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HAS MUSIC EVER SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGED THE COURSE OF HISTORY?

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of music as a propaganda tool during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) under Mao Zedong's leadership. It explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) utilised revolutionary songs, known as "red songs," to foster social conformity, suppress individuality, and reinforce communist ideology. The essay traces the origins of the Cultural Revolution to the aftermath of the disastrous Great Leap Forward and analyses how music was employed to rebuild Mao's cult of personality and maintain the CCP's power. Through examining song lyrics and their cultural context, the essay demonstrates how revolutionary music evoked patriotism, promoted collective identity, and portrayed Mao as a godlike figure. This paper concludes by reflecting on the effectiveness of music as a propaganda medium and its lasting impact on Chinese society during this period.

Keywords: *Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, Chinese Communist Party (CCP), propaganda, revolutionary music, revolutionary songs, red songs, social conformity, communist ideology, patriotism, collective identity, cult of personality, impact of music, lyrics, red culture*

"Chairman Mao loves the people, he is our guide... The Communist Party is like the sun, wherever it shines, it is bright. Wherever the Communist Party is, Hurrah, the people are liberated!" – Song: *The East Is Red* (东方红) (Joaquin 2123).

These are lyrics from the de facto anthem of the Chinese Communist Party that are adapted from a traditional Chinese Shaanxi Folk song during the Cultural Revolution. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, (or the Cultural Revolution) took place during the years of 1966–1976, under the command of the Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) and the leadership of Chairman Mao, better known as Mao Zedong.

As illustrated above, during the Cultural Revolution, the CCP utilised music as a tool of propaganda for it to foster social conformity, suppress individuality, and reinforce communist ideology, thereby exerting control over the cultural landscape. It did so by idealising communist beliefs and Mao Zedong himself, the chairman of the party after the disastrous Great Leap Forward program, thereby winning conformity and support of the nation, strengthening his cultish status and keeping the party and Mao in power.

The development of the Cultural Revolution can be traced back to the effects of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward', which was a five-year plan – starting in 1958, to modernise agriculture in rural areas through industrialisation in order to compete with western countries (Clayton D. Brown, 2012). The application of communist ideology can be seen in the effects of the plan, such as the CCP controlling and allocating resources and food, and putting an end to private farming. However, by using unreliable and new, unproven farming techniques and methods, the changes resulted in declining crop yields, resulting in the Great Leap Forward doing more harm than good. Due to the unjustified methods used, production of grain decreased rapidly, leading to food shortages and causing massive famines to occur in rural areas. The famine had been the largest one to date, causing around thirty million people to perish (Shige Song. 2010). Additionally, because of the plan, hundreds of thousands died due to overworking, unrealistic quotas and tough working conditions. Instead of turning China into a Communist paradise, it showed the opposite; a nightmare for Mao and the CCP.

Following the disastrous effects of the Great Leap Forward, Mao stepped back a bit from the role of Chairman of the CCP, and allowed other officials to govern. They introduced policies that allowed private farming and enabled families to own plots of land (Britannica, T., 2024). This was an attempt at reestablishing the devastated economy that followed Mao's plan. However, a problem with these new policies was that they were not in line with the pure, communist beliefs of Mao, loosening the iron grip he had over the country.

Concerned about the party members working to benefit themselves and losing sight of their ideals, Mao feared that some CCP officials were abandoning the values of pure communism, and the influence they would have on the Chinese population by openly criticising his policies. In order to regain the power and prestige that the CCP had lost, Mao and/or the CCP introduced the idea of communism as a belief to the general public. This included music targeted to the people. Mao's red songs served as powerful tools of propaganda and were used to indoctrinate the people of China. These songs were

brought to the people through performances and radio broadcasts. The songs brought a sense of unity to the revolutionaries and appealed to their patriotism. However, they also aided the erosion of traditional Chinese culture, and suppressed other alternative forms of artistic expression, which were labelled 'bourgeois'. This led to less cultural diversity and self expression.

"He strives for the peoples' happiness, hurrah, he is the peoples' great saviour!" – *The East is Red* (东方红) (Joaquin 2123).

Revolutionary songs aimed to instil loyalty to the party, and win both the hearts and minds of those throughout the nation. The action of singing these lyrics together fostered unity, and most importantly collective identity. It gave those in the country the idea that the struggle against the bourgeois they faced was shared and that there were others in the same positions as them, all working together, unified. As seen above, this sense of community is especially shown when the individuals in the country are continually referred to as the "people", in the context of their happiness, and how Mao is their saviour. By identifying Chinese citizens collectively, the individual could feel the support of others, which would make them feel wanted, and part of a group. The use of inclusive pronouns can be seen in other examples such as in the patriotic song: *We Walk on the Great Road* (Mr Old Major 2011), which says "Our flags raised towards the sun" and "Our lands are crimson red".

Also shown in the last lyric above, colour symbolism was also common during the cultural revolution, and so colours were integrated into the revolutionary songs, as seen in their informal name, 'red songs'. The colour red has been essential in Chinese history and tradition, especially seen as a sign of celebration and happiness (Dongxin Shu. 2022). Some examples of this can be viewed through Chinese customs, such as wearing red on the Spring festival, or giving out red envelopes. However, during the cultural revolution, red also represented socialism and revolution. The flag is dyed red, to represent 'the blood of the revolutionaries'. This rich tradition and multiple meanings behind one single colour is one of the reasons why the colour is so prevalent in the lyrics of Mao's revolutionary music. Two popular songs were enti-

tled – *The Sun is Reddest, Chairman Mao is the Dearest and The East is Red*.

These songs and others represented the essence of red culture; how they glorified Mao Zedong and the CCP, and their communist values. Their powerful, patriotic lyrics evoked emotions within the people of China, making them willing to sacrifice for what they believed was a greater cause. This is how the songs made citizens responsive to the CCP's messages.

"The working class is in command of everything" – *We Walk on the Great Road*. (我們走在大路上) (Mr Old Major. 2011).

"The Mao Zedong thought is the sun that forever shines" – *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*. (大海航行靠舵手) (Dongxin Shu. 2022).

Not only did red songs propel the people of China to feel like a part of a collective movement, proud and willing to support the CCP's goals, they strongly presented Mao himself as a Godlike figure, which reinforced his absolute authority.

All these lyrics have something in common as they idolise Mao Zedong. Whether it is comparing him to a helmsman guiding the ship of revolution, or a sun that sheds light on the rest of the country, these songs were sung over and over, strengthening his cultish status.

After the atrocious events of the Great Leap Forward (Shige Song. 2010), which tarnished his image globally, Mao's previous headlock on the country had been loosened; and he needed a way to get it back. With his economic policies facing growing criticism and scrutiny (Britannica, T., 2024), the red songs acted as a distraction, and redirected public attention in order to reinforce Mao's authority. So, instead of focusing on the disaster that was the Great Leap Forward, the CCP instead chose to show Mao's leadership qualities and as the omnibenevolent leader that had the best interests of the people at heart. This effectively rebuilt his damaged reputation.

Revolutionary songs served as a means to send out his political messages to the public, and spread his ideology. Since the songs were frequently sung during large rallies and public events, the people felt connected to both Mao and each other – strengthening their

cultish identity. The songs evoked feelings of pride, patriotism and nationalism, through the lyrics that highlighted the struggles of the people, the sacrifices they made and how they contributed to the revolutionary cause. This made the people of China feel proud as one. It made them feel a sense of purpose and connection to their 'great leader', and more willing to 'serve' him. The lyrics painted Mao as the ultimate hero, a God that was the embodiment of the revolution and could lead them to victory. Soon, singing the songs were not just a courtesy to the CCP, but a sign of devotion to their God.

"Dear leader Chairman Mao is the Sun that never sets" – *Boundless Longevity to Chairman Mao*. (祝福毛主席萬壽無疆) (MIA: Art: Music, accessed 28 May 2024).

Music is extremely fascinating, and can easily influence emotions, relationships, cultures and traditions. It has commonly been seen as a form of self and cultural expression, with the lyrics reflecting the traditions, values and mindset of the community they originate from. The easy distribution and spread of music allows it to transport ideas and stories, therefore greatly influencing people (Mr Old Major. 2020). The catchy anthems and uplifting melodies allow the easy exchange of ideologies. This is exactly why the red songs were used to evoke feelings of patriotism within the citizens of China.

Patriotism is the robust commitment to one's country. This powerful tool has the ability to unite people of different beliefs and backgrounds, creating a shared identity and purpose to be proud of one's country. It can inspire individuals to sacrifice for the benefit of their country, and drives them to protect and feel responsible for their nation. The sense of national pride and identity is extremely important, as it creates a community that each and every person in the country can join and feel welcomed. The combination of patriotism and music has existed long before the emergence of red songs in the form of national anthems, seen all around the globe.

Similarly, Mao's revolutionary songs combined both of these phenomena to create a weapon of propaganda; one that instilled pride and brought out emotions to target the Chinese people, emphasising his God-

like status all while reminding citizens of the essence of red culture. The new communist political ideology was sold to the masses by powerful propaganda, containing music. This was his way of retaining power and of keeping his dominion over the country.

Could Mao have successfully solidified his control without music? Perhaps, but definitely not as effectively. Music allowed him to spread his ideas quickly and without the harshness of a speech or blatantly blasting his message into the ears of the people. This meant that the listeners were more receptive, and would not make them feel indoctrinated, but rather as a willing supporter of the regime.

The impact of music on the cultural revolution can be seen by the changes within Chi-

na. This was a state that went from civil war, widespread famine and economic instability to a country that became fully communist and was united under teachings and vision of one man. The influence music had was that it brought the people of China together and made them see a community in which they all had sacrificed to support both Mao and the CCP. By praising and idolising him, the revolutionary songs were an absolutely essential part of the state's propaganda, and suppressed the opposition, namely the bourgeois population. Those who sang with pride and those who refused were marginalised, which solidified the control the CCP had over the narrative of the cultural revolution.

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