
To what extent was fear of opposition the prominent motive for Mao Zedong launching the Cultural Revolution in the middle of the 1960s?

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Section A

The question for this investigation is “*To what extent was fear of opposition the prominent motive for Mao Zedong launching the Cultural Revolution in the middle of the 1960s?*”.

Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1935-1976, launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 as a last attempt to change China before he passed away.

The most prominent sources in this investigation was the secondary non-contemporary textbook “The People’s Republic of China 1949-76” by Micheal Lynch along with a secondary and non-contemporary book titled “Mao A Reinterpretation” by the historian Lee Feigon.

Source I

The origins of the history textbook “The People’s Republic of China 1949-76” is written by Micheal Lynch and published in 2008. The value of is Lynch, a British historian and honorary fellow from the University of Leicester, has published several books particularly about Chinese history. It’s written in 2008 and has the benefit of hindsight, being able to use a range of sources and conduct accurate information. Additionally, having a different nationality allows for a more objective perspective. However, Lynch being a British historian could also mean he has a bias tendency painting Mao in a certain way, influenced by his own nationality. The purpose of this source is to sell and share information about the development of China from 1949-76 for students studying this topic. This is of value for investigation as it gave a clear overview of Mao’s aims and role before and during the Cultural Revolution. Allowing for a better understanding of the situation and a basis on what to examine in other sources. This is also the limitation of the source, as it’s a bit too broad and too generalized meaning

complementary sources where necessary. The text is formal and tries to stay neutral. It was good for my investigation as Lynch focused specifically on the social and political perspectives behind the Cultural Revolution.

Source II

The book “Mao A Reinterpretation” was written by Lee Feigon and published in 2002. Lee is an American historian who specializes in 20th century Chinese History and studied in several American universities. The value of this origin is similar to source 1, Lee is an expert in this area and from a different nationality and will thus offer a different perspective. It also has the benefit of hindsight. A limitation is that Lee has written for several political newspapers such as The Nation, and indicates quite a political bias in his work. The purpose of this source is to earn profits, but also to share his view and opinion about how Mao has been misinterpreted by the west, for an audience with an interest in Mao and China. Which is shown through the content of the source being quite biased and exaggerated to explain Mao and his intentions. This was significant for my investigation, as it offers a very different view on Mao and his motives than my other sources. However, the limit of the purpose and content is that there’s clear indication of trying to persuade the audience of his political views. Nonetheless, Lee offered an insight into Mao's ideological and social motives.

Section B

The Cultural Revolution was officially launched in 1966 which would last until 1976 when the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mao Zedong passed away. The Cultural Revolution would not only involve removal of high officials in the CCP but also a new ideological and social status for Mao, affecting China as a whole. Mao was able to establish a full totalitarian leadership following marxists ideology and creating a Mao cult with millions of followers during this revolution. However, the main motives behind launching it in the middle of the 1960s would become a topic of debate amongst historians, as Mao had recently stepped down from the Chairman position in 1958¹ from the failure of the Great Leap Plan. Therefore, In this essay, from assessing and comparing the fear of opposition along with ideological and social motives it's evident the key aspect for Mao launching the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s is his fear of opposition.

Mao's paranoia for opposition and loss of power would be one of the most prominent reasons for the Cultural revolution in 1966². The Great Leap was a five year plan from 1958-1962, established by Mao, which he had hoped to establish and develop China industrially, economically and socially. However, it was a failure and led to millions starving in a famine, and so Mao stepped down from the Chairman position and Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping took over.³ According to historian Micheal Lynch, Mao felt his reputation within the CCP had been damaged and he had convinced himself Liu and Deng were against him. Mao, terrified of losing control over the party, turned to Lin Biao, a loyal Maoist and leader of the People's

¹ Lynch, Michael. *Access To History: The People's Republic of China 1949-76* p.69

² [Ibid] p.73

³ Gray, Brian, Mariam Habibi, Sanjay Perera, and Roger Fortune. *Authoritarian States: Ib History Print and Online Pack: Oxford Ib Diploma Program.* p.154

Republic Army (PLA)⁴. Additionally, historian Jack Gray argues, while Mao's aims began with fear of resistance within the party, it developed into fear of a new ruling class. Mao therefore saw the Cultural Revolution as an opportunity to create radical changes within the Party and remove his opposition⁵. This can further be proven through Mao's actions right before the Cultural Revolution. Jonathan Fenby, another historian, points out in 1966 Mao created and implemented the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG), consisting of several Maoists, all dedicated to bringing down any opposition within and outside of the government.⁶ Furthermore, Gray mentioned there was an evident fear Mao and his supporters would be met with an armed coup from Lin Biao's speech in 1966 and Mao is preparing for it. Thus hinting of the upcoming Cultural Revolution.⁷ In that sense, it's clear this indicates a strong sense of fear of opposition and wanting control over the CCP, but it's hard to state whether this was Mao's true intention with the Cultural Revolution or if it's what he felt was necessary in order to achieve his aims. Mao's personal physician, Li Zhisu explains, the more and more Mao's power grew, the more paranoid Mao was about others attacking him and losing power, including the people closest to him such as Lin Biao⁸. In this case, Mao's paranoia and fear of opposition has always been a prominent issue for him. This can further be seen when examining other motives as well, such as the ideological and social ones. They all tie into a fear of losing his authority and ideology, and thus it cannot be ignored that to a great extent fear of opposition was an important motive.

The fear of losing the Communist ideology amongst the CCP and having a bureaucratic government would also be a prominent reason behind the Cultural Revolution.⁹ Mao heavily

⁴ Lynch, Michael. *Access To History: The People's Republic of China 1949-76* p.73

⁵ Gray, Jack. *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*. p.333

⁶ Fenby, Jonathan. *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present*, p.441

⁷ Gray, Jack. *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*. p.337

⁸ Zhi-Sui, Li. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* p.13

⁹ Lynch, Michael. *Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single-party States*. p.131

believed in a Marxists-Lennist ideology and feared the CCP was becoming more capitalistic and bureaucratic¹⁰. Micheal Lynch goes on to argue this is evident with Deng and Liu successfully ending the famine caused by Mao during the Great Leap Forward plan, by implementing private farming and markets while abandoning collectivization. Thus undermining the socialists movements the Communist Party was built upon.¹¹ Mao had tried both in 1963 and 1964 for the Socialists Education Movement to establish ten points to make sure the party was going in the socialists direction, however, both were ignored by the party. Not only were they ignored, but Liu had create a proposal soon after which Mao saw as an attempt for bureaucratic growth¹². Mao created an additional document in 1965 known as the Twenty-three Articles, and was a set of instructions about peasants. In this way, Gray states the Twenty-three Articles would become the early indication of an attempt at the Cultural Revolution.¹³ Furthermore, Mao from this point outlined the goal of the movement to “rectify those people in positions of authority within the Party who take the capitalist road”¹⁴, thus it’s evident there was both fear the Communist ideology was disappearing within the party, but it was related to Mao's fear of opposition.

Furthermore, from a social aspect Lee Feigon argues Mao was scared the ideas the CCP had built upon would go away once he’s gone, similar to the transition after Stalin’s death in the Soviet Union, and therefore an aim for a permanent revolution.¹⁵ Mao is 70+ years old and he therefore launched the revolution, wanting to overcome the bureaucracy by appealing directly to the people.¹⁶ Specifically Mao wanted to get a hold of the younger generation. This can be seen from the establishment of propaganda, which became a prominent aspect of the Cultural

¹⁰ Lynch, Michael. *Access To History: The People's Republic of China 1949-76* p.69

¹¹ Lynch, Michael. *Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single-party States* p.132

¹² Zhi-Sui, Li. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* p.507

¹³ Gray, Jack. *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000.* p.327

¹⁴ Feigon, Lee. *Mao: A Reinterpretation* p.145

¹⁵ *[Ibid]* p.176

¹⁶ Lynch, Michael. *Access To History: The People's Republic of China 1949-76* p.82

Revolution. One of the many and most effective propaganda techniques was the Little Red Book, released in 1964,¹⁷ which was essentially a collection of quotations from Mao Zedong with the purpose of persuading and sharing his ideology. As Fenby mentioned, “Lin was busy turning the PLA into Mao’s ideological arm, with soldiers playing the role of model citizen.”¹⁸, the release and creation of the Little Red Book suggests the importance and motive of Mao launching the Cultural Revolution. It was a way for Mao to make sure his ideology and status would remain after his death. This can further be seen through Mao’s action of swimming across the Yangzi river in July 1966, and as Gray mentioned was a way to re-establish himself publicly and to state that he is yet to be dismissed.¹⁹ Mao also is said to have had additional social motives, as he believed the cultural aspects such as radio, magazines, cinema, music, opera were to be changed, and thus sponsored new forms of arts.²⁰ Lee argues, Mao began the Cultural Revolution after the criticism of the Wu Han play, and thus showcases Mao’s intention with wanting to initiate a new form of arts.²¹ Additionally, Feigon declares Mao's motive behind the Cultural Revolution was to use already established power to change the Cultural and Educational aspects.²² While Mao did have an educational motive as he was an important part of the Socialists Education Movement in 1963²³, and a Cultural motive, it’s more evident Mao was trying to enforce his Marxists ideology but also keep his social status and authority. In this sense fear of opposition was to a lesser extent the key motive but nonetheless important.

In conclusion, there were many motives Mao had for launching the Cultural Revolution in 1966, but his fear of opposition was to a great extent the most prominent motive. Although it

¹⁷ Lynch, Michael. *Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single-party States*. p.132

¹⁸Fenby, Jonathan. *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present*, p.429

¹⁹ Gray, Jack. *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*. p.341

²⁰ Feigon, Lee. *Mao: A Reinterpretation* p.150

²¹ [Ibid] p.155

²² [Ibid] p.155

²³ Gray, Jack. *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*. p.324

goes hand in hand with his ideological motives and social motives. In that regard, the reasons for Mao's social motives were to establish a long lasting status amongst the people, and the ideological movement was a fear of losing what the CCP had already created. Mao feared the loss and opposition of it, and thus the Cultural Revolution became his last attempt to establish a permanent revolution.

Section C

While investigating the motives behind Mao's launch of the Cultural Revolution, I was made aware of the challenges historians face. A historian studying a similar topic as my own would have to consider a mixture of primary and secondary sources to interpret and form an opinion of their own. In this case a primary source would be essential, when examining the motives behind the Cultural Revolution looking at official documents, letters, speeches or people close to Mao would show better understanding as to why he launched it. However, an obstacle historians could face in this instance would be that either the primary sources are not available as if they do not exist or Mao or the CCP would not release them. Studying a topic regarding another country than your own would mean there might be a selective and translated amount of information, where it's essential to be source critical. A translated primary source in Chinese will not give the same nuances and context behind the motives as someone who understands Chinese.

When I was researching Mao and his motives behind the Cultural Revolution I found plenty of secondary sources but it was harder to reach primary sources discussing or implying Mao's motives. Mao never explicitly stated the reasons behind the Cultural Revolution and therefore it's up to educated interpretations of the motives. Therefore using several sources was essential and examining the historians' thoughts behind it, but also using Li Zhisui's primary source became a significant aspect in my investigation to have some context behind someone who stood close to Mao. But, I had to keep in mind that most of the historians and access to sources I had were translated sources or from western historians. Meaning there's a limitation behind my own context and interpretation of what the motives behind the Cultural Revolution were.

I faced a lot of obstacles a historian would encounter when facing such a topic. Historians themselves will have to narrow down their research and find specific reasoning and motives behind their topics, as they can't focus on everything without becoming too much of a generalization. Additionally, I also

faced the obstacle of finding accurate primary sources that would give information about the motives behind the Cultural Revolution, similar to historians, and would therefore rely a lot on educated interpretations based on secondary sources, and the events taking place before and during the Cultural Revolution.

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