leader Chairman Mao!' There were pages of worshipping comments from foreigners, and pictures of European crowds trying to grab Mao's works. Chinese national pride was being mobilized to enhance his cult.

The daily newspaper reading soon gave way to the recitation and memorizing of *The Quotations of Chairman Mao*, which were collected together in a pocket-size book with a red plastic cover, known as 'The Little Red Book.' Everyone was given a copy and told to cherish it 'like our eyes.' Every day we chanted passages from it over and over again in unison. I still remember many verbatim.

One day, we read in the *People's Daily* that an old peasant

had stuck thirty-two portraits of Mao on his bedroom walls, 'so that he can see Chairman Mao's face as soon as he opens his eyes, whatever direction he looks in.' So we covered the walls of our classroom with pictures of Mao's face beaming his most benign smile. But we soon had to take them down, and quickly, too. Word circulated that the peasant had really used the pictures as wallpaper, because Mao's portraits were printed on the best-quality paper and were free. Rumour had it that the reporter who had written up the story had been found to be a class enemy for advocating 'abuse of Chairman Mao.' For the first time, fear of Chairman Mao entered my subconscious.

Like 'Ox Market,' my school had a work team stationed in it. The team had halfheartedly branded several of the school's best teachers as 'reactionary bourgeois authorities,' but had kept this from the pupils. In June 1966, however, panicked at the tide of the Cultural Revolution and feeling the need to create some victims, the work team suddenly announced the names of the accused to the whole school.

The work team organized pupils and the teachers who had not been accused to write denunciation posters and slogans, which soon covered the grounds. Teachers became active for a variety of reasons: conformity, loyalty to the Party's orders, envy of the prestige and privileges of other teachers – and fear.

Among the victims was my Chinese language and literature teacher, Mr Chi, whom I adored. According to one of the wall posters, he had said in the early 1960s: 'Shouting "Long live the Great Leap Forward!" will not fill our stomachs, will it?' Having no idea that the Great Leap had caused the famine, I did not understand his alleged remark, although I could catch its irreverent tone.

There was something about Mr Chi which set him apart. At the time I could not put my finger on it, but now I think it was that he had an air of irony about him. He had a way of making dry, short half-cough, half-laughs which

suggested he had kept something unsaid. He once made this noise in response to a question I asked him. One lesson in our textbook was an extract from the memoirs of Lu Dingyi, the then head of Central Public Affairs, about his experience on the Long March. Mr Chi drew our attention to a vivid description of the troops marching along a zigzagging mountain path, the whole procession lit up by pine torches carried by the marchers, the flames glowing against a moonless black sky. When they reached their night's destination, they all 'rushed to grab a bowlful of food to pour down their stomachs.' This puzzled me profoundly, as Red Army soldiers had always been described as offering their last mouthful to their comrades and going starving themselves. It was impossible to imagine them 'grabbing.' I went to Mr Chi for an answer. He cough-laughed, said I did not know what being hungry meant, and quickly changed the subject. I was unconvinced.

In spite of this, I felt the greatest respect for Mr Chi. It broke my heart to see him, and other teachers I admired, being wildly condemned and called ugly names. I hated it when the work team asked everyone in the school to write wall posters 'exposing and denouncing' them.

I was fourteen at the time, instinctively averse to all militant activities, and I did not know what to write. I was frightened of the wall posters' overwhelming black ink on giant white sheets of paper, and the outlandish and violent language, such as 'Smash So-and-so's dog's head' and 'Annihilate So-and-so if he does not surrender.' I began to play truant and stay at home. For this I was constantly criticized for 'putting family first' at the endless meetings that now made up almost our entire school life. I dreaded these meetings. A sense of unpredictable danger haunted me.

One day my deputy headmaster, Mr Kan, a jolly, energetic man, was accused of being a capitalist-roader and of protecting the condemned teachers. Everything he had done in the school over the years was said to be 'capitalist,' even studying Mao's works – as fewer hours had been devoted to this than to academic studies.

I was equally shocked to see the cheerful secretary of the Communist Youth League in the school, Mr Shan, being accused of being 'anti-Chairman Mao.' He was a dashing-looking young man whose attention I had been eager to attract, as he might help me join the Youth League when I reached the minimum age, fifteen.

He had been teaching a course on Marxist philosophy to the sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds, and had given them some essay-writing assignments. He had underlined bits of the essays which he thought were particularly well written. Now these disconnected parts were joined together by his pupils to form an obviously nonsensical passage which the wall posters claimed was anti-Mao. I learned years later that this method of concocting an accusation through the arbitrary linking of unconnected sentences had started as early as 1955, the year my mother suffered her first detention under the Communists, when some writers had used it to attack their fellow writers.

Mr Shan told me years later that the real reason he and the deputy headmaster were picked out as victims was that they were not around at the time – they had been absent as members of another work team – which made them convenient scapegoats. The fact that they did not get on with the headmaster, who had stayed behind, made things worse. 'If we'd been there and he'd been away, that son of a turtle wouldn't have been able to pull his pants up, he would have had so much shit on his arse,' Mr Shan told me ruefully.

The deputy headmaster, Mr Kan, had been devoted to the Party, and felt terribly wronged. One evening he wrote a suicide note and then slashed his throat with a razor. He was rushed to hospital by his wife, who had come home earlier than usual. The work team hushed up his suicide attempt. For a Party member like Mr Kan to commit suicide was regarded as a betrayal. It was seen as a loss of

faith in the Party and an attempt at blackmail. Therefore, no mercy should be shown to the unfortunate person. But the work team was nervous. They knew very well that they had been inventing victims without the slightest justification.

When my mother was told about Mr Kan she cried. She liked him very much, and knew that as he was a man of immense optimism he must have been under inhuman pressure to have acted in this way.

In her own school, my mother refused to be swept into any panic victimizing. But the teenagers in the school, stirred up by the articles in the *People's Daily*, began to move against their teachers. The *People's Daily* called for 'smashing up' the examination system which 'treated pupils like enemies' (quoting Mao) and was part of the vicious designs of the 'bourgeois intellectuals,' meaning the majority of the teachers (again quoting Mao). The paper also denounced 'bourgeois intellectuals' for poisoning the minds of the young with capitalist rubbish in preparation for a Kuomintang comeback. 'We cannot allow bourgeois intellectuals to dominate our schools anymore!' said Mao.

One day my mother bicycled to the school to find that the pupils had rounded up the headmaster, the academic supervisor, the graded teachers, whom they understood from the official press to be 'reactionary bourgeois authorities,' and any other teachers they disliked. They had shut them all up in a classroom and put a notice on the door saying 'demons' class.' The teachers had let them do it because the Cultural Revolution had thrown them into bewilderment. The pupils now seemed to have some sort of authorization, undefined but nonetheless real. The grounds were covered with giant slogans, mostly headlines from the *People's Daily*.

As my mother was shown to the classroom now turned 'prison,' she passed through a crowd of pupils. Some looked fierce, some ashamed, some worried, and others uncertain. More pupils had been following her from the

moment she arrived. As the leader of the work team, she had supreme authority, and was identified with the Party. The pupils looked to her for orders. Having set up the 'prison,' they had no idea what to do next.

My mother announced forcefully that the 'demons' class' was dismissed. There was a stir among the pupils, but nobody challenged her order. A few boys muttered to one another, but lapsed into silence when my mother asked them to speak out. She went on to tell them that it was illegal to detain anyone without authorization, and that they should not ill-treat their teachers, who deserved their gratitude and respect. The door to the classroom was opened and the 'prisoners' set free.

My mother was very brave to go against the tide. Many other work teams engaged in victimizing completely innocent people to save their own skins. In fact, she had more cause than most to worry. The provincial authorities had already punished several scapegoats, and my father had a strong presentiment that he was going to be the next in line. A couple of his colleagues had told him discreetly that the word was going around in some organizations under him that they should turn their suspicion on him.

My parents never said anything to me or my siblings. The restraints which had kept them silent about politics before still prevented them from opening their minds to us. Now it was even less possible for them to speak. The situation was so complex and confusing that they could not understand it themselves. What could they possibly say to us that would make us understand? And what use would it have been anyway? There was nothing anyone could do. What was more, knowledge itself was dangerous. As a result, my siblings and I were totally unprepared for the Cultural Revolution, although we had a vague feeling of impending catastrophe.

In this atmosphere, August came. All of a sudden, like a storm sweeping across China, millions of Red Guards emerged.