

Editorial

Thirty years ago on May 16, 1966, the Communist Party, bowing to Chairman Mao's wishes, launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This cataclysmic episode in China's recent history has, in retrospect, been called "a mistake," and "the 10 year catastrophe". And yet, the 30th anniversary commemorating this strange and terrible interlude has passed without comment or commemoration. A cloud of silence still prevails. There has been no media coverage, no seminars, no conferences, no books or pamphlets, nor documentation that might allow for some analysis that would shed light on how and why this bizarre event happened in the first place.

In 1966, thirteen million young fanatic red guards dispersed throughout the country on an ideological crusade to wipe out the "four olds": ideology, thought, habits and customs. They began an unprecedented reign of terror that would last until 1976. They virtually shut down the country, leaving it without churches, schools or factories. They looted China's shrines and museums destroying national treasures; they ransacked libraries and burned irreplaceable books. Intellectuals and religious leaders were singled out for special humiliation, persecution and torture. They were forcibly taken from their families and friends and sent to languish in prisons, or work camps, labouring without rest in jobs for which their background and training had not conditioned them. Tens of thousands of innocent men and women perished as a result.

It seemed at the time that the nation had embarked on a determination to destroy every vestige of its own history. Fortunately, the madness stopped short of completing its task and a magnificent heritage of 5,000 years was saved from total eradication.

Is it any wonder given these facts that China's government would prefer to forget this episode from its recent past and hope against hope that its citizens would follow suit? But surely it is not unreasonable to raise the question of whether it is wise for a people to bury the past without first coming to terms with it? Is it not better to confront and struggle to understand the dynamics of events before consigning them to the dust-bin of history? Nor can Mao Zedong be

asked to shoulder all the blame for the decade of disaster. There was enough harm done and pain inflicted to hold others responsible as well. Or is it such a painful wound to the collective psyche that it cannot be faced up to, but must be erased from all human memory? Is it too much to ask that people ponder the incredible length, breadth and depth of human folly men and women, swept up in the madness of events, are capable of?

Or are there more pragmatic reasons for the silence?

As China's doors daily open wider to the outside world, the government has made it perfectly clear that its overriding concern and top priority is guarding its national stability. It cannot and will not allow anything in that might adversely affect present national pride and social unity. Nor does it wish to disclose to the outside world its vulnerability or the inevitable cracks in its Party structures.

Furthermore, where have those fanatical red guards of yesteryear gone? Reliable sources indicate that even the most dedicated proletarian revolutionaries of the past have now "taken the plunge" along with the rest of China, into the capitalistic sea of private enterprise. We are told further, that they are doing very well indeed!

Aside from a handful of psychologists and academics, the past is past. Most prefer to lay it to rest. The youth of today are not yesterday's red guards; they have no memory of the Cultural Revolution. Today, yesterday's red guards are middle aged, married, and with families to support. They prefer not to talk about it. As for the government, Mao is no longer a factor and officialdom would like to put this phase of the past behind them. They also make sure that the young do not study about it in school. The Cultural Revolution is an item that gets very little ink in official textbooks. It is not surprising then that the subject elicits very little interest from the young. Those who suffered, those who participated and those born after, all say the same thing: "Let us forget the past and launch with full confidence into the future." Fine words, but is it possible? Every nation must exorcise itself from the demons of its past. History cannot be written off so easily, but must be confronted and dealt with with courage and clarity. If it is suppressed, will it not surface again in even more menacing and seductive forms, rising like ghosts from the past to haunt the present and the future? (BAM)