

The Discovery of Chairman Mao in Finland in the 1960s.

In Finland, the Chinese leader Mao Zedong and his thoughts were discovered in the 1960s by a very small group of Maoists. For the majority of the Finns, Chairman Mao and his Cultural Revolution remained a strange, or even a mystical phenomenon. However, this was the second time that Mao and Socialist China were discovered in Finland – the first wave of awareness had taken place in the 1950s.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Finnish political left was eager to make contact with the "new China". The official state-level and unofficial NGO-level contacts with China were very active during the first decade. Finland established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China as early as 1950. The Finland-China Society was founded to promote friendship and disseminate information about China in Finland. The Finnish Communist Party, SKP, created its own party-level contacts with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As early as 1953, the Finnish SKP decided to send students to China, and Ville Pessi, Secretary General of the Finnish Communist Party, participated in the CCP convention of 1956. From 1953 onwards, China started sending groups of young people to study Finnish in Finland, financed through grants conferred by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

The contacts established during the early days of the People's Republic were ignored once the ideological split between China and the Soviet Union became public knowledge during the era of Secretary General Nikita Khrushchov's leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). In particular, after the open correspondence which started in 1963 between the CCP and the CPSU, all contact with China was actively suppressed, especially within the Finnish Communist Party SKP. The official Finnish line was to have "nearby friends (the Soviet Union) and remote enemies (China)". The inter-governmental relationships were reduced to a minimum so as would not cause China to lose her face. In other words, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs acted silently behind the curtains, without making any particular noise about its change of policy. Similarly, the SKP did not even conduct an internal debate about the China problem, which created a sense of uncertainty among the Finnish Communists who did not know how to react to the Chinese statements, which were occasionally quite harsh. The leading status of the CPSU within the international Communist movement remained a premise for the SKP. The

allegiance to the CPSU was explained by the fact that the Soviet Union was the land of the October Revolution and Lenin, and it had the longest experience in the construction of Socialism. However, there were China enthusiasts and people interested in the Chinese ideology, even within the SKP. Some were more interested in the old Chinese culture, others preferred Chinese Communism as an ideological alternative.

Young Finns became interested in China in a totally new manner in the early 1960s, prior to the Cultural Revolution. This interest was stimulated by the ideologies that had spread to Finland mainly from Scandinavia and the Anglo-Saxon countries – the pacifist peace movement, concern for the so-called Third World, and Neo-Leftist thinking. During the *first wave* of the new interest in China, prior to the Cultural Revolution, China was mainly seen as a model of alternative development for the developing countries in the Third World. The interest in China was further enhanced by the Vietnam War, after the US had extended the war into North Vietnamese territory in February 1965. The young ideologists of the small Socialist Party, Neo-Leftist and Third-World oriented Pentti Järvinen and Tauno-Olavi Huotari, were the organisers of the Vietnam demonstrations right from the beginning. When the Pacifist peace movement divided in 1966 into the radical “marchers” and the “researchers” insisting on Pacifism, Huotari and Järvinen aligned themselves with the marchers.

As in other western countries, the *second wave* of the new enthusiasm for China in Finland was inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in the autumn of 1965, and the turmoil of the summer of 1966 made China, and the respective ideologies, the major news topic of that time. Tauno-Olavi Huotari was not interested in Communism in its CPSU form, but he was a Neo-Leftist interested in the development of Marxist ideology and in the “third road” of Socialism between Communism and Social Democracy. Similarly to the Continental European Neo-Leftists, he was now looking to China and Cuba for ideological inspiration. By the autumn of 1967, he was seriously interested in the thinking of Chairman Mao, and so he joined Helsingin Marxilais-Leniniläinen Seura (Helsinki Marxist-Leninist Society), the Maoist discussion group of a few Helsinki-based youngsters.

The discussion group was the first Finnish Maoist group founded in 1967 by Matti Puolakka, the son of a Communist family in Helsinki. For the first couple of years, the society was merely a “club” of a few China-enthusiasts. In autumn 1967, Tauno-Olavi Huotari took over the presidency of the club when Puolakka left Helsinki for military service. However, Puolakka continued to spread the ideas of Chairman Mao, and by that autumn the club published the first Finnish edition of a Chinese booklet on the Chinese stance on Khrushchev’s revisionist heresies. The famous “Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong”, or Mao’s Little Red Book, was published in December 1967, probably funded by the Chinese Embassy.

Another young man Jarmo Lavila, a Tampere student who had been raised in a bourgeois home, also started to take an independent and private interest in the thoughts of Mao. In Lavila’s own words, in the summer of 1967 he had

understood that “violence is sometimes inevitable, necessary, recommendable and even blessed”.. What he referred to was a genuinely Maoist violent revolution which, according to the thinking of Mao, was indispensable in order to liberate the peoples of the world from the capitalist and imperialist exploitation system. As is well known, Chairman Mao had said that power grows out of the barrel of a gun. In other words, a non-violent revolution was virtually impossible, even though the CPSU, Khrushchev and other revisionists maintained otherwise. The troika formed by Huotari, Puolakka and Lavila became thus the ideologists and leaders of the Finnish Maoist movement.

On August 8, the Central Committee of the CCP adopted a circular with 16 items, constituting the Maoist instructions for the Cultural Revolution. These instructions also became well known in the western world. However, on August 12, the Central Committee issued another Communiqué, this time on foreign policy, in which the CCP made a very strong verbal attack on the Soviet leadership and its ideological outline. The western world paid very little attention to the Communiqué but Moscow read it with a magnifying glass. The Moscow reaction was further boosted by Chairman Mao receiving the young red guards in a massive demonstration in the Tianamen Square in Beijing, the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution sweeping over the Chinese cities. On the basis of the Communiqué and the raging red guards, the CPSU and its sister parties declared: “What is going on in China is not culture, nor revolution but vandalism.” This was also the stand of the Finnish SKP.

The many passionate characteristics of the Cultural Revolution, the idolisation of Chairman Mao and the violence inspired confused feelings in the west. Only very few people were able to go to China, and verification of the information about China was impossible: the search for information was almost entirely dependent on the pro-Mao people, i.e., on Maoist propaganda. Anti-Mao and anti-Maoist information was scarce, and was of dubious reliability. In rough terms, it can be maintained that that the western image of the Cultural Revolution in China became established in the autumn of 1966, and that image continued to live on, although the situation in China itself was constantly changing.

In this situation, three Helsinki-based journalists, who had visited China in 1966, were given the role of “China experts”. Yet two of them had been in China earlier in the spring, i.e., before the Cultural Revolution, while only one among them – Jaakko Okker – had witnessed the launch of the Cultural Revolution with his own eyes in June 1966. The three journalists shared their views in the press, radio and TV. Their China-related journalism was mainly characterised by a Third-World orientation – they were interested in the development potential of the Third World.

Among the very first to comment on the Cultural Revolution was the right-wing writer Yrjö Kivimies. In his writing he expressed the warning that the Chinese Cultural Revolution would make the youth “catch anarchy”, or the model for revolutionary action. Also a columnist Seppo Nummi, a composer and critic, described in a well-informed manner how the Cultural Revolution

had destroyed traditional Chinese opera. He was also the first to tell in Finland about the pianist Liu Shikun who had been ruthlessly battered by the red guards. According to the Nummi's information – information that was proven incorrect much later in the 1970s – the red guards had crushed Liu Shikun's fingers which had driven him to suicide. Nummi had obtained this information from his Soviet musician friends, but the news about Liu Shikun's fate also arrived through the west: Ma Sicong, the Director of the Beijing Central conservatory, talked about these issues after he had defected from China to the US in autumn 1966. Thanks to Seppo Nummi, Liu Shikun's case inspired a debate in the Finnish press about the true character of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Another debate started when a group of upper secondary school students from Rauma gave a China cabaret performance in their theatre. The message of the students was that the information disseminated from China could not be trusted; some of their teachers became scared by the political content and prohibited the students from rehearsing a “Maoist” play on the school premises. In reality, not one of these students was a Maoist. The issue of the unreliability and one-sidedness of the information from China was also raised by the Helsinki-based student paper *Ylioppilaslehti* in its special China edition published in late 1966. The paper published a number of very provocative texts which it had obtained from the Chinese Embassy which gave the Soviet Embassy reason to accuse the special edition of an anti-Soviet “hostile act”. However, the incident was a private one between the editor-in-chief and the Soviet Embassy, it was never made public.

In addition to the Vietnam war, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was a crucial phenomenon which radicalised the opinions of the youth. The third opinion-maker was the Cuban revolutionary hero Che Guevara who died in the autumn of 1967 “in a battle somewhere in the South American jungle”. Che Guevara's appeal to form “one, two, many Vietnams” in the world became well-known in Finland once his article was posthumously translated into Finnish. It is probably the Vietnam war, combined with Che's appeal, that inspired a vigorous debate in the spring of 1968 among the Finnish peace movement and radical students concerning the legitimacy of violence in the Third World's fight for freedom.

By the time of the violence debate in January 1968, the ideological development of Tauno-Olavi Huotari, one of the peace movement marchers, had resulted in the insight that the Vietnam war had radically changed the views of the state of the world among the peace movement. In the beginning, the peace movement had agreed with Moscow and the CPSU that the main problem faced with world development was the contrast between capitalism and socialism. In Huotari's mind the current view was that of Beijing and the CCP, according to which the major global conflicts were caused by the contrast between the industrial world and the developing countries. Even more direct than Huotari, Lars D. Eriksson pointed out that the Chinese were right and the Soviets were wrong in their analysis of the world situation. Eriksson wrote that the Chinese analysis was currently materialising as the “world rural areas”, i.e., the Third World countries, were already encircling the “world cities”, i.e., the

imperialism represented by the US. This was most evident in the Vietnam war which, according to the expression used by China and the Maoists, was the “centre of the struggle” of the peoples of the world.

Johan von Bonsdorff, a radical Third-World oriented, Neo-Leftist journalist, suggested that a “second front” would be needed inside Finland to support the fight of the Vietnamese people. His proposal led to the establishment of Finland’s first FNL group in March 1968 in Helsinki to conduct solidarity work for Vietnam. The model for the FNL groups came from the Swedish Maoists who were in charge of the Vietnam solidarity work in their country. The Swedish Vietnam movement was not only very active but it also enjoyed the support of the Swedes. The ideas of the Finnish Vietnam demonstration organisers, Tauno-Olavi Huotari and Pentti Järvinen, also came from the Swedish Maoists. Evidently, they felt that the FNL group was competing with their own Vietnam work, and as a result their work assumed increasingly radical features in the spring of 1968.

Pentti Järvinen never became a Maoist, but in the Vietnam demonstration organised in Helsinki in May 1968, he drew very radical conclusion about the objectives of the demonstrations, conclusions which he shared with the Swedish Maoists and Che Guevara. According to Järvinen, the task of the Vietnam movement was to develop a counter strategy for Finland “for the circumstances in which we need to fight for FNL.” In this demonstration, the Helsinki Maoists and anarchists marched for the first time as a small group of their own, with their own banners and posters of Chairman Mao. After the actual demonstration, the Maoists and the anarchists – also for the first time – launched their own “demonstration” in the streets of Helsinki, making demands for a red Helsinki and a socialist Finland. The moderate members of the FNL group considered that the action of the Maoists and the anarchists was nothing but rampage, in which they had their own agenda which was not that of Vietnam.

The rough action of the Helsinki-based youth and the contemporary events in Paris in May contributed to an extensive debate which was conducted in the summer of 1968 on the necessity of demonstrations. One factor to inspire this debate was the invitation by Professor Antti Eskola of the Tampere University to use all the means of anarchism to fight the prevailing bourgeois hegemony. The debate was further boosted by the speech by Prime Minister Mauno Koivisto in which he warned against the spread of anarchism in Finland on the lines of the examples of Paris. On the day prior to Koivisto’s address, the first demonstration among a series of corresponding events organised in the summer of 1968 at the foot of the Runeberg memorial had been arranged in Helsinki. The well-planned demonstrations continued throughout that summer. Initially, Vietnam was the leading theme, and they involved all the radical groups ranging from Social Democrats to anarchists. Pentti Järvinen was again involved in the organisation of these events. July 4 constituted a turning point as one of the Maoists burned the US flag in the Vietnam demonstration, inspiring the condemnation of even the moderate Communists. As the summer progressed, the themes of the Red Saturdays became increasingly radical, and finally they

were taken over by the anarchists and Maoists. The last Red Saturday of that summer should have been arranged in late August but it was cancelled due to the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

That summer's demonstrations had taught the Finnish youth to express their opinion in a new way in the streets. On three successive days after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the young radicals demonstrated against the occupation in front of the Soviet Embassy. The Maoists were represented by a group of their own who distributed flyers which were openly critical of the Soviet Union's action. Some of the young people who had been enthusiastically involved in the action of the Maoists earlier that summer were now insecure: a youth named Jaakko Laakso mainly just stood there, and soon after the events in Czechoslovakia he joined the ranks of the Stalinists of the SKP. In the analysis of the Stalinist wing, the situation was crystal clear: the Soviet Union defended the cause of Socialism in Czechoslovakia, and anyone holding any other view was an anti-Soviet traitor to the cause, which included, in the Stalinists' view, the moderate majority of the Party, who had condemned the occupation. Naturally, the followers of the Chinese ideology were also traitors since China had condemned the occupation.

The occupation of Czechoslovakia was a great turning point which forced Finns of every social background to take a stand on ideological issues. After the occupation, the common Finnish view was that the young were more interested in the Cuban and Chinese model of Socialism, rather than that of the Soviet Union. This analysis was totally incorrect, as shown by the rise of the Stalinist youth and culture movement of the 1970s. However, the situation in the autumn of 1968 seemed completely different. Thus the post-occupation situation saw the Finnish Maoists organising their ranks in a determined manner. Under the leadership of Puolakka in Helsinki and Lavila in Tampere, they established study groups on "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought", Mao's philosophy and political ideology. They were active debaters wherever a discussion was about Marxism and the Finnish transition to Socialism. In the autumn of 1968, they established the first Maoist paper in Helsinki, and rented premises for the meeting of their study groups. In March 1969, the Helsinki Maoist "club" was founded as a real society, and on the initiative of Matti Puolakka, they also founded a real offset printed paper called Punakaarti (Red Guard). The summer of 1969 also saw the establishment of Maoist operative and study groups in Turku and Rauma.

The future of Maoism seemed very bright at that moment, since Mao's ideology appeared to offer a feasible ideological alternative. The favourable wind enjoyed by the ideology was further boosted by the international Mao fashion of 1968–1969, a way for the young radicals to irritate the bourgeois circles also in Finland. The fashion consisted in a superficial behaviour of waving Mao's Little Red Book or wearing Mao badges, while the number of those profoundly interested in the Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong school of thought were extremely few. Even they knew Mao's thoughts only at a theoretical level, on the basis of Maoist literature and western Maoist theoretical

writing. No Finnish Maoist had yet visited China nor seen how Maoist ideology was practically implemented in China. They were even more suspicious of the reports on the horrors of the Chinese Cultural Revolution published in the papers than the other leftist.

The attitude of the Finns vis-à-vis the news arriving from China during the Cultural Revolution was clearly bipolar. The right-wing people believed even the most incredible stories, while the Left were generally suspicious of the credibility of the news. Certain right-wing columnists expressed their concern for the fact that the youth was admiring the raging of the Chinese red guards and the Cultural Revolution. The columnists used the term “Maoist” very liberally, referring to any extreme left movements from the Trotskyists to Stalinists, and from anarchists to Maoists. From the perspective of the Right, they were just one and the same group with the objective of launching a Communist revolution. It can be thus maintained that the Right spoke about “Maoists” as they lacked a word for the young extreme radicals. Similarly, in the terminology of the Right of the 1970s, the term “Maoist” was replaced by “Taistoist”, a denomination of the extreme left given after Taisto Sinisalo, the leader of the SKP Stalinist wing.

Very few of the “Maoists” of the late 1960s were thus genuine Maoists, true supporters of the Maoist ideology, such as Huotari, Puolakka and Lavila. The Maoists were aware of the narrowness of their support base, but they believed that support would increase through historical inevitability. In their minds, the SKP had become a revisionist party, with only a nominal Communist quality to it. The objective they set was the foundation of a new, ideologically pure Communist party, but its time had not yet come. In the societal situation of the turn of the decade, the Maoists considered that their major task was to disseminate the ideology and to prepare the ground for the imminent revolution. Among other actions, they systematically took over vital organisations, such as the Finland-China Friendship Society in May 1970.

The Finnish SKP had followed the spreading of Maoist thinking with concern. Following the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Stalinists in the Party declared that the two major criteria for Communist orthodoxy were the attitudes towards the “events” in Czechoslovakia and towards the teachings of Mao. The threat of China was revealed to the Communists in a new manner in the spring of 1969, in the shape of the Ussur conflict on the Soviet-Chinese border in the Far East. Now even the moderate Communists considered that the Maoist outlook was horrible: according to information obtained from the Soviet Union and from the US, China was planning a nuclear war against the Soviet Union. China, in turn, was afraid of the Soviet Union planning a disciplinary campaign against China in much the same manner as it had in Czechoslovakia. Most of all, however, China was afraid of the Soviet Union and the US launching a joint war fought with nuclear weapons. Immediately after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, China had evidently started to prepare a rapprochement to the US in order to fight the threat of the Soviet Union, but there was really no contemporary information about the change of policy of China.

The fight between the Stalinists and Maoists for the souls of the Finnish youth had started soon after the occupation. In the autumn of 1969, the Helsinki Maoists quietly expelled some of the members who had adopted Stalinist ideas. Among the SKP Stalinists, the ex-Maoist Jaakko Laakso was efficiently leading the defence against the Maoist danger. As early as the summer of 1970, the Helsinki Communist bookshop and the national youth federation were – under the leadership of Laakso – purged of Maoists and at the same time of Pacifist and Neo-Leftist material. The fight between the two Marxist-Leninist groups had started, and the fight was extremely bitter. Mainly as a consequence of this fight, the Finnish Maoists found themselves marginalised in the 1970s.