

*astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...*

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Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

This month's commentary returns to my ongoing series about the 1960s and its relationship to what lies ahead in 2008-2015. This particular chapter covers more than I can comfortably compress into a single newsletter, so it's in two parts—the first installment this month and the second next month. I hope you'll find it relevant.

CHAOS IN THE 1960S (PART ONE)

Many Americans hold the 1960s in less than fond regard. A sizable percentage of people in each of the four generations that were alive then (plus a fair number in subsequent generations that weren't yet born) look back at that tempestuous decade with negativity, either dismissively or with stronger emotions of loathing and disdain. To them, what happened in America during the '60s was an aberration, a shameful outburst of disrespect for authority, tradition, and property, through protests that were revolting, violent, and, well, just plain bad manners on the part of college students, blacks, feminists, native Americans, etc. Most of their scorn is aimed at the straw men of the political "New Left" and the psychedelic drug subculture, characterized as radicals and hippies. Goodbye and good riddance, they say, reveling in the conservative backlash of the Reagan '80s and the accompanying class and culture wars that have now reached epic proportions.

While people of all ages were caught up in the many divergent and interwoven movements of the 1960s, most of the criticism is aimed squarely at Baby Boomers, who were coming of age at the time and formed the nucleus of those challenging the status quo. In the negative view, the youthful Boomers were (and still are) regarded as egocentric, narcissistic, and altogether spoiled—pampered in infancy, indulged in childhood, and privileged in adolescence—who expect everything their own way and want it all now. This is essentially the Pluto in Leo generation.

Are these criticisms of the '60s and the Boomers correct? That's debatable, of course, and finally a question of point of view. As a Boom member who lived through that amazing time and saw much of the best and worst of what happened and who we were, I would say that such harsh judgments contain a measure of truth, but with considerable bias and one-sidedness.

What critics and naysayers fail to realize is that what was born during the 1960s (in an admittedly wrenching caesarian section) was not merely a discontinuity in American and world history, but a harbinger of things to come. That awakening—in all its joy and disturbance, its spiritual searching, alternate lifestyles, social disobedience, and even its violent confrontations—represented the birth pangs of conflicts that will return in the years ahead, but in manifestations and for reasons very different from those of its boisterous infancy.

In other words, those who don't like or discount the '60s misinterpret that decade as a period of temporary insanity in American culture, rather than the worldwide phenomenon it truly was. America was only one of many epicenters for the winds of change that swept around the globe in the second half of the 1960s. Race riots in black ghettos erupted in Los Angeles and Detroit, but also in Johannesburg. Youth-driven political confrontations grabbed headlines in Chicago, but also in Paris and Prague. And yet, all the outbursts were momentary bubbles, notable more for their wide dispersion than their destructive impact. What people remember, however, is the media coverage, especially the news film on television and the still photographs in magazines. The violence in civil society was actually sporadic and fleeting. The media images were permanent, leaving an indelible scar in collective memory.

In fact, the 1960s were neither violent nor chaotic for most Americans, including those of us who took part in the cultural movements of that time. The vast majority of political demonstrations were peaceful, which is remarkable, given the passions of the period. Yes, the rhetoric was often provocative (which is what the media fed on), and the pace of social change certainly accelerated, but the realities of day-to-day life in America and Europe remained, if not constant, at least flexibly coherent.

In only one place was the '60s revolution truly chaotic and enveloping, and there the trauma remained largely invisible to the rest of the world. That place was China.

To understand accurately the core meanings of the 1960s—both as it was then and in its implications for what may lie ahead in 2008-2015, we need to remove the veil that shrouds the incredible events that rocked the most populous country on earth.

CHINA

Americans are less knowledgeable about China than any other part of the world. Most of our awareness of that foreign, even alien culture comes from ersatz Chinese food, fortune cookie aphorisms (“*Confucius say...*”), and bad Hollywood movies (such as *The Good Earth*, or *55 Days at Peking*. Yuk.) China's complex history is shrouded in mystery, in part because of its age, but also due to its own intentional and insistent isolationism. Oriental culture has indeed been largely “inscrutable” to western minds, even those of scholars. We know about the Golden Age of Greece and the Roman Empire; China's dynastic empire predates them by 1,000 years. And it is a turbulent history, as full of darkness and light as any complex society that ever existed.

Over the past 300 years, while the western world embraced materialism and modernity, China struggled to throw off the yoke of a feudal caste society. Because of its topography, huge peasant population, social inertia, and the economic necessities of remaining agrarian just to feed its people, China was largely excluded from the Industrial Revolution. Despite her status as the oldest existing civilization on earth, with an inbred sense of superiority, China suffered humiliation in the 19th century at the hands of western powers that were aggressively colonial, intent on opening the Orient to trade, and more than willing to enslave Chinese masses by selling opium to achieve their profits. By the beginning of the 20th century, China's dynastic traditions were corrupted from within by their own dead weight, and that massive country—one-fifth of the world's population—was plunged into a tumultuous transformation that would last the entire century.

For a time, it appeared that Chiang Kai-shek's armies and his Kuomintang government would consolidate power, but the brutal Japanese invasion in the 1930s, the Long March of the People's Liberation Army, and, following World War II, a sudden reversal in the decades-long civil war produced an amazing result: the unexpected communist victory and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, atop which Mao Zedong perched as the new "emperor."

The upper echelon of the now ruling Communist Party had been rebel soldiers their entire lives. They had fought for 40 years to win control, and, in spite of China's desperate need for economic modernization, their ideology included a strain of "perpetual revolution." This was especially true of Mao, whose cult of personality bequeathed to him the traditional Mandate of Heaven. His ascendance to the throne did not prevent power struggles at the top, however, and palace intrigues had a great deal to do with two culminating traumas.

The first was **The Great Leap Forward**, which started in 1958 and ended in 1961. This was a massive reform of rural China to reorganize the Soviet-style collectives into farm communes and stimulate industrial development from the ground up. China had to catch up quickly to the industry of western societies, and Mao believed fervently in the power of the masses. As a result, small "backyard blast furnaces" were built in thousands of farm communes to fabricate steel.

After initial success in 1958, the plan went awry. Two years of drought resulted in massive crop failures in 1959-1960. Some crops simply rotted in the fields as communes could not manage the labor of even a meager harvest while busy stoking their steel furnaces. Meanwhile, the steel produced in these primitive ovens was of such low quality that it could not be used.

A disaster ensued: 30 million peasants died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition over that brief period of two years. Such a huge number of premature deaths seems almost inconceivable, and estimates vary among scholars in China (the death toll may have been even larger), but 30 million is the consensus.

Few Americans knew that this catastrophe had befallen the Chinese people, since "Red China" was a closed society and a Cold War communist enemy. Astonishingly, the tragedy was largely silent; Chinese society was not overtly disrupted. While the grim reaper waltzed through rural villages throughout the vast and often remote countryside, the historical passivity and dutiful obedience of China's rural peasant population still held sway. The millions that died did so almost without a whimper, and China's ruling hierarchy remained intact. The scope of suffering was not even realized by the government until late in 1960.

In 1961, Chairman Mao reluctantly admitted the unavoidable fact of profound failure. The Great Leap Forward—which turned out to be a giant step backward—was mercifully ended. Mao accepted responsibility and guilt, sacrificing both prestige and power among the ruling elite. For a time, he receded into the background, turning over control of China's economy to Party leaders of a more pragmatic and sensible frame of mind. Under their measured reforms, China's shattered economy recovered significantly in 1962-1964, while peasant families stoically swallowed their grief.

Mao was not gone for long, however. The humiliating embarrassment of The Great Leap Forward merely set the stage for his defiant return to the pinnacle of power in 1965. As readers may recall from earlier essays in this series, that was the exact year that Uranus first conjoined Pluto while both planets opposed Saturn. Astrologically, it was the seminal birth year of the 1960s global revolution, although the full effects would take another seven to eight years to manifest and play out fully. Late in 1965, Mao initiated **The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**, his final legacy to China.

Mao Zedong had the soul of a poet and the ruthlessness of a warlord. He composed visionary odes of lofty spiritual portent, and yet, when asked about the one million Chinese casualties in the Korean War, replied coldly that China had sufficient population to afford the losses. A lifelong proponent of class struggle for equality, he believed that a permanent state of revolution was necessary to keep China from backsliding into feudalism. As Mao approached his twilight years, he worried that the goal of a truly egalitarian society would be subverted from within.

The Cultural Revolution began quietly, with student groups from around the country invited to congregate and be lectured by Mao in Tiananmen Square at the Forbidden Palace in Beijing. *The Little Red Book* of Mao's quotations had already been published and distributed throughout China, illuminating what was reverently termed "Mao Zedong Thought." In the autumn of 1965, provocative edicts were issued by the Chairman, charging various elements of Chinese society with "revisionism" (the code word for superior status). Something was definitely up. Something big.

In June of 1966 classes throughout China were suspended indefinitely, and students—from university level down to grade schoolers—were enlisted into cadres called the Red Guards. Peasant children were still largely shut out from the educational pathways up the ladder in China. Students who would move on to middle school or university were mainly from two classes: Either they were offspring of "intellectuals," meaning teachers, scientists, and business managers, or they were from families of Party members who had fought for the Communist revolution and represented a rising substrata of bureaucrats. Within the narrower limits of Chinese society, they were extremely privileged youths, the Chinese equivalent to America's Baby Boomers.

Unlike America, where Boomer ideals challenged the beliefs of their parents and government in American goodness and supremacy, Chinese youth worshipped the hierarchy of authority, genuflecting to images of China as the great evolving nation. They had been born into an extraordinarily high-minded and rigid idealism, in which they believed passionately—that of a new communist society whose propaganda painted the utopia of a classless society where all were equal. These young revolutionaries were so patriotic and completely devoted to Mao (who was effectively considered an omniscient deity, a god who could do no wrong) that little effort was required to whip the students into a frenzy through slogans, plays (operas) and Big Character Posters, which were like state-sponsored graffiti that appeared everywhere. When Mao said "*Jump*," they said "*How high?*" When Mao said, "*Cleanse and purify China*," they said, "*Who do you want killed?*"

Manipulating the students' righteousness proved all too easy. They became not merely evangelists preaching the gospel of communism, but willing thugs in Mao's Mafia. The Red Guards' wrath was targeted toward intellectuals, provincial bureaucrats, "capitalist roaders" (including landlords and money lenders), and other bourgeois or feudal miscreants. The belligerent and fanatical cadres of students were then released, descending on China's major cities to confront The Four Olds: "old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits." Unlike the Great Leap Forward, which focused on the rural peasantry, the Cultural Revolution was aimed at the upper strata of Chinese society located mainly in urban centers.

Inspired by Mao's vision and backed by state sanction, Red Guard aggression escalated into a nightmarish reign of terror. Hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens were attacked in their homes, dragged into the streets, beaten senseless, sometimes murdered outright or forced into humiliating public "trials" that were in essence Kafkaesque kangaroo courts. This was the Spanish Inquisition pursued on a mass scale. Any accusation of revisionism provoked immediate reprisals. The accused were simply assumed to be guilty, allowed no defense, and given no quarter.

Families were broken up, with some members sent to prison (often for up to ten years), others brutally interrogated, while the Communist Party forcibly relocated millions to primitive farm work communes in faraway rural areas. No one felt safe, and the routines of daily life could be overturned in an instant. Homes were burned, personal property confiscated and destroyed, regional government offices trashed, and countless lives ruined.

Imagine the Salem witch hunt multiplied million-fold. If you said anything critical of what was happening, you could be targeted. If you inadvertently offended someone, you could be targeted. If you remained too silent, you could be targeted. If you happened to be a friend or acquaintance of a person who had been targeted, you could be targeted. This may not have been total anarchy, but it was certainly madness.

By the end of 1967, the very fabric of normal society disintegrated. The Communist Party had gutted itself in a wholesale purge that extended all the way down to local-level officials. Government collapsed, and cities throughout China were chilled by an atmosphere of entirely justified paranoia. Competing factions developed within the Red Guards, and violent street warfare broke out among the cadres. Mao

realized that events had spiraled out of control, and he called out the army (PLA) to crack down on the Red Guards and restore order. Naïve students who had been whipped into a frenzy of fanaticism in service to the state suddenly found their heads on the chopping block as the new victims of military repression. Tragically, by that point not even the charismatic Mao could stop the cycle of violence and social disruption. The Chinese dragon convulsively ate its own tail.

After the “cleansing” of the Party was achieved (60% of all officials were purged) the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution was officially terminated in 1969, but the harrowing repression continued in less obvious forms until Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, after which a quiet coup overturned and arrested the so-called “Gang of Four” (which included Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife and the provocateur behind much of the Cultural Revolution’s initial strategies and eventual excesses).

Unlike America, where many of us remember the ‘60s with great affection and nostalgia for the exhilarating freedom to experiment with life, almost no one alive today in China who suffered through the Cultural Revolution regards that time without deep emotions of tragedy laced with shuddering horror.

Why was China’s youth upheaval so much more extreme than America’s? What does the Cultural Revolution teach us about the Uranus-Pluto cycle and the coming next phase of that cycle in 2008-2015? And, most important, is this the legacy of chaos to which we must look forward with anxiety?

The answer to the last question is a qualified “no.” That’s not to suggest that everything will be sweetness and light—far from it—but we are not doomed, either. What is coming will *look* quite different from either the American or Chinese experience of the 1960s, and yet what happens will *feel* connected to both. The reasons for that, as well as possible answers to the other questions posed above, will be addressed next month in Part Two of this essay.



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