



# THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN INNER MONGOLIA 1967–1969: THE PURGE OF THE "HEIRS OF GENGHIS KHAN"

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This is a substantially modified version of the talk on the same subject which he gave to the Society on 8 November 2006.

2006 saw the fortieth anniversary of the start of the Great Cultural Revolution, launched by Chairman Mao Zedong in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mid-1966. The anniversary was marked in the Hong Kong and international press, though, as for the last three ten-year anniversaries, there was little commemoration in the PRC itself, the country which was to be driven to the brink of civil war during the course of the "ten years of turbulence".

The Cultural Revolution (CR) was to have a devastating and profound effect on the development of the PRC, an impact that has lasted to this day. It involved as many as 10 million casualties and injuries, country-wide mayhem, the closing down of China's schools and universities, and the devastation of China's cultural and historical heritage. It also shaped the outlook of the generation of Chinese who hold key positions today – including the current President, Hu Jintao, and Premier Wen Jiabao, both of whom lived through the CR, and participated in it to some extent.

The CR began with an obscure literary argument in Beijing between the then Vice Mayor Wu Han and a Shanghai-based writer Yao Wenyuan. Wu Han had written a play, *Hai Rui, Dismissed From Office*, ostensibly about a Ming dynasty official from 500 years before who had been hounded from power because of a corrupt emperor. Yao, who was to gain fame as one of the members of the group later to become notorious as the Gang of Four, accused this work of being a veiled attack on Mao Zedong and his dismissal of the popular Defence Minister and war hero Peng Dehuai after the disaster of the Great Leap Forward seven years before.

This literary spat was to escalate to the point that, by 1967, most of China's schools, its leadership structure, and many of its institutions had simply broken down. The President of China, Liu Shaoqi, was hounded from office for being a



Figure 1 Inner Mongolia

"capitalist roader" and a revisionist. He was to die tragically, reportedly of untreated cancer, two years later. Deng Xiaoping, who was to make a spectacular return to power after Mao's death a decade later, was also felled. By 1968 the balance sheet for China was to have only one Ambassador abroad (in Egypt), to be gearing up for war with the USSR (a war which, thankfully, only ever reached the stage of border skirmishes), and to be economically crippled and an international pariah. The legacy of the CR was to be seen in the grotesque Cambodian version in 1975–1979 Kampuchea, and the ongoing Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

## The CR in the provinces

The CR was a hugely complicated movement, which might explain why it was only in 2006 that the first relatively comprehensive history of it appeared.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship has been hampered by the lack of candour and openness of the

Chinese government itself about what really happened from 1966 onwards (despite the fact that in the last few years memoirs and some limited records about this period have been appearing in China) and further complicated by the fact that the CR took a very different form in the various provinces and autonomous regions of China. The CR in Beijing was in essence a high level power struggle between Mao Zedong, and those he regarded as ranged against him, trying to dilute and change the direction of the Chinese revolution. This struggle was immensely disruptive and violent, but it was focussed very much on the various factions vying for influence. The CR translated to the context of China's other provinces in many different ways. In Shanghai, the CR was a perfect opportunity for radicalised students to pit themselves against industrial workers and organisations. Shanghai set up a "commune" in early 1967 that had to be quickly closed down by the central government as it became far too autonomous and ambitious in its political programme. In Guangzhou and Wuhan, the movement exacerbated local political contradictions, leading in many cases to violent clashes and beyond. What subsequently became known as the Wuhan Incident in mid-1967 saw the People's Liberation Army (PLA) pitted against students and workers in something approaching civil war. In Sichuan and the south-west of China, local districts disintegrated into anarchy, with the local leadership essentially decimated. There were even reports of cannibalism in Guangxi province.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to deny that Mao Zedong, and Mao alone, was the presiding genius behind this massive dislocation, and that his utterances and strategies from Beijing rippled out to the edges of the Chinese universe and manifested their effects there. But even he was unable to predict what these effects would be.

They were most unpredictable, and destructive, in the great border areas, particularly the "Autonomous Regions" of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, which had complicated histories as separate territories. Their highly ambiguous relationships with the central Beijing state were to be stretched to breaking point. For these areas saw the clash of two incompatible ideologies. On the one hand, the PRC, led by the Beijing government, declaring the universality of Marxism-Leninism Maoism as a development model, promoting international revolutionary struggle, and basing this on the universal applicability of class struggle above all other forms of social and cultural identification. Ranged against this were expressions of identity based on ethnicity. Communities who were seen to be placing ethnicity above class during the CR were interpreted as declaring their opposition to the central state. And the CR, in these areas at least, operated as a massive campaign to rein them in and force conformity.

In *Tibet*, which had only come fully under Beijing's control in 1959, where there were local memories of the Chinese invasion and occupation from 1951 onwards, the CR was to become a full scale exercise in excising the influence of local religion and culture in favour of the atheist Marxist state. Temples were bombed. Monasteries closed. Campaigns were waged to reduce the influence of the Dalai Lama. As recent studies have shown, this was not a simple

conflict between Tibetans and Han outsiders. Many of the most enthusiastic destroyers of Tibetan culture and temples were, in fact, ethnically Tibetan.<sup>3</sup>

*Xinjiang* was to see the predominantly Muslim Uiguar ethnic group being challenged to renounce their religious beliefs in favour of pure allegiance to the Marxist, multi-ethnic, atheist Beijing state. Those in Xinjiang had the powerful memory of existing as the independent state of Turkestan from 1945 to 1949. From 1967 onwards, the region was to see Imams forced to publicly renounce their religion and eat pork as proof of their sincerity, the closure of all mosques, and a mass influx of "sent down" urban youths, the vast majority ethnically Han, many of whom stayed permanently in the region and radically changed its demographics.

#### **Inner Mongolia**

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR), sandwiched between the Mongolian People's Republic and the PRC, was to be one of the worst affected areas of China during the CR. While the impact of the CR came slightly late to the area, and extended mainly over the period 1967 to 1969, it was to result in over 22,000 deaths, and 300,000 injuries, according to official statistics. Demographic studies have shown that, based on the almost zero growth rate of the population from 1965 to 1975, the real level of casualties may have reached up to 100,000 deaths. Almost every person of Mongolian ethnicity in the region was affected in some way by the events of the CR. These have a claim to being acts of genocide, and are a wound that lingers to this day.<sup>4</sup>

To understand these events, however, one needs to look back a little further in history, to the setting up under Soviet patronage of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) in 1921. The Inner Mongolian area had already been heavily populated by Han settlers since the middle Qing period, and was considered part of the territory of both Qing (1644–1911) and Republican China (1911– 1949). From the 1920s until the 1940s there was, indeed, a political movement in Inner Mongolia agitating for unification with the MPR and the creation of a pan-Mongolian state.<sup>5</sup> But the main political leadership in the region gave their allegiance to Mao and the Communists after securing an agreement from him that they would be able to self-determine when the war against the Japanese was finally won. This was contained most famously in a declaration Mao made in 1935 in which he stated that "only by fighting with us can the Inner Mongolian nation preserve the glory of the epoch of Genghis Khan, avoid the extinction of their nation, embark on the path of national revival and obtain independence and freedom like that enjoyed by the nations of Turkey, Poland, the Ukraine and the Caucasus."<sup>6</sup> This statement was to be removed from Mao's works after 1949, a sign of its evident sensitivity.

The national war against the Japanese continued deep into the 1940s. The Japanese occupation of Inner Mongolia, while it saw brutal activities, was to be less traumatic than in other areas of China. In fact the Nationalists were seen as far more severe overlords during their period of tenure, up to

the late 1930s, and, indeed, banned outright the use of spoken Mongolian in the region's cities. Perhaps this was one of the reasons for the general welcome and support given to the Communists, and the setting up of an Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in 1947, a full two years before the founding of the PRC proper in October 1949. The "Autonomous Region" of the PRC, under a leader of Mongolian ethnicity, Ulanfu, believed that it had wide-ranging powers, and was, if not independent, then at least the next best thing.

Ulanfu was to be the most important leader in the region for the following two decades, balancing the interests of the area against the demands of the central government. A native of central Inner Mongolia, from a region called Tumet, he had been an early Communist activist, and studied in the USSR in the 1920s, along with some of the top leadership of what was to become the Communist Party of China, including Kang Sheng, an ominous and sinister figure who was to become, in effect, the leader of the Chinese secret service, and one of the main prosecutors of the purge in Inner Mongolia. Ulanfu had joined the Red Army in Yenan, and been promoted to a number of important political positions before being tasked with leading the Communist groups in his native Inner Mongolia. From 1949, he occupied the key positions of power in the region, and seemed to enjoy the trust and support of Mao in Beijing. In the 1950s he headed the implementation of a full land reform campaign, and the introduction of the social and political systems that implemented the Communists' plans and tied the area more closely to the rest of the PRC. In many ways, Ulanfu was forced to walk a tightrope throughout this period, holding on to his local constituency of Mongolian activists, while satisfying the central government.

These local tensions, essentially between the desire for greater autonomy and the need to keep within the parameters set by the Beijing government, posed one of the major problems that spun out of control when the CR dawned. The other arose from IMAR's geo-political position, with its close links through the MPR to the USSR, with which the PRC had had a spectacular falling out in the early 1960s. Any sort of connections with the MPR or the USSR were immediate grounds for suspicion, a suspicion that thrived in the paranoid atmosphere of the CR and became the basis for an all-out campaign against those who were alleged to be local separatists and enemies.

#### The battle commences

In the summer of 1966, Ulanfu was summoned to Beijing for a meeting at the Qianmen Hotel, which ran over two months. At this meeting he was accused of "anti-Party activities" and savagely denounced by central leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, himself very soon to become one of the CR's most senior victims. Dismissed from his posts in the Party and local government, Ulanfu literally disappeared from sight for the next decade, only resurfacing in the late 1970s when he was appointed a Vice Premier as part of the wave of rehabilitations after the death of Mao Zedong. On his death in 1988, his obituary in the

*People's Daily* described him as a distinguished worker and servant of the Party. But over the two years from 1967, a particularly blood-curdling propaganda campaign was waged against him, in which he was accused of being "Mongolian trash", a splittist, a counter-revolutionary and a servant of the feudal classes. This campaign was to extend, like a nasty virus, to his family, and to anyone associated with him.

Ulanfu, at least, was taken away from the battle front. There were many others who were not so lucky. Cadres of Mongolian ethnicity in Inner Mongolia were particularly vulnerable. Tensions in the area over the winter of 1967 and into 1968 led to a clash between students and the army, which resulted in the death of a student. This, at last, attracted the attention of the central leadership, and for three months, from February to April, Premier Zhou Enlai was to chair eight meetings, convened between local groups, and central leaders, to "handle the problem of IMAR". These meetings, carefully transcribed and issued in pamphlets for dissemination to the local community, were to culminate in savage denunciations of Ulanfu and all those leaders around him, condemning them for collusion with the Soviet Revisionists. On 14 April 1967, a "Decision" with quasi-legal force was issued by Beijing, demanding that the IMAR be pacified, and that a new leadership be put in place. A Han Chinese, General Teng Haiqing, previously a senior figure in the Beijing area garrison, was imposed on the area.

If this was meant to calm down the situation in the IMAR, it failed. A combination of the general atmosphere of the times, and the particular sensitivities in the region, meant that, by mid-1968, what was called in a slogan commonly used at this time an "all-out campaign to dig and root out the enemy sleeping at our side" was in full swing. People were arbitrarily accused of allegiance to the old Inner Mongolian People's Party, which, it was claimed, had continued to exist after 1949. Spurious pieces of evidence were dredged up, from letters purportedly from operatives of the Party in IMAR to their brothers and sisters across the border, to accusations that a full Party Congress had taken place in the 1950s, with a programme and manifesto to push for full independence from the PRC, and a clear leadership structure with chairmen, deputies and party officials. This seemed to confirm the worst fears of leaders in Beijing, showing that a significant number of Mongolians, whatever they may have said in the open, had never truly committed themselves to the PRC. In some areas of the region almost all people of Mongolian ethnicity were rounded up. Appalling abuses occurred. Mongolian language was banned from publications. An office to "root out the Inner Mongolian people's party" was set up, producing Stalinistlike lists of those most under suspicion, under the direction of a man himself of Mongolian ethnicity, Ulanbaagen. Two Chinese historians who produced a history of the period published in 1995 in Chinese record people being branded with hot irons, having their tongues and eyes ripped out, and being burnt alive.<sup>7</sup> A haunting account by a visiting soldier describes how, when he drove in an army jeep into one of the villages surrounding the provincial capital, Hohhot, people literally fled for the lives, believing him to be the latest in a constant stream of "clean up" patrols coming to get more victims.<sup>8</sup>

# THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN INNER MONGOLIA 179



Plate 1 Making revolution is no crime: to rebel is justified. Open fire on the bourgeois reactionary line and on the handful of capitalist-roaders in the party



Plate 2 Warmly welcome the establishment of the Shanghai, East is Red, Diesel-Engine Factory Revolutionary Committee



Plate 3 The Paris Commune was a seizure of power by the working class (Marx). Long live the Paris Commune



Plate 4 Completely root out the Ulanfu reactionary clique



Plate 5 Intellectual youth, go to the countryside and recieve re-education from the low and lowermiddle class peasants



Plate 6 Long live the great unity of nationalities



Plate 7 Greet the holding of the Ninth Congress by grasping revolution and boosting production

The very worst year, 1968, saw almost total breakdown, with hundreds of thousands affected. Society was in a state of constant political agitation, with the leading figures in most organisations, from schools to public offices, either removed or absent. "Struggle Sessions" and mass meetings, beloved of the time, occurred most days in the centre of local cities and towns. Those denounced were lucky if they got away with verbal denunciations and slight vandalism of their houses. In many meetings, things deteriorated to such an extent that people were either badly injured, or, in some cases, killed. One eyewitness I spoke to in a town north of Hohhot, the provincial capital, told of a pregnant woman strung up and beaten so badly she miscarried. Not all of these attacks were on ethnic Mongolians, but there is no doubt that a very high proportion were.

The problems were compounded by the setting up of Rebellious Groups (better known as Red Guards) who supported particular revolutionary positions, and who competed with each other for influence and power. Groups like the "Third Alliance" and the "East is Red Battle Alliance" issued their own pamphlets, acting like *de facto* legal and social entities, literally taking the law into their own hands. The most radical of these pamphlets contained language that came close to, and sometimes tipped into, outright racial attack. In particular, the Mongolians were accused of being "the sons and heirs of Genghis Khan".

#### Genghis Khan as a symbol

The great Khan was always likely to be a contentious figure: used remorselessly by the Mongolians across the border as a figure to inspire nationalist pride, he offered powerful competition to the figure of Mao, and became the focus of a campaign based on an "either/or" allegiance. "To tell the truth, Genghis Khan is the representative of the feudal exploitative classes", said one pamphlet issued at the time. "Lifting up Genghis Khan's dead spirit, and making it a model for Mongolian and Han unity, carrying on 'development of history' from Genghis Khan, just means carrying on the history of exploitative classes, the continuation of national minority oppression and national minority exploitation."

That Genghis Khan was to be, almost eight centuries after his death, such a controversial figure in the PRC was perhaps unsurprising. He had been the leader of what were perceived, at least in some Chinese eyes, to be a bunch of nomadic bandits, who had toppled a Chinese dynasty (the celebrated Song) and installed a regime, the Yuan, that had wreaked havoc on the world. More than this, Genghis Khan had considered a well documented plan to exterminate the Chinese, at least in the south of the country, but was dissuaded from this by a Chinese advisor who told him that raising tax from the people instead would be more beneficial to his new empire. That the Khan had established a global empire that stretched from the coast of China to the Danube at one point was neither here nor there to contemporary Marxist-Leninist Maoists. All



Figure 2 Genguis Khan

that he had achieved had lasted no more than a century. His armies had devastated whole regions of the north-west of China. He was the feudalist *par excellence*, creator of a society of slavery and exploitation.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, images of the great Khan were to be forbidden during the CR. Being a descendant of him became a term of abuse. Ulanfu was himself labelled a "modern day Genghis Khan". Sites which had any connection to him, such as his reputed burial place, were vandalised. Festivals associated with him were forbidden. Ulanfu, in particular, was accused of trying to establish a new "Yuan Dynasty", directly competing with the government of Mao Zedong in Beijing. Pamphlets produced at the time contained damning indictments of Ulanfu's hubris and arrogance, clearly pointing to ambitions to set up a state with Chairman Ulanfu in charge, and Genghis Khan literally elevated to the position of a state deity.<sup>10</sup>

#### The centre steps in

By 1969, the area had slid into almost complete chaos. Many party and government functionaries had been removed from power, making the functions of government grind to a halt. Universities were closed, and a reign of terror prevailed. In short, the campaign to "uproot and dig out" the Inner Mongolian People's Party had unleashed such dangerous social forces and grievances in the region, and had escalated to such an extent, that the central leaders in Beijing realised that something was badly wrong. CR legend has it that this was prompted by a niece of Premier Zhou Enlai writing him a letter about the terrible situation in the grasslands where she had been sent. Be that as it may, one sentence by Mao Zedong caused the leadership in the IMAR to be changed. "Excesses have been committed", he reportedly said.

By the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969, the first for over a decade, decisions had evidently already been taken. Teng Haiqing and the group around him were summoned and subjected to criticism, first by the leading members of the Central Cultural Revolutionary Group, and then by local leaders. Over the final months of 1969, a fascinating process of apology and abnegation was set in motion, with General Teng, previous ringleader of the attacks on the Inner Mongolian People's Party, forced to undergo a series of public sessions in which he faced local audiences and attempted to justify himself. This was a highly artificial activity - Teng, after all, had only been acting on instructions from the real promoters of the campaign in Beijing. But he was the most obvious, and convenient, fall guy. In the summer and autumn of 1969, there seemed to be no end to the humility, profuse apology and regret that Teng was able to articulate. At least personally, Teng's offer seems to have worked. At the end of 1969, he was sent for re-education to Hebei, and then made a comeback in the late 1970s as a military commander in Jinan, before retiring to Beijing, where he died in 1996. Calls for his trial in the 1980s were to fall on deaf ears. As the then paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping was to say, "One should be severe to one's enemies and kind to one's friends". Whatever else could be said about Teng, he seems to have been an exemplary servant of the Communist Party.

In mid-1969, as if to prove that concerns about the vulnerability of the area to outside influence were not without foundation, there was a skirmish with the Russians on the northern border in Heilongjiang Province between the two countries in which shots were exchanged and both sides suffered casualties. Inner Mongolia was kept on a tight reign throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, for about a decade the IMAR was reduced in size, with three large portions allocated to neighbouring provinces and this act was only reversed in 1979.

By then, following the death of Mao in 1976, and the rise to power of an ostensibly more liberal leadership under the rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping, the CR period had ended, and attempts were made to offer compensation and rehabilitate those victimised. A Party Statement in 1979 simply declared that "the Inner Mongolian People's Party never existed" and blamed the entire episode

on the "Gang of Four and the Lin Biao Clique". But this did little to appease the many who had suffered so dreadfully at the time. Their attempts to get some form of justice continued into the 1980s, when there were major student demonstrations in the region, particularly in 1984 and 1987. The issue of the CR impacted on the 1989 national demonstrations. It was also to reoccur in the mid-1990s when there was a further significant purge of people regarded as Mongolian separatists, who pointed to the CR as a key contentious issue. One of them, a bookshop owner named Hada, is still in jail to this day because of what was claimed to be separatist activities.

## The CR in Inner Mongolia and its relevance today

2007 marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the IMAR. In 1997, the 50th anniversary was celebrated by a substantial building programme in the main provincial city of Hohhot, and the visit of the then President, Jiang Zemin. Over the last decade, the same tidal wave of development and investment that has swept the rest of the country has seen business parks and major building programmes throw up skyscrapers and motorways across much of the Inner Mongolian region. There are even plans to develop the Xanadu site (called in Chinese "Yuan Shang Du" - literally the Capitol of the Yuan Dynasty) into a full blown tourist centre - it currently remains a sleepy, barely visible ruin, about 9 hours drive to the north-west of Beijing. The trauma of the CR continues at most a distant memory. But it is still something that is sensitive enough to mean that a history in Chinese of the period issued in 1995 remains banned, despite receiving initial sanction. Another even more contentious Chinese language account in 2001 was suppressed immediately. Websites, in English and Chinese, about the CR period remain blocked. Ever since the CR period, the key power holders in the region, up to the current day, have been Han Chinese.

Finding any traces of the memory of the CR in the region is increasingly difficult. Most of the old city in Hohhot, for instance, has been swept away and replaced by the new style architecture so beloved of every other region of China. The region's main museum, in the centre of Hohhot, is dominated by a huge skeleton of a dinosaur, and two floors related to the history of the Mongolians in the region, and the victory of the revolution. This history contains not one mention of the period 1966 to 1976. There are no public memorials to the victims of the CR period, nor any official marking of their demise. At the very most, older people sometimes talk of their baffling memories of this period.

The final location of Genghis Khan's burial place in what is now called Mongolia by an international group of archaeologists led by the Japanese in 2004 has done little to dent the claims from the PRC government that Genghis Khan was the leader of a Chinese dynasty, and for that reason Chinese. Rather than following a strategy to vilify him, as had been the case in the late 1960s, he is now "assimilated". Neither seems particularly truthful or honest. There is still a group of activists, led from Germany by Xi Haimin, originally from Inner Mongolia and now in exile, who run what is called the modern Inner Mongolia People's Party, and agitate for the full independence of the region from the PRC. However, unlike the historical party, whose alleged existence was behind so much of the turmoil of the CR period, the modern party exists as much as a result of the unaddressed grievances of the CR as for any other reason.

In that sense, the attitude in the IMAR to the sore wounds left by the CR period does not differ much from that in other areas of the country, where it remains the great forgotten period, something that figures as a major embarrassment. The tendency seems to be to simply try to forget. It seems odd that no lesson can be learned from this stark and traumatic period and the suffering of many tens of millions. While a similar movement pitting ethnic and social classes against each other is not very likely, the current grossly unequal economic development of the PRC could possibly result in a return to the highly tribal, destructive clashes of the CR period. For that reason, and that alone, studying this period, for those both inside and outside China, is one of the very best ways of preparing for potential dislocation and breakdown in the future and ensuring that this period of China's modern nightmare will never be repeated.

#### NOTES

- 1. Michael Schoenhals and Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Final Revolution*. Harvard: Bellknap Press, 2006.
- 2. See Zheng Yi, Scarlet Memorial. London, 1997.
- 3. See Tsering Shakya, Dragon in the Land of Snows: a History of Modern Tibet Since 1947. London, 1999.
- 4. Fuller details about this history can be found in Kerry Brown, *The Purge of the Inner Mongolian People's Party in the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1967–1969.* Cambridge University Inner Asian Series: Pimlico, 2006, upon which the material in the rest of this article is based.
- The history of this period has been dealt with exhaustively in Christopher Atwood's monumental Young Mongols and Vigilantes in Inner Mongolia's Interregnum Decades, 1911– 1931. Leiden: Brill, 2002.
- 6. Quoted in Stuart Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949*. London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, p. 71.
- Tumen and Zhu Dongli, Kang Sheng yu Neirendang yuanan (Kang Sheng and the Unjust Case of the IMPP). Beijing: Party School Publisher, 1995.
- Found in W. Woody, *The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia: Extracts from an Unpublished History*, trans. and ed. Michael Schoenhals, Stockholm Occasional Papers no 20. Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1993.
- 9. John Man, *Genghis Khan: Life, Death, and Resurrection*. London: Bantam, 2005, is the most recent biography.
- 10. Details of these can be found in the fourth chapter of Brown, *The Purge of the Inner Mongolian People's Party in the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1967–1969.*

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