

The Chinese Cultural Revolution

Dynamic Times, Dramatic Lessons for Today's Kids

By Deborah Pellikan



Source: *Red Guard Magazine*, Beijing, June 1966

The lesson plans presented here could be used in a high school World History course as part of a larger unit on the People's Republic of China. Prerequisite understandings would include: 1) basic concepts of comparative governments, 2) the impact of Western imperialism on China, 3) an overview of twentieth-century Chinese history from the collapse of the Qing or Manchu dynasty in 1911 to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, and 4) the successes and failures of Maoist China prior to 1966.

Mindful of various teaching styles and the differences in student populations, the attached handouts can be used in a number of ways in your classroom. Each handout explains one aspect of the Cultural Revolution and presents a firsthand account of its impact. When examined as a set, an overview should emerge. Hopefully, one of the lesson plans below will be successful in your classroom, provoking discussion and promoting understanding.

At the conclusion of these activities, students will be better able to:

1. Address specific knowledge outcomes of the National Standards for World History:
 - Era 9, 1B—Assess the benefits and costs of Communist policies under Mao Zedong, including the . . . Cultural Revolution
2. Demonstrate critical skills in Historical Thinking, as outlined in the National Standards for World History, including:
 - 2E—Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved.
 - 2F—Appreciate historical perspectives, describing the past in its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there.
 - 3B—Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
 - 3C—Analyze cause-and-effect relationships.
 - 3F—Compare competing historical narratives.

Procedure and Materials

Divide students into five groups. Each group will become “experts” about a single topic. Prepare enough copies of the five different handouts for each student to have one.

Option 1: Jigsaw Lesson



Assign each “expert” group a different topic. Pass out handouts so that each group has a separate topic and every student in each group has a handout. Ask students to read and discuss the information and be able to respond to all questions in the “Be able to . . .” section at the end of the handouts. Advise them to take notes on a separate sheet of paper. Allow approximately twenty minutes for them to become experts. Have students count off within each group to prepare to rotate to new groups.

Then ask students to move to their “jigsaw” group, all ones in one group, twos in the next, and so on, creating five new groups, each composed of experts on different topics. Direct students to fold the handout page with the Chinese name printed on it in half, and then in



Students at Dulles High School in Sugar Land, Texas, discuss the impact of China's Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the person they researched earlier in the period. Photos provided by Deborah Pellikan.



only to his or her notes—“bringing the jigsaw pieces together.”

To extend the group to full-class discussion, refer to the “Suggested Discussion Questions” below.

Note: The handouts shown in this article show all of the information on one side of a page. To download two-sided handouts, please go to the EAA Web site: <http://www.aasianst.org/EAA/supplemental.htm>

half again, to produce a name placard for the person whose point of view they will present. For five minutes, each student will then teach his or her topic to the other students, referring

Option 2: Reader's Theater

All first-person accounts in the five handouts are “action packed.” Arrange students into five groups and assign each a separate topic. Allow the groups half a class period to plan their presentations, which could include making props suggested by the reading (e.g., posters, hats, pins, armbands). The following day, have each group introduce its presentation, explaining the setting and important concepts, then act out the experiences of the person profiled.

It is important to impress upon students the gravity of these events and that their reader's theater presentation should be a serious handling of the subject matter. Following the presentations, the teacher can conduct a full-class discussion, referring to the questions below.



When the “reader's theater” approach is used, each group dramatizes the events in their assigned reading, as these Ft. Bend ISD students are doing. Photos provided by Deborah Pellikan.



Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What political and economic conditions set the stage for the Cultural Revolution? What philosophy was behind each program?
2. Discuss the experiences of the person profiled in your reading. What did he or she sacrifice? What did he or she learn?
3. Can the events in your reading be compared to other events you've studied in World History or to events ongoing today?

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 *communitizing* 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 princi-

pal 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.

The excerpts are from Gordon A Bennett’s and Ronald N. Montaperto’s *Red Guard, the Political Biography of Dai Hsiao-ai* (34–40).

Dai Hsiao-ai

HANDOUT 2

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.

The excerpts are from Liang Heng's and Judith Shapiro's *Son of the Revolution* (102–103, 121–123).

Liang Heng

Destroy the Four Olds

In August of 1966, the Red Guard units were authorized to set out to destroy the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) by raiding the homes and shops of members of the “backward” classes. These classes were often referred to as the black elements, and included former landlords, former merchants, former rich peasants, and persons perceived to be counterrevolutionaries, rightists, or criminals. The provincial party authorities assisted the Red Guards in finding targets for their raids. The students carried out this assignment with great enthusiasm, marching through the streets with banners, singing revolutionary songs, and shouting slogans.

The following account is taken from the memoirs of a woman named Nien Cheng who was fifty-one years old at the time. She was the wealthy widow of a former diplomat who had worked for the previous Chinese government, overthrown by the communists back in 1949. A week after these events she would be arrested and kept in prison in solitary confinement for almost seven years.

From the direction of the street, faint at first but growing louder, came the sound of a heavy motor vehicle slowly approaching. I listened and waited for it to speed up and pass the house. But it slowed down, and the motor was cut off. I knew my neighbor on the left was also expecting the Red Guards. Dropping the book on my lap and sitting up tensely, I listened, wondering which house was to be the target.

Suddenly the doorbell began to ring incessantly. At the same time, there was furious pounding of many fists on my front gate, accompanied by the confused sound of hysterical voices shouting slogans. The cacophony told me that the time of waiting was over and that I must face the threat of the Red Guards and the destruction of my home. . . . The Red Guards pushed open the front door and entered the house. There were thirty or forty senior high students, aged between fifteen and twenty, led by two men and one woman much older. Although they all wore the armband of the Red Guard, I thought the three older people were the teachers who generally accompanied the Red Guards. . . .

The leading Red Guard, a gangling youth with angry eyes, stepped forward and said to me, “We are the Red Guards. We have come to take revolutionary action against you!”

Though I knew it was futile, I held up the copy of the Constitution and said calmly, “It’s against the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China to enter a private house without a search warrant.”

The young man snatched the document out of my hand and threw it on the floor. With his eyes blazing, he said, “The Constitution is abolished. It was a document written by the Revisionists within the Communist Party. We recognize only the teachings of our Great Leader Chairman Mao.”

The students then went about the business of smashing the woman’s mirrors, furniture, porcelain dishes and priceless antiques. Her curtains, fur coats, evening dresses, and silk robes were cut up with a scissors. Books and papers were ripped up and strewn. They made it a point to collect and turn over to party officials items like cameras, watches, clocks, binoculars, and silverware. While their attention was focused on another part of the house, Nien Cheng climbed the stairs to survey the damage on the third floor.

In the largest guest room, where the Red Guards had carried out most of their destructive labor of cutting and smashing, a radio set was tuned to a local station broadcasting revolutionary songs based on Mao’s quotations. A female voice was singing, “Marxism can be summed up in one sentence: revolution is justifiable.” There was a note of urgency in her voice that compelled the listener’s attention. This song was to become the clarion call not only for the Red Guards but also for the Proletarian Revolutionaries when they were organized later on. I thought of switching off the radio, but it was out of my reach unless I climbed over a mountain of debris in the middle of the room.

I looked at what had happened to my things hopelessly but indifferently. They belonged to a period of my life that had abruptly ended when the Red Guards entered my house. Though I could not see into the future, I refused to look back. I supposed the Red Guards had enjoyed themselves. Is it not true that we all possess some destructive tendencies in our nature? The veneer of civilization is very thin. Underneath lurks the animal in each of us. If I were young and had had a working-class background, if I had been brought up to worship Mao and taught to believe him infallible, would I not have behaved exactly as the Red Guards had done?

Be able to

1. Explain the campaign to Destroy the Four Olds. What were they? How was the plan carried out?
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing her name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about her.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this woman.

The excerpts are from Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai* (70–71, 78–79).

Nien Cheng

The Attack on the Arts

Music and other performing and visual arts were a major focus during the Destroy the Four Olds campaign and throughout the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao's wife, who had been an actress during her younger years, used her influence to shape a new style of drama, music, dance, and visual arts that reflected the ideals of Maoist China and rejected traditional Chinese styles. All Western music was banned, since it was linked with "bourgeois capitalism." Classical musicians, because of their expertise and appreciation of music that originated in Europe, were detained and persecuted by unruly mobs. The following excerpts are the recollections of a famous violinist from China, Ma Sitson, who had escaped only months before and who shared this account with the readers of *Life Magazine*.

In May last year I had no idea how far this new movement would go, nor did anyone else. Conditions were tense, but in the past they had been even more tense . . . I was used to it. You had to get used to it. In early June, however, I got word that tatsepao (big character posters) attacking me had been put up at the Music Academy. Such posters are the hallmark of the Great Cultural Revolution. Scrawled on newspaper or butcher paper, they carry news, accusations, confessions, announcements, or simply praise for Chairman Mao.

A friend suggested that my wisest move would be to write a self-criticism before things went any further. My wife and daughter Celia agreed. I hesitated; I had nothing to confess, and besides I didn't like the idea of putting myself forward. Finally my daughter wrote a statement for me. It said that I supported the Cultural Revolution enthusiastically and, though I did not admit to specific wrongdoing, that I was willing to accept reform.

Ma Sitson's efforts to insulate himself from criticism and punishment were futile. He was detained by authorities for fifty days, and then he and a few others were loaded onto a truck and returned to the Central Music Academy where he had formerly been the president.

As we entered the big gate we saw a great crowd of people—students, workers, soldiers, even children. We were prodded off (the truck) and no sooner had I set foot on the ground than someone dumped a bucket of paste over my head. Others stuck tatsepao on my body and rammed a tall dunce cap labeled "Cow Demon" on my head. A cardboard plaque around my neck said, "Ma Sitson, agent of the bourgeois opposition." Later another sign calling me "vampire" was added. Finally they gave each of us a copper basin—a

"death bell"—and a stick to beat it with. . . . It was a wild scene. Our assailants acted as if they had gone crazy. We were paraded across the campus to the din of shouted slogans. All the way people hit out at us and spit upon us, especially the children. I recognized the distorted faces of some of my own students. . . . This was only the beginning of months of degradation and harassment.

Every morning and evening we had to sing together—and sometimes alone—a disgusting song composed by the son of the professor of conducting. It was called The Howl of the Black Gangsters and it went:

*I am a cow-headed monster
I have sinned, I have sinned
I must come under the people's dictatorship
Because I am an enemy of the people.
I must be very frank,
If I am not, smash me to bits!*

It ended on the seventh note with a crescendo to make it sound ugly.

None of this was pleasant, but the most nerve-wracking thing was the random harassment. At any time revolutionary students, who by the middle of August were calling themselves Red Guards, could order us out of our rooms. "Come out!" they would say. "Bow your head!" Then, because I had been labeled "vampire" for ill-treating workers (namely my ex-chauffeur) they would force me to recite my "crimes" over and over. The children were the fiercest of all. They made me crawl on my hands and knees. On several occasions they tore up my room, pulled the bedding apart and scattered my books. One boy took my quilt and threw it up on the roof, remarking, "So long as it is revolutionary, no action is a crime."

These Red Guards had no leaders, and we were fair game for any of them. It was anarchy.

Be able to . . .

1. Why were the arts a target of the government during the Cultural Revolution? What types of art and music did this campaign seek to wipe out? How?
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing his name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about his life.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this man.

The excerpts are from Ma Sitson's "In the Hands of the Red Guard," *Life Magazine*, June 2, 1967 (28–29).

Ma Sitson

The Rustication of Urban Youths

In 1968, a new program sent millions of people from urban areas to the countryside to be “re-educated.” Mao’s rationale was called “thought reform through labor.” The city dwellers would learn firsthand the essential dignity of rural life and work, and the peasants would benefit by being brought up-to-date on the Cultural Revolution’s revolutionary thought and activities. In reality, this forced relocation, or “rustication,” of many thousands of people and severely disrupted the lives and families of those involved. Often careers and educations would not be resumed. Many splintered families never reunited. The program’s unstated purpose was to provide a means of ridding the cities of the hundreds of thousands of young people roaming about with little to do, and to provide a means of exiling adults who were believed to hold questionable political beliefs. The following recollections are from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old girl, Jung Chang.

In January 1969, every middle school student in Chengdu was sent to a rural area somewhere in Sichuan. We were to live in villages among the peasants and be “re-educated” by them. What exactly they were supposed to educate us in was not made specific, but Mao always maintained that people with some education were inferior to illiterate peasants, and needed to reform to be more like them. One of his sayings was: “Peasants have dirty and cow manure-sodden feet, but they are much cleaner than intellectuals.”

Everything in Ningnan was done manually, the way it had been for at least 2,000 years. There was no machinery—and no draft animals, either. The peasants were too short of food to be able to afford any for horses or donkeys. For our arrival the villagers had filled an earthenware water tank for us. The next day I realized how precious every drop was. To get the water, we had to climb for thirty minutes up narrow paths to the well, carrying a pair of wooden barrels on a shoulder pole. They weighed ninety pounds when they were full. My shoulders ached agonizingly even when they were empty. . . .

. . . Now I began to learn to cook the hard way. The grain came unhusked, and had to be put into a stone mortar and beaten with all ones’ might with a heavy pestle. Then the mixture had to be poured into a big shallow bamboo basket, which was swung with a particular movement of the arms so that the light shells gathered on top and could be scooped away, leaving the rice behind. After a couple of minutes my arms became unbearably sore and soon were shaking so much I could not pick up the basket. It was an exhausting battle every meal.

Then we had to collect fuel. It was two hours’ walk to the woods designated by the forest protection regulations as the area where we could collect firewood. We were only allowed

to chop small branches, so we climbed up the short pines and slashed ferociously with our knives. The logs were bundled together and carried on our backs. I was the youngest in our group, so I only had to carry a basket of feathery pine needles. The journey home was another couple of hours, up and down mountain paths. I was so exhausted when I got back that I felt my load must weigh 140 pounds at least. I could not believe my eyes when I put my basket on the scales: it came to only five pounds. This would burn up in no time: it was not enough even to boil a wok of water.

On our first day working with the peasants, I was assigned to carry goat droppings and manure from our toilet up to the tiny fields which had just been burned free of bushes and grass. The ground was now covered by a layer of plant ash that, together with the goat and human excrement, was to fertilize the soil for the spring plowing, which was done manually.

I loaded the heavy basket on my back and desperately crawled up the slopes on all fours. . . . When I finally arrived at the field I saw the peasant women skillfully unloading by bending their waists sideways and tilting the baskets in such a way that the contents poured out. But I could not make mine pour. In my desperation to get rid of the weight on my back I tried to take the basket off. I slipped my right arm out of its strap, and suddenly the basket lurched with a tremendous pull to the left, taking my left shoulder with it. I fell to the ground into the manure. Some time later, a friend dislocated her knee like this. I only strained my waist slightly.

Hardship was part of the “thought reform.” In theory it was to be relished, as it brought one closer to becoming a new person, more like the peasants. Before the Cultural Revolution, I had subscribed wholeheartedly to this naïve attitude, and had deliberately done hard work in order to make myself a better person. . . . Now, scarcely three years later, my indoctrination was collapsing. With the psychological support of blind belief gone, I found myself hating the hardship in the mountains of Ningnan. It seemed utterly pointless.

Be able to . . .

1. Explain the reasons given for the rustication program that sent so many urban youths to the countryside. What other problems did they hope to solve?
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing her name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about her life.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this young woman.

The excerpts are from Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans, Three Daughters of China* (379, 381, 384–386).

Jung Chang

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