

# The Cult of Mao

For the first eighteen years of the People's Republic of China, children were raised to revere Chairman Mao. He was their George Washington. In many ways, he was also considered their spiritual leader, guiding their society toward a communist utopia. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, the political powers behind the movement tapped into this existing respect for Mao and encouraged fanaticism, which was especially powerful among the adolescents who would later be placed at the forefront of the Cultural Revolution. The following are accounts by a twelve-year-old boy, Liang Heng. Though younger than most of the youths involved, he experienced the excitement of participating in two pilgrimages to honor Chairman Mao. The first recollection is of setting off on the "New Long March," a 240-mile hike retracing the path of the Red Army's march during the 1949 Communist Revolution.

*There were eight people on our team, including Peng Ming's younger brothers and sisters and several other neighbor children, all of them much older than I. We prepared for three days, learning how to fold our things inside our blankets in a neat little square of army green, how to tie our Red Army-style straw sandals and wrap our leggings around our calves. We prepared a red flag with yellow characters in imitation-Chairman-Mao calligraphy reading "Long March," fitted placards on our bundles with Quotations so the people walking behind us could see them and take inspiration, collected a first-aid kit, a map, and canteens. My proudest moment was when Peng Ming pinned on my red armband, not a makeshift paper one, but one of finest red silk, with the shining snow-white words "Red Guard" painted onto it. Then he attached a beautiful Chairman Mao button on my jacket, a noble yellow profile with metallic red rays emanating from it and Tien An Men Square in red relief below. I think I grew ten inches. . . . Father and the other parents saw us off, anxious but not regretful, proud but afraid to show their feelings before the small gathering of onlookers. Tears were controlled on my part as well, for I was determined not to show my age. I marched proudly and quickly, without looking back even once.*

*The people of the Changsha streets stared at us with respect and envy, and this made us walk even taller and faster. We had soon passed through the suburbs and entered the countryside itself. Within a half a day we began to encounter other New Long March teams, some from as far away as Guangxi and Guandong provinces, and I felt prouder than ever to be from Hunan, Chairman Mao's home province and the fountainhead of the whole Communist movement. Some of these groups had better costumes than we, with real uniforms and caps with red*

*stars, and most of the teams were larger than ours, but our excitement and purpose were the same. We struck up an instant camaraderie, singing songs together, encouraging each other, exchanging information about what lay ahead. The walls of the peasants' houses had been painted with slogans like . . . REVOLUTION TO THE END, so we felt more than ever that we were all engaged in a common pilgrimage, that we were all part of an exalted tide being pulled inexorably toward some sacred moonlight.*

By the end of 1967, eleven million young people had traveled to Peking (now called Beijing) to proclaim their loyalty to Chairman Mao. This second excerpt recounts this same boy's experiences.

*If there was a single thing that meant ecstasy to everyone in those days, it was seeing Chairman Mao. Ever since I had been in Peking, the possibility had been in the back of my mind, and, like every other Red Guard, I would have laid down my life for the chance. . . . On May 1st Peng Ming was planning to go with a small group to conduct performances of Revolutionary songs at the Summer Palace during the day . . . and I was sometimes asked to carry drums and other instruments, so I went with Peng Ming's group to the park. We were completely unprepared for what happened.*

*In the middle of singing a song that Peng Ming had composed himself, we heard the great news: Chairman Mao was in the park! Gathering our instruments together hastily, we ran gasping to the spot, but it was too late. He was gone. All that remained of him was the touch of his hand on the hands of a few who had been lucky enough to get close to him. But we didn't leave in disappointment. That trace of precious warmth in the palms of others seemed to us a more than adequate substitute for the real thing. Those Chairman Mao had touched now became the focus of our fervor. Everyone surged toward them with outstretched arms in hopes of transferring the sacred touch to their own hands. If you couldn't get close enough for that, then shaking the hand of someone who had shaken the hands with Our Great Saving Star would have to do.*

## Be able to . . .

1. Explain why the people of China revered Mao and how young people would be especially involved with the cult of Mao.
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing his name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about this boy.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this boy.

# Origins of the Cultural Revolution

China became communist in 1949 when forces led by Mao Zedong defeated the Chinese Nationalists after a civil war that had lasted more than ten years. For the next twenty-seven years, Mao remained the supreme leader of China, despite serious economic problems and tragic errors in leadership. In 1966, Mao was on the defensive, fearing that opposition to his leadership was growing. He believed that certain people in the government wanted to replace him. To prevent this from happening, he declared a "Cultural Revolution." This would complete the process of *communizing* the country by exposing those he termed "reactionary bourgeois authorities," "capitalist roaders," or "revisionists"—and by destroying all remnants of China's pre-communist past. Then, to create a revolutionary atmosphere and the upheaval it brings, Mao encouraged young people to organize themselves to carry out his policies.

The following excerpts are recollections of seventeen-year-old student Dai Hsiao-ai, soon to become a Red Guard. In May 1966, the principal of his school was asked to suspend all classes and direct his students to make "big character posters" (handmade posters used to criticize people) and to write essays denouncing certain "revisionist" writers Mao considered enemies.

*At first, big character posters were fun. We would write our individual posters together and exchange ideas about the best kinds of criticisms. There was a kind of competition to see who could write the best one. However, we knew nothing about (these writers); they seemed distant and few of us had even read their essays. All of our information came from the newspapers. We just copied phrases and accusations from them and incorporated them into our posters. Discussions of our essays were the same. . . . After 10 days of this, even the most active among us grew tired. We began to tell jokes in our meetings. Some people stopped attending entirely and dozed instead. We continued for about eight more days but nobody was deeply involved any more. We thought the end was in sight.*

*Everything changed with the denunciation of the two teachers. We became more active than before. Since we were all about eleven or twelve during the anti-rightist campaign in 1957, we had never before had the opportunity to participate personally in a political movement. We were therefore very eager and full of enthusiasm. On the day after the principal denounced the two teachers at an all-school meeting, every wall of the school was covered with big-*

*character posters. This time, we were not as indifferent as we were when the target was (a writer). Each of us wrote at least ten posters on that day.*

*The struggle was always very intense. We forced the teachers to wear caps and collars, which stated things like "I am a monster." Each class confronted and reviled them in turn with slogans, accusations, and injunctions to reform their ways. We made them clean out the toilets, smeared them with black paint, and organized "control monster teams" to see that it was done properly. We would charge them with specific mistakes and not relent until they admitted they were true. It took nearly a week of constant struggle to make the man admit he had said "Mao was wrong" in conversation with one of his fellow teachers. They had little rest and were forced to sleep apart from their fellow teachers. We would join into informal groups, raid their quarters, and begin to work on them again. They could not escape us.*

*After about two weeks, we were afraid that the literature teacher would kill herself. We kept her under constant surveillance and even wrote a poster and attached it to her mosquito net over her bed reminding her that she was being watched and could not succeed in committing suicide. . . .*

*In the beginning, I had mixed emotions. I was particularly close to the literature teacher and had always thought that she was a good person and an excellent teacher. At first I was unwilling to criticize or to struggle against her, but my classmates accused me of being sentimental and warned me that I was becoming like her. They even told me that I was headed for trouble. I gradually realized that they were right. The Party could not be wrong and it was my duty to join the struggle. I did so and eventually with enthusiasm.*

## Be able to . . .

1. Explain Mao's goals in starting the Cultural Revolution and the role that young people would play in carrying out his policies.
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing his name correctly (somewhat like 'Die-she-ao-eye'), and tell what you know about him.
3. In your words, describe the events explained by this young man.