On October 1, 1949, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chairman Mao Zedong stood atop Beijing’s Gate of Heavenly Peace and proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Mao’s declaration culminated more than two decades of Communist struggle against the rival Nationalist (Kuomintang/ KMT) Party and the Japanese. It also contained great symbolic meaning, for the CCP had succeeded in uniting China after decades of internal disarray and Western and Japanese imperialism. Yet the divergent visions and goals of CCP leaders eventually led to a different kind of disarray and, finally, a retreat from the extremist revolutionary vision of radicals such as Mao.

In the first years of Communist rule, the CCP focused on consolidating its power and bringing the revolution to each village and region. Communist cadres won the loyalty of millions of peasants with their relative incorruptibility, land reform practices and dedication to reconstruction and universal education. Under peacetime CCP rule, agricultural production increased and poverty fell for the first time since the anti-Japanese war. Yet, by the mid-1950s, slowing growth and political fervor spurred the CCP leadership to embrace deeply flawed economic policies in an effort to modernize China more quickly.

These policies, together with Mao Zedong’s leftist radicalism, undid many of the PRC’s early achievements. In 1958, the CCP launched its Great Leap Forward, a disastrous campaign to expand grain production and to catch up to British and American steel production capabilities at the same time. By setting incredibly unrealistic farm quotas and wasting food and labor, Party leaders managed to create a huge man-made famine that killed about thirty million people. After the Great Leap, the CCP returned to more moderate economic policies under the leadership of Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun, while Mao Zedong played a less visible role than previously.

Increasingly disturbed over the path these leaders were taking, Mao and his allies in 1965 used an initially obscure literary and historical debate to urge cultural revolution and eventually to purge the Party inner circles of Liu and other moderates. During this period, millions of young people and workers answered Mao’s call to struggle against ‘rightists’ in the Party. These ‘Red Guards’ plunged the nation into chaos as they fought bloody battles. Only army intervention stopped these clashes, after which radical leaders sent thousands of students, intellectuals and CCP members to remote rural areas to learn from the peasants. Although the worst disorder of the Cultural Revolution was over by 1969, radical party members remained influential until Mao’s death in 1976.

Soon after Mao died, former leaders and generals whose claims to legitimacy lay in their participation in the revolution and the Long March pushed the radicals out of power and jailed the Gang of Four. With the support of this old guard, Deng Xiaoping emerged as China’s paramount leader and began working to reverse the effects of years of chaos and economic mismanagement. He and his allies shifted China’s production focus to light industry, encouraged small business and agricultural sideline production and redistributed commune land to individual peasants to farm on their own. The Party also opened certain areas of South China to foreign investment. Such economic policies, which current president Hu Jintao followed and expanded upon, have succeeded in creating relative prosperity across much of China.

However, the CCP has proved much less interested in initiating political reform. During certain periods of post-Mao political ‘thaw’, notably 1978, 1986 and 1989, workers and students have called for democracy, the rule of law and an end to the official corruption that has accompanied rapid economic development. In each instance, the Party has eventually crushed these movements and the demonstrations they spawned.

Demographics and broad social trends in China suggest that larger structural and social changes must eventually occur, however. Greater wealth has created intellectual and cultural ferment in Chinese cities, with urban residents expressing their views more freely than in the past and using the Internet to communicate. Since the 1980s, millions of peasants have also flooded into Chinese cities hoping to take part in the economic boom. Such migrants are no longer under the tight supervision of village leaders in the way they once were. Economic openness and competition have also highlighted the weakness of state-run enterprises, former backbones of the industrial economy that have become costly liabilities with legions of pensioners and outdated, inefficient equipment and techniques. Shutting down such companies is risky, however, for like the migrants, the urban unemployed comprise a force with destabilizing potential.

Since the 1989 worker and student protests, the central government has accelerated economic reforms in an effort to use prosperity to counter such problems. In addition, the government-run school system has begun instilling students from an early age with an intense, sometimes xenophobic nationalism, a central tenet of which is the indispensability of the Chinese Communist Party to China itself.

Causes

Beginning in the 1830s, a series of domestic travails and Western colonialist incursions into China greatly weakened the ruling Qing dynasty. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged in 1921 as one of many responses to the chaos and warlordism into which China plunged after the 1911 Republican Revolution and the fall of the Qing. During the 1920s, the CCP worked both alone and with the Kuomintang (KMT) to organize villagers and urbanites in parts of South China. The two parties also collaborated during the 1927 Northern Expedition, during which KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek succeeded in uniting much of the country under Nationalist rule or sympathetic regional warlords. But after Chiang’s forces took Shanghai, they turned on their CCP allies and slaughtered and imprisoned thousands of Communists and suspected Communists. This ‘White Terror’ forced a shift in Communist tactics away from organizing in cities and toward rural revolution, a view that the young cadre Mao Zedong espoused. By 1934, relentless KMT attacks had greatly weakened the Communists and pinned them down in the rural southern base areas to which they had retreated in 1927. The remaining CCP forces succeeded in breaking out of these bases, commencing a costly, year-long ‘Long March’ to northwestern China.

By 1936, growing public anger about the large-scale Japanese invasion of China forced the KMT to shift its attention to this newest danger. The KMT and the CCP formed a fractious ‘United Front’ against the Japanese, with KMT forces continuing to fight the Communists at
different times. During this period, Mao Zedong consolidated his power and became the acknowledged leader of the CCP.

The Communists used the war period to rebuild their armies, recruit thousands of new members and gain increasing legitimacy among common Chinese as a patriotic force for national unity. In contrast, Nationalist reluctance to fight the Japanese, general corruption and economic incompetence angered many Chinese. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Communists used their new strength to push the increasingly unpopular and weak KMT out of China by 1949.

Effects
The Communist Party succeeded in uniting and strengthening China after almost one hundred years of weakness, disunity and quasi-colonial status. In the past twenty years, the PRC government has also raised the living standards of the majority of Chinese and helped China become a respected power in Asia and the world. At the same time, however, the disastrous economic mistakes and political machinations of CCP leaders left much of the population cynical about the Party and communism itself. The widespread official corruption of recent years has only compounded such sentiments.

Timeline

The Late Qing Era
The death of the Qianlong Emperor in 1799 signals the end of the ‘golden age’ of Qing dynasty rule, and internal and external problems plague the empire. The inadequacy of Chinese military forces and the technological superiority of industrialized Western nations become particularly apparent after several clashes with British and other foreign troops. In 1905, the ruling house initiates numerous reforms, including the creation of a Western-style army, the abolition of the old Confucian examination system for bureaucrats and the adoption of a constitution with provisions for a legislature. But the taxes the Qing dynasty levies for these reforms anger the populace, and the halting pace of change disturbs many reformers and elites. Many have been contemplating a future without imperial rule for at least a decade.

The Early Republican Period
Responding to Qing suppression of a nationalist revolutionary cell, troops mutiny in Wuhan on October 10, 1911. In the following weeks, more mutinies occur nationwide, culminating in the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. On December 29, delegates from sixteen provincial assemblies elect Sun Yat-sen provisional president of the new Republic of China. Yuan Shikai, chief military leader, rejects Sun’s claims to the presidency and assumes the office himself. Yuan names himself emperor in late 1915 but steps down just a few months later after nationwide protests over his move.

A series of corrupt, inefficient regimes and warlords fills the political vacuum in China. Japan lends money to those leaders internationally recognized as the legitimate government of China, laying the foundations for its subsequent claims to significant portions of Chinese territory. Both China and Japan enter World War I on the Allied side, with China sending thousands of laborers to Europe. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, Japan is awarded German concessions in China, based on international recognition of its sustained influence in China; students and intellectuals protest against the decision. The initial protest takes place on May 4 and sparks the May the Fourth Movement for political and cultural reform in China.

The 1920s
In 1920, Vladimir Lenin, leader of the new Communist regime in Russia, dispatches Comintern (Third or Communist International) agents to China. They approach Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, two leftist intellectuals involved in the May the Fourth Movement. Li, Chen, the agents and a small group of acquaintances meet to study Marxism, then recruit others. Chinese students in Europe, including Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, become involved with socialist groups. The next year, the first plenary meeting of the CCP secretly takes place in Shanghai. Delegates, including Mao Zedong, elect Chen Duxiu secretary-general.

Still small and weak, the CCP allies with the Kuomintang, and Comintern agents help Sun Yat-sen strengthen his position and reorganize the KMT. After Sun’s death in 1925, the more conservative Chiang Kai-shek assumes leadership of the KMT. Between 1925 and 1927, Chiang’s armies defeat a series of warlords and make alliances with others. After Chiang’s forces capture Shanghai in the spring of 1927, they turn on their Communist and labor union allies, jailing and killing thousands. The CCP members slip away to remote areas of Jiangxi, Hunan, Fujian, Anhui and Hebei and attempt to set up Communist bases there.

The 1930s
Chiang Kai-shek continues to fight the Communists throughout the early 1930s as the condition of the nation deteriorates. Japanese troops move into Manchuria in 1931 and exert influence over other areas of north China. The worldwide economic downturn affects the country, and government taxation and modernization policies create resentment and poverty. Official corruption is rife, despite Chiang’s inauguration of the New Life Movement, which stresses Confucian values and morality. Still, the KMT comes close to crushing the CCP’s main base in Jiangxi, forcing the Communists to undertake their legendary Long March in 1934. Chiang’s paramilitary supporters, modeling themselves on European fascists, target Chinese leftists in KMT-ruled areas of the country.

By 1935, Japanese incursions into North China become increasingly worrisome, but Chiang Kai-shek still focuses on exterminating the Communists. Patriotic students protest KMT policy in demonstrations across China. Late in 1936, Zhang Xueliang, the warlord in control of Xi’an, kidnaps Chiang Kai-shek and forces him to meet with
Communist leaders, Chiang finally agrees to fight the Japanese instead of the Communists.

1937-45: The War Years

After Japan invades China proper in 1937, the CCP and KMT maintain a United Front but frequently clash. The CCP creates a loyal following, redistributing income and land in areas it controls, rebuilding its military forces and fighting the Japanese. Communists gain a reputation for honesty and fairness in contrast to KMT officials, whose brutality shocks American allies. Near the end of the war, the American government considers co-operating with the CCP but gives up the idea after Chiang protests.

1945-49: The Renewed Civil War

Following the Japanese surrender, the CCP-KMT Civil War resumes, but the Communists now enjoy significant advantages. The Red Army has grown to one million men. The USSR allows the CCP to capture surrendered Japanese weapons and supplies in Manchuria. Although the American government supports the Nationalists, the United States grows increasingly disillusioned with the KMT, which suppresses dissent and supports ruthless landlord repossession of property in formerly Communist areas. Throughout KMT-ruled China, rampant inflation creates general misery. The Communists spend much of 1945 and 1946 transforming their guerrilla armies into a conventional fighting force—the People's Liberation Army—before launching attacks on the Nationalists late in 1946. The PLA moves steadily down from the north into the Chinese heartland, assisted by Communist agents in key cities and general dissatisfaction with the KMT. The CCP captures much of northern China in 1948 and takes the south in 1949.

The 1950s: The People's Republic of China

The Party redistributes the holdings of the wealthy (or unpopular) to the poor and landless. At least several hundred thousand 'class enemies' and 'counterrevolutionaries' die during this land reform. Party campaigns eliminate opium abuse and prostitution. With Soviet assistance, the Chinese rebuild, emphasizing the development of heavy industry.

In 1956, Mao delivers his famous Hundred Flowers speech inviting criticism of the Party but quickly re-leads as the mounting critiques anger other leaders. Party officials launch the Great Leap Forward in 1958 to spark China's economy (see fig. of a street market of the period) but create a famine, which lasts until 1961 and kills thirty million people. At the Lushan Plenum in 1959, Peng Dehuai privately criticizes Mao's Leap policies. Mao purges Peng and continues the Leap. Ideology pushes the Soviet Union and China further apart, resulting in a total split by 1960. China attempts to position itself as the champion of the so-called Third World, sending aid and technical advisors to Africa and to Asia; still, the PRC fights a border war with India in 1959 and puts down anti-Chinese protests in Tibet.

The 1960s

The Party backs away from Leap policies, shrinking communes and allowing small businesses to emerge. The economy slowly recovers under the management of Liu Shaoqi, Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping. By 1965, however, Mao becomes disgusted with these moderates, whom he considers counterrevolutionary 'rightists', and launches the Cultural Revolution to put China back on the 'correct' revolutionary path. Schools close as Red Guards and radicals attempt to make revolution. They fight each other and 'struggle' against 'rightists', including cadres, teachers and other authority figures, many of whom die from mistreatment.

The worst chaos of the Cultural Revolution ends by 1968 with bloody PLA intervention. Leftist radicals allied with Mao and Jiang Qing retain power, sending millions of students, cadres and young urbanites to the countryside to 'reform' through labor. Around the world, the Chinese media's highly sanitized version of the Cultural Revolution gains popularity with radicals, anti-colonial revolutionaries, intellectuals and many people of Chinese ancestry. Soviet troop buildups on China's northern border cause the PRC leadership great concern by the late 1960s.

The 1970s

Zhou Enlai makes overtures to the United States, and in 1972, President Richard M. Nixon visits China. Mao plays off leftists attempting to continue the Cultural Revolution against moderates hoping to reinstate order. By 1974, the leftists have purged Deng Xiaoping, but protests after Zhou Enlai's 1976 death reveal how intense popular discontent has become. After Mao's death that year, premier Hua Guofeng moves against the leftists.

Deng Xiaoping reemerges to push the more radical Hua out of power. Deng and his colleagues inaugurate reforms that gradually open the nation to foreign investment and break up communes. Although the CCP 'rebilitates' many Chinese punished between 1957 and 1976, most reforms are economic. When students and workers voice their discontent in the 1978-79 Democracy Wall movement, the government imprisons those who call for greater political openness.

In 1979, Deng visits the United States and normalizes relations (see fig.). Protesting Vietnam's growing willfulness and persecution of ethnic Chinese, PRC troops fight a brief war there. The Vietnamese prevail, revealing China's need for military modernization. Like the United States, China backs the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia because of its opposition to Vietnam.

The 1980s

In the early 1980s, the effects of market reforms and land privatization become apparent. Some farmers with ready markets grow wealthy selling cash crops. Others in poorer areas fare less well, and many cadres and peasants resist the retreat from the revolution. Surplus agricultural laborers and the urban unemployed set up small shops. Numerous Chinese citizens are able to purchase television sets, washing machines and similar luxury goods. Although the leadership continues to push market reforms, they simultaneously initiate 'anti-spiritual pollution' campaigns to counter the influences of wealth and Western culture. The central government also institutes a rigorously enforced one-child policy to keep population growth in check.

In 1986, students in Anhui protest against the undemocratic nature of Party-controlled 'elections'. A national student protest emerges, but authorities suppress it in early 1987. Deng Xiaoping blames the Party's reform-minded secretary-general, Hu Yaobang, for the unrest and purges him. When Hu dies in April 1989, thousands of students march to Tiananmen Square in Beijing to lay wreaths in his memory, protesting Party corruption and the lack of democracy in China. Around the nation, workers, students and others join the widening protest movement. As demonstrators call for the resignation of Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng, the central leadership criticizes the protesters. They also purge Party Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang, who is openly sympathetic to the demonstrators (and a potential Deng rival). On June 4, 1989, PLA troops move on Tiananmen Square and surrounding areas, crushing the protests and killing an unknown number of people. Protesters flee overseas or go underground as the police crack down on dissenters. Numerous nations criticize China's move and impose sanctions.

1990-Present

The early 1990s are a period of slowed growth and reduced foreign investment and interest, due to the crackdown and the ensuing conservative resurgence in China. But the economy takes off after Deng Xiaoping visits Shanghai and declares support for market reforms there. The economy continues to boom throughout the 1990s. The United States and other Western nations run trade deficits with China, which relies on low-cost labor to make...
its exports attractive. Although hard-line leaders such as Li Peng retain influence, the relatively moderate Jiang Zemin becomes China’s leader upon Deng’s death in 1997.

Huge pro-democracy movements now seem a thing of the past. The government has instituted a system of limited local elections but maintains strict control over the entire process and its results. As China’s economy becomes increasingly market-driven, much of the population focuses its energies on getting rich—including the recently released leaders of the 1989 protests. With Communist Party ideology increasingly diluted, millions of Chinese replace their belief in communism with devotion to folk religions and Christianity. Others worship money.

As in the 1980s, Party cadres at all levels get rich faster than ordinary citizens, due in large part to their power, influence and susceptibility to corruption. A 1993 study of Anhui Province reports that 300,000 cadres—or twenty per cent of all officials in the province—are involved in corruption. Throughout the 1990s, the Party institutes anti-corruption campaigns and executes thousands of people found guilty. But leaders in Beijing find imposing their will on provincial authorities—many of them enmeshed in networks of corruption—increasingly difficult. Top officials’ children and relatives are involved in corruption, which is particularly embarrassing. Evidence emerges as well that the PLA is running numerous profitable businesses, some of them illegal, throughout the country.

After 1989, the Party harnesses potent nationalism to divert attention away from the continued lack of democracy and growing official corruption in China. The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 sparks celebrations across the nation. But nationalism turns violent in 1999, after NATO missiles hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Chinese students take to the streets of Beijing and attack the American embassy with the tacit assistance of the police and the authorities. Taiwan remains a major issue as well; with Taiwanese officials expressing decreased interest in reunification with the mainland, Chinese leaders become more threatening in their rhetoric, even as they welcome greater Taiwanese investment in the PRC.

Leadership Struggles

Like Mao, most of the PRC’s early leaders joined the Chinese Communist Party as young men in the 1920s and rose to central leadership positions during the 1930s. Particularly legendary were those who took part in the epic Long March, including Mao, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai and Peng Dehuai, as well as those who fought the Japanese from Yan’an. After 1949, this generation ruled jointly, but Mao remained first among equals, the final authority on all decisions, and the symbol of Party power and strength. Though scholars continue to debate Mao’s behavior during this time, Frederick C. Teiwes has argued convincingly that while Mao exercised his authority with relative restraint during the first years of the PRC, he also grew increasingly less concerned about creating consensus. The unifying threat of the KMT armies was now gone, and Mao’s assumption of the trappings and responsibilities of power left him less accessible to other leaders than he had been in the Yan’an period (Teiwes 13).

Splits in the Party leadership became apparent by 1958, after Mao and other leaders endorsed the Great Leap Forward. The will is more significant than economic policy it was a tremendous failure. Increasingly noticeable by 1959, Lushan Plenum to rectify general Peng, the Great Leap reflected Mao’s belief that human forces in creating social change, but as a Leap-related problems growing. Party leaders convened the Leap policies. After general Peng Dehuai criticized Mao’s decision and denounced him ‘opportunists.’ Mao backed away from the policies of the Great Leap would do in similar fifteen years, he turned to within the Party in an effort to promote reintegration. By 1959, Mao had stepped down from his post as head of state, a position Liu Shaoqi assumed. During the early 1960s, Mao left much of the daily work of running the nation to economic pragmatists such as Liu, Chen Yun and others. At the same time, however, Lin Biao moved the People’s Liberation Army in a more political direction, instituting the study of Mao Zedong Thought among the ranks and cementing the growing cult of Mao.

By 1965, Mao had become increasingly frustrated with the direction of the Party, which he saw descending into economic and political revisionism along Soviet lines. In a shrewed gambit, he criticized in an article a historical play that he claimed painted him as a despot imperial figure. The debate that ensued in print later resulted in Mao, his wife Jiang Qing and their allies denouncing leading intellectuals, Party members and finally Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Mao moved to isolate Liu and to purge several other leaders from their positions, after which Zhou Enlai proclaimed the commencement of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Mao’s allies then encouraged radical students to engage in this revolution and denounce ‘revisionist’ Party members.
Although many left-leaning Western intellectuals at that time romanticized the Cultural Revolution, most scholars now see it as a multifaceted struggle involving connected struggles between leadership factions and larger social classes. Initially, the sons and daughters of Party officials and members of other ‘red’ classes answered the Maoists’ calls, forming so-called Red Guard units. While these groups violently attacked the old ‘class enemies’ and sometimes killed them, moderate leaders attempted to contain the growth of the Cultural Revolution movement. Mao resisted this by intensifying his criticism of his rivals and by calling for a wider Cultural Revolution. In doing so, the Chairman capitalized on the class resentments he helped provoke almost two decades earlier; soon, members of the ‘bad classes’ organized their own Red Guard units to struggle against the ‘conservative’ Red Guards.

As Hong Yung Lee has shown, the battles that took place within mass organizations and between Red Guard factions reflected those of Mao, his allies and their elite opponents, all of whom manipulated segments of the population as they struggled for power. At the same time, however, the outcome of citizens’ conflicts influenced the moves Mao and others made as they jockeyed for position (Lee 2-3). Eventually, the armed forces intervened to stop the widespread violence that caused, directly and indirectly, hundreds of thousands of deaths, including those of Liu Shaoqi and other disgraced leaders.

In his last years, Mao grew increasingly suspicious of his subordinates, such as Lin Biao, and eventually chose an unknown provincial official, Hua Guofeng, to succeed him. Although Hua remained premier for a few years after Mao’s death, the Long March generation, particularly the most respected elder generals and cadres, threw their weight behind Deng Xiaoping.

Deng refused to cultivate a personality cult the way that Mao had, but he and other leaders grappled uneasily with the problem of maintaining Party power while rejecting the many purges, campaigns and excesses that had marked CCP rule since 1949. While promoting economic liberalization and rejecting the worst policies of the past, Deng and other leaders resisted any attempts at democratization. Much of the Long March generation, dedicated to Party control and remembering the chaotic China of their youth, supported the 1989 PLA crackdown against the workers and students at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The few leaders, such as Zhao Ziyang, who evinced sympathy for the protesters found themselves purged and sometimes jailed.

The post-Deng leadership consists of proponents of the crackdown, such as Li Peng; political ciphers initially promoted for their loyalty to Deng, including President Jiang Zemin; and technocrats like Hu Yaobang and Zhu Rongji. These men, like the Party itself, remain committed to preserving CCP authority in the midst of rapid economic change and the social disruption that change has created.

**Bureaucracy and Class**

The tremendous size of China’s population has always presented a challenge to those who would lead the country. In the nineteenth century, a static number of officials governed a rapidly growing population, leading to conditions that helped weaken the Qing dynasty’s grip on power. Provincial and central attempts to extract taxes during the 1920s and 1930s led to corruption and to widespread disillusionment with KMT government among village leaders and prominent citizens (Duara 249-51). When the Communists came to power, their authority reached much further than had that of any previous regime. The Qing emperors and the Kuomintang had largely relied on elites and then local strongmen to collect taxes and impose authority below the county or district level; Communist control, on the other hand, penetrated right down into villages and urban neighborhoods, where cadres translated the Party line into action.

In the cities, the CCP in 1949 initially retained many pre-PRC officials and much of the economic infrastructure in an attempt to preserve order during the transition to Communist rule. However, in a series of campaigns beginning in 1951, the Party worked to purge potentially disloyal from the urban scene. Initially attacking ‘counterrevolutionaries’, the Party eventually moved to increase its influence over workers and to decimate the ranks of the businesspeople and capitalists who had remained in China after 1949.

As it extended its control over the cities and the countryside, the Party began to define Chinese citizens by their supposed ‘class backgrounds’, dividing them into poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, landlords, capitalists and other similar categories. Although such labeling often correlated with reality, many Chinese ‘capitalists’ were almost as poor as their workers and numerous villages contained no real landlords. Since class struggle helped ignite pro-Party fervor, the CCP pursued its labeling campaign in spite of the relative lack of classes in many areas. In the process, cadres and the ‘masses’ often targeted unpopular residents distrusted for reasons other than their wealth, including Christians, former KMT members and Japanese collaborators (Huang 114-18).

Whether ‘rich peasants’, ‘landlords’ and ‘capitalists’ or not, these newly minted ‘class enemies’ found themselves and their children permanently labeled. Despite the fact that many top leaders, including Mao, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, were themselves the children of intellectuals or ‘rich peasants’, Party leaders paraded out class enemies during each new political movement, from the Anti-Rightist Campaign to the Cultural Revolution. These ‘enemies’ had no recourse and suffered not just humiliation, but sometimes physical harm. Party youth organizations refused to admit their children, who then had little or no access to higher education, certain jobs and decent land.

The Party selected cadres in large part because of their class background, a system that favored former poor peasants and laborers in the countryside. But replacing the ruling elite in the villages and at other levels simply created new power structures. Because the Party eventually consolidated landholdings into collective farms and combined households into production teams, team leaders wielded significant power in rationing resources, from scarce clothing and bicycles to work points. Brigade heads, who oversaw groups of production teams, also enjoyed significant power and influence over the peasants (Oi 6-9).
The role of these cadres as a critical link between the central government and the peasantry placed them under significant pressure, however. In short, the penetration the Communist government had achieved compromised the protective function of the administrative structure that pre-1949 regimes had created. Team, brigade and other local leaders provided harvest information to the central government, which then decided on the amount of surplus grain that belonged to the state. When politics intervened, reporting proved crucial, particularly as political activism became a crucial aspect of cadre performance. In the late 1950s, local and provincial cadres caught up in the frenzy of the early Great Leap Forward greatly over-reported grain production figures. Jean Oi has argued that such misinformation, which cadres initially provided to demonstrate the ‘red’ character of their production teams, led to the huge Great Leap Forward famine (91). As the famine progressed, however, local cadres also hid grain from the state as they attempted to feed their peasant team members. Even in less dire situations, team and brigade leaders often struggled to translate faulty central policies to skeptical peasants and to convey peasant resistance to higher-level officials.

Increasing economic liberalization since the late 1970s has lessened state penetration and, to some degree, the power of cadres over the lives of individuals. Peasants who migrate to cities escape the supervision of their work units, even as they lose some of the benefits—such as schooling for their children—that work unit registration brings. For their part, city officials mindful of the need for cheap labor often tolerate the presence of illegal migrants, sacrificing state control for economic development.

Still, the influence local officials continue to wield has led to rampant corruption and profiteering. Cadres have used their influence and connections to purchase state assets cheaply, to steal the proceeds of such sales and to extract bribes from businesspeople entering the private sector. To compensate for their own corruption, many have also levied excess fees on farmers, students and traders, whose attempts to protest against such policies have been silenced with police power. Given the degree of local and provincial corruption, the central government has encountered numerous difficulties in quashing illegal activities at the lower levels of the bureaucracy.

Chinese citizens have enjoyed a somewhat greater voice in their government than in the Mao era, however. Although direct elections for township People’s Congresses have taken place in China since the 1950s, for a long time the voters had no choice of candidates and no secret ballot. In 1979, the government introduced secret ballots and some competition for seats and has made county People’s Congresses directly elected as well (Jacobs 174). However, the majority of candidates are government-sponsored, often retired cadres or representatives of state organizations. Those elected to government office often find that the parallel Party bureaucracy continues to wield power and make all-important decisions. Official enthusiasm for elections and support of the campaign process also varies from place to place, reflecting the continued discomfort of many cadres with processes beyond their control. In any case, Chinese citizens still have no say in the selection of leaders above the county level.

**Intellectuals and the State**

On May 4, 1919, students at Beijing University and other new, Western-style schools in China protested against the signing of the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I. Although China and Japan had both participated in the conflict on the Allied side, the treaty gave Japan Germany’s old concessions in the northern part of China rather than returning them to the Chinese. The May the Fourth Movement, initially a patriotic response to this national humiliation, soon grew into literary and political movements intent on national salvation and cultural reform. As anthropologist Helen Siu has noted, ‘[T]hat awakening in thought brought with it a strong sense of mission, a deep commitment to society’ (2). While this commitment to cultural ‘enlightenment’ and political renewal has defined intellectual endeavors since that time, it has also created tensions between outspoken Chinese and the succession of governments that have ruled them during the twentieth century.

After the Japanese invasion, many intellectuals sought refuge with the Communists, the group most dedicated to fighting the Japanese armies. The intelligentsia in the northwest readily accepted the Communists’ call to embrace rural culture and to use it to remake themselves and promote the CCP cause among the peasantry (Judd 377). Yet the cosmopolitanism, individualism and Western orientation of many of these intellectuals disturbed Party leaders, who advocated ‘national proletarian forms’ of art and literature (Cheek 28). Writers such as Wang Shiwei and Ding Ling called for intellectuals to serve as critics of the state and society, while Mao and other Party leaders saw their role as doing propaganda work and celebrating the Party and the masses (Cheek 30). During his famous ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature’ in 1942, Mao outlined this role and commenced his Rectification Campaign during which he and other leaders criticized and punished Wang, Ding and other writers and artists.

Although members of the intelligentsia fell into line, similar problems continued to beset the relationship between the Party and intellectuals after 1949. In the new class system the Communists created, the most ‘red’ groups were workers and poor peasants. Intellectuals, or ‘experts’, did have a place in this order—China’s desperate need for well-educated specialists to assist in its development ensured this—and thousands of Chinese intellectuals who had left the country during its years of chaos returned after 1949 to assist in rebuilding the nation. At the same time, intellectuals’ class backgrounds were now considered suspect; many had come from relatively prosperous bourgeois families with the resources to educate them, and others had attended universities in capitalist countries such as the United States. Party policies often isolated and demoralized intellectuals, who underwent intense indoctrination in Marxism and Maoist thought in the early years of the PRC. As politics shifted leftward, writers, artists and other ‘thought workers’ often became targets of criticism for past work. Those who veered too far from the Party line similarly faced punishment and found themselves ‘sent down’ to the countryside to learn from the peasants.

Different factions in the CCP debated the role of intellectuals during the 1950s, with several Party leaders, including Mao himself, advocating better treatment of citizens with suspect backgrounds in an attempt to
improve development and encourage Taiwan to seek reunification (Spence 567). In 1956, during a Party conference, Mao paraphrased a traditional saying when he called for 'letting one hundred flowers bloom, one hundred schools of thought contend'— in essence, inviting Party members and other Chinese to comment on and critique CCP policies. By mid-1957, intellectuals were openly criticizing Party shortcomings and complaining about unfair bureaucratic practices, small-minded cadres and harsh policies. But the opposition of Party leaders who had never supported the Hundred Flowers campaign compelled Mao to back away from the new openness. In a swiftly commenced 'anti-rightist' campaign, the Party labeled more than a quarter million intellectuals 'rightists'. The CCP sent many down to the countryside for years and jailed others, and the 'rightist' label that remained in the files of all ruined their careers.

For the nation's intellectuals, the aftermath of the Hundred Flowers campaign signaled the beginning of a period in which 'red' trumped 'expert', regardless of national need. Leading intellectual figures, including literary notables who had supported the Communists during the civil war, became major targets of the Cultural Revolution, as did traditional learning itself. Red Guards burned libraries, destroyed artwork and wrecked historic buildings. Jiang Qing and her allies urged the destruction of traditional culture and promoted dreary 'model operas' and fiction that uncritically celebrated the masses.

In addition to demoralizing and punishing thousands of educated people, Party leaders also stunted the nation's educational system. Elementary and secondary schools shut down for the first years of the Cultural Revolution, while Red Guards viciously attacked and even killed many teachers, professors and cultural workers. After the primary and secondary schools reopened, Party leaders limited students' reading materials to Marxist tracts and the teachings of Mao. Universities, which closed in 1966, remained shuttered until the mid-1970s, leaving an entire generation of Chinese with no access to higher education. The CCP also sent down thousands more educated people to the countryside to learn from the peasants and leave behind their 'bourgeois intellectual' ways.

After the death of Mao, the Communist Party publicly rehabilitated many of the intellectuals vilified during the 1950s and 1960s, including elderly writers and artists who had participated in the original May the Fourth Movement. Deng Xiaoping allowed Chinese university graduates to travel abroad for further education, despite realistic expectations that few would return home. Professors also revamped university curricula and removed much of the Maoist literature that had been a staple of the schools since the 1960s.

The ensuing thaw encouraged many intellectuals to critique state policies, something Deng and other officials initially allowed. But as writers and artists turned their attention from Maoist excesses to contemporary problems such as corruption and lack of democracy in China, they lost the support of the Party leadership. At three points—1979, 1986 and 1989—the state crushed the protests of intellectuals and workers calling for greater openness and democracy.

Party leaders have continued to maintain a tight rein on intellectual critiques they consider suspect and have struggled with dissident students and intellectuals attempting to cast themselves as legitimate heirs to the May the Fourth tradition. More recently, the Party has worked assiduously to control the flow of information in Chinese society and to quiet criticism by arresting scholars and businesspeople on vague charges of spreading state secrets. But the Party's commitment to information control has created tensions between cadres and capitalists, who require and expect transparency and the free flow of data and news. Already publishers and newspapers forced to self-supporting in the market economy have created new intellectual challenges to the authority of the Party, as have new technologies such as the Internet.

Mao Zedong from The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World

By all reasonable standards of historical judgment, Mao Zedong must be counted among the half-dozen most important political actors in modern world history. Mao was the acknowledged leader of the greatest and most popular of modern revolutions. And almost unique among revolutionary leaders, he remained the dominant figure in the post-revolutionary regime for more than a quarter of a century, presiding over the beginnings of the modern industrial transformation of the world's most populous land. Certainly no one influenced more profoundly, for better or worse, the lives of more people than did Mao Zedong by virtue of his person, his power, his policies, and his thought.

The son of a rich peasant, Mao Zedong was born in the village of Shaoshan in Hunan province on 26 December 1893. During his early years, the old imperial Chinese order was rapidly disintegrating, radical reformist and revolutionary movements were rising, and newly introduced Western ideas and ideologies were undermining faith in traditional values and beliefs. Although the young Mao became well versed in classical Chinese texts and retained a strong attachment to certain aspects of tradition (especially historical novels and poetry), he soon became caught up in the radical political and iconoclastic intellectual currents that swept Chinese cities in the years preceding and following the Revolution of 1911 that overthrew the imperial system. As a student at the middle and normal schools in the provincial capital of Changsha during the years 1913–1918, Mao eagerly assimilated a broad range of Western ideas, briefly pursued a career as a teacher, and embarked upon his lifelong career as a political organizer, establishing the "New People's Study Society", one of the more important of the local groups that were to prove so politically and ideologically instrumental in the making of the radical May Fourth Movement of 1919. In Changsha, Mao became involved with New Youth magazine, that extraordinarily influential westernizing and iconoclastic journal of the new intelligentsia that molded the ideas of a whole generation of modern Chinese political and intellectual leaders. It was in New Youth that Mao's first published article appeared in 1917, A Study of Physical Culture, which combined an ardent Chinese nationalism with a no less ardent rejection of traditional Chinese culture—in this instance an attack on the Confucian separation between mental and manual labor. It was a uniquely modern Chinese combination of nationalism and cultural iconoclasim that very much reflected the radical spirit of the times and one that was to remain a prominent feature of the Maoist vision.
Masses, this historic backwardness promised great political advantages for the future—for, as he confidently put it, “that which has accumulated for a long time will surely burst forth quickly.” These populist-type beliefs were to remain enduring characteristics of the Maoist mentality, profoundly influencing Mao’s reception and reinterpretation of Marxism.

Mao Zedong’s actual conversion to Marxism, according to his own testimony, occurred only in the summer of 1920, following discussions with one of his political mentors in Shanghai. He then plunged into organizational activities, working to establish a labor union for miners in his native province of Hunan and organizing a small Communist group in Changsha, one of several such local groups in various parts of the country (and among Chinese students studying abroad) which coalesced into the Chinese Communist Party. Mao was one of the thirteen delegates who attended the party’s founding congress, secretly convened in Shanghai in July 1921.

During the first, urban-based phase of the party’s history (1921–1927), and especially during the period of the Soviet-sponsored Communist-Nationalist anti-warlord alliance (1924–1927), Mao’s populist proclivities increasingly drew him from the cities to the countryside—and from the proletariat to the peasantry. Mao was not the only, nor the first, Chinese Communist to discover the revolutionary potentialities of the peasantry, but he did of course prove to be the most important. During the years 1925–1927, he devoted the greater portion of his prodigious energies to detailed investigations of rural socioeconomic conditions, to the organization of peasant associations, and (under Nationalist auspices) to the training of a peasant organizational cadre. Mao’s populist impulses found their fullest expression near the end of this period in his famous Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, published early in 1927. Here, in what is perhaps the most pristine expression of what later came to be known as “Maoism,” the young Mao celebrated the spontaneity of peasant revolt, an elemental force that he described as a tornado and a hurricane, one “so extraordinarily swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to suppress it.” Mao not only looked to the peasantry as the popular base of the Chinese Revolution; he also attributed to peasants themselves all those elements of revolutionary creativity and standards of political judgment that orthodox Marxist-Leninists reserved for the Communist Party. For Mao, it was not the party that was to judge the revolutionary capacities of the peasantry, but rather peasants who were to judge the revolutionary sufficiency of the party. Throughout, the document emphasized, in most non-Leninist fashion, the creative revolutionary works that the peasants were accomplishing on their own and expressed hostility to all external organizational restraints.

The “Hunan Report,” so heretical from an orthodox Marxist-Leninist point of view, no doubt would have earned Mao his expulsion from the Chinese Communist Party had it not been for the collapse of the Communist-Nationalist alliance just weeks after the publication of the document. It was in early April 1927 that Chiang Kai-shek turned his army to the task of destroying the Communists and their urban-based mass organizations. The relatively few Communists who survived the counterrevolutionary carnage were driven from the cities and sought refuge in the more remote areas of the countryside. The tie between the Communist Party and the urban working class was severed and was to remain broken until 1949. The confinement of the revolution to the rural areas was the essential condition that permitted Mao’s political ascendance in the Communist Party and the emergence of “Maoism” as the dominant Chinese version of Marxism.

Yet Marxist influences are by no means apparent in Mao’s prolific writings and frenetic political activities during the winter of 1919–20. Rather, what is most clearly evident is a powerful populist strain that celebrates the organic unity and inherent revolutionary potential of the Chinese people. Also celebrated, again in typically populist fashion, was a belief in the advantages of backwardness. Although the Chinese people had been oppressed and made impotent for “thousands of years,” Mao wrote in his main treatise of the period entitled The Great Union of the Popular

In late 1918, Mao Zedong left Changsha for Beijing. Beijing University had then become the center of radical Chinese intellectual and political life. Under the influence of radical intellectuals and their activist student followers, Mao became increasingly politicized. Even though he was unable to enroll as a regular student, he worked as an assistant librarian at the university and was first introduced to Marxist theory in the winter of 1918–19 as a member of a loosely organized Marxist study group. But Mao did not become an immediate convert to Marxism. He later described his ideas at the time as a “curious mixture” of Western liberalism, democratic reformism, and utopian socialism or anarchism. It was only after his return to Changsha in the summer of 1919, under the influence of the increasingly radical and fiercely nationalistic currents then rising in China, that Mao began to be attracted to the political message of the Russian Revolution and its accompanying Leninist version of Marxism.

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The rise of Mao Zedong to party leadership in the mid-1930s was accomplished only after a long and bitter struggle against a Moscow-supported faction of Chinese Communists—and in direct defiance of Stalin. During the entire Stalinist era of the world Communist movement, Mao was the only leader of a Communist party to achieve leadership without the blessings of the Soviet dictator. The Chinese party’s de facto independence of Moscow sworad one of the seeds of the later Sino-Soviet dispute. The Yanan era (1935–1945)—so called after the area in remote northwest China where the Communists established a base area to escape annihilation by Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist forces—was the heroic and decisive phase in the history of the Chinese Communist revolution—and it was undoubtedly Mao’s finest hour as a revolutionary leader and military strategist. Under Mao’s leadership and through a combination of popular nationalist and social revolutionary programs, the Chinese Communists won enormous popular support, especially among the peasantry of north China, the essential basis for their eventual victory over the Nationalists. During the Yenan era the distinctive Chinese variant of Marxism-Leninism (canonized as “Mao Zedong Thought”) crystallized as a formal body of doctrine. It was an ideology marked by powerful nationalist, populist, and voluntaristic impulses that greatly modified the inherited corpus of Marxist-Leninist theory. Indeed, “Maoism” implicitly defined itself, in large measure, by its departures from the main premises of Marxist theory. It was a doctrine that rejected the Marxist orthodoxy that capitalism is a necessary and progressive phase in historical development and thus the essential prerequisite for socialism. Accordingly, Maoism rejected the Marxist faith in the industrial proletariat as the necessary bearer of the new society, instead looking to the peasantry as the truly creative revolutionary class in the modern world. Further, Maoism inverted the Marxist conception of the relationship between town and countryside in the making of modern history, rejecting the Marxist and Leninist assumption that the city is the source and site of socio-historical progress. And reflecting the lack of any real Marxist faith in objective laws of historical development, Maoism placed a decisive emphasis on the role of human will and consciousness in molding social reality.

Such were some of the essential intellectual and ideological preconditions for the Maoist-led Chinese Revolution, which took the historically unprecedented form of harnessing the revolutionary energies of the peasantry in the countryside to “surround and overwhelm” the conservative cities. That unique revolutionary process, with a now-semi-sacred Mao Zedong as its unquestioned leader, culminated in 1949 when the Red Army defeated the numerically superior armies of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists—and peasant soldiers victoriously marched into the cities to “liberate” an urban working class that had been mostly politically passive since the defeats of 1927. On the basis of that victory, the People’s Republic of China was formally established on 1 October 1949, unifying China after a century of disintegration and humiliation. In 1949 Mao stood high atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace (“Tiananmen”), appearing as both national liberator and socialist prophet.
Mao Zedong dominated the history of the People’s Republic for more than a quarter of a century, until his death in September 1976, just as he had dominated the history of the rural-based revolution that had produced the new communist state. Much of what is unique and distinctive about both the general pattern and the specific events of China’s turbulent post-revolutionary history must be credited to—or blamed upon—the leadership of Mao Zedong. Rarely in world history has an entire historical era been so deeply stamped by the personality of a single individual.

In considering the thought and policies of Mao Zedong over “the Mao era” (1949–1976), one is struck by several enduring themes. First, it is a period animated by the notion of “permanent revolution.” Although the Maoist theory of permanent (later “continuous”) revolution was not explicitly set forth as part of “Mao Zedong Thought” until 1958, the essential components of the notion were present from the outset—an impatience with history that expressed itself in an ambivalent attitude toward the Marxist assumption that socialism presupposes capitalism; a burning determination to pass through the Marxian-defined “stages” of history in the most rapid possible fashion; an ardent faith that people armed with the proper will and spirit can mold social reality in accordance with the dictates of their consciousness, regardless of the material circumstances in which they find themselves, and indeed a tendency to extol the advantages of backwardness as such for the advancement of socialism. The latter notion was to find its most extreme expression in Mao’s celebration of the alleged Chinese virtues of being “poor and blank.”

This utopian impulse to escape the burdens of history manifested itself in the brevity of the “bourgeois” or “New Democratic” phase of the history of the People’s Republic, essentially terminated at the end of 1952 with the proclamation of the beginning of the period of “the transition to socialism.” It further revealed itself in the 1955–1956 campaign to collective agriculture, accomplished in little more than a year. And it found its most fulsome expression in the disastrous Great Leap. Forward campaign of 1958–1960, whose utopian ideology envisioned a spiritually mobilized populace simultaneously bringing about the full-scale modernization of China and its transition from socialism to communism within a few short decades.

A populist modification of Leninism is another strikingly pervasive feature of Mao Zedong’s post-revolutionary theory and practice, one manifestation of which was a continuous tension between the person and persona of Mao, on the one hand, and the institution of the Chinese Communist Party, on the other. The tension originated with the “ Hunan Report” of 1927 when Mao drew a sharp dichotomy between the revolutionary spontaneity of the peasant masses and the conservative restraints that political parties (and intellectuals) attempted to impose upon them. A similar dichotomy reappears after 1949, with Mao presenting himself not simply as the chairman of the Communist Party but also as the embodiment of the popular will struggling against the conservativism of an increasingly bureaucratized party apparatus. This tension between Mao the leader and the institution he led dramatically revealed itself in July 1955 when Mao personally overrode the collective decisions of the party leadership and appealed directly to “the people” in launching the accelerated campaign for agricultural collectivization. It is also apparent in the “Hundred Flowers” campaign of 1955–1957 when Mao encouraged nonparty intellectuals to criticize the Communist Party from without. And the tension culminated in the Cultural Revolution, which began (but did not end) with the extraordinary Maoist call for the masses to rebel against the authority of the party and its organizations.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the post-revolutionary Mao Zedong was his historically unique (if ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to reconcile the means of modern economic development with the ends of socialism. Rejecting the inherited Stalinist orthodoxy that the combination of rapid industrialization with state ownership of the means of production would more or less automatically guarantee ever higher stages of socialism and eventually communism, Mao emphasized that the continuous socialist transformation of human beings and their social relations was essential if the process of modern economic development were to have a socialist outcome. This social radicalism was responsible, in part, for the adventures of the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution—and Mao Zedong must bear the historical and moral responsibility for the enormous toll of death and suffering that resulted from these extraordinary events, however unintended those results may have been. But Maoist social radicalism also served to forestall the fully Stalinist institutionalization of the post-revolutionary order in China and perhaps served to keep alive, among some, the hope for the eventual realization of the ultimate socialist goals that the revolution promised. It certainly kept the post-revolutionary order in flux, providing Mao’s successors, including Deng Xiaoping, with considerable flexibility for charting a new course of development.

The conventional view of the Mao era is that Mao Zedong sacrificed modern economic development to “ideological purity” in a vain and costly quest for some sort of socialist utopia. Yet the actual historical record of the era suggests that Mao was more successful as an economic modernizer than as a creator of socialism. Over the Mao period (1949–1976), China was transformed from a primarily agrarian nation to a relatively industrialized one, the ratio of the value of industrial production to total production increasing from 30 to 72 percent. From 1952 (when industrial output was restored to its highest prewar levels) until the close of the Mao era, Chinese industry grew at an average annual rate of 11 percent, the most rapid pace of industrialization achieved by any major nation (developed or developing) during that time. Indeed, Maoist industrialization, however crude the process was in many respects, compares favorably with comparable decades in the industrialization of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, hitherto generally regarded as the three most successful cases of modernization among major “latecomers” on the world industrial scene.

Rapid industrialization during the Mao period exacted enormous human and social costs, as had been the case with other late-industrializing countries, and most of the costs were borne by the peasantry. Agricultural production barely kept pace with population growth, and living standards in both town and countryside largely stagnated after 1957 as the state extracted most of the surplus product to finance the development of heavy industry. Yet although the blunders, deficiencies, inequalities, and imbalances that marked and marred the process were many and grave, future historians nevertheless will record the Mao era as the time when the basic foundations for China’s modern industrialism were laid.

Far more questionable than Mao’s status as a modernizer is his reputation as the creator of a socialist society. For what is most strikingly absent in both Maoist theory and practice is the elemental Marxist principle that socialism must be a system whereby the immediate producers themselves democratically control the products and conditions of their labor. In the Maoist system, by contrast, the control of labor and its fruits was left in the hands of an ever larger and more alien bureaucratic apparatus. Mao, to be sure, repeatedly conducted anti-bureaucratic campaigns, and there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of his antipathy to bureaucracy. But from those campaigns, he time and again failed to devise any viable means of popular democratic control over the powerful bureaucratic apparatus over which he uneasily presided. And if Mao broke, at least in some significant ways, with the Stalinist strategy of socioeconomic development, in the political realm the Maoist regime retained essentially Stalinist methods of bureaucratic rule and consistently suppressed all forms of intellectual and political dissent in Stalinist fashion. The Mao era was thus marked by a deep incongruity between its progressive socioeconomic accomplishments and its regressive political features, an incongruity that precluded any genuine socialist reorganization of Chinese society.

The Mao era in the history of the People’s Republic was one of the most turbulent periods in modern world history, and it remains one of the most controversial. When the political passions engendered by the era have subsided, most future historians will likely evaluate Mao Zedong much in the fashion in which he is now ideologically portrayed by his successors in Beijing. First and foremost, Mao will be lauded as modern China’s greatest nationalist, the leader of a revolution whose enduring achievement was to bring national unification and independence to the world’s most populous land—after a century of repeated internal political failures and grave external impingements. Mao will also be seen as a great modernizer who, despite monumental postrevolutionary blunders, presided over the initial modern industrial transformation of one of the world’s most economically backward lands, inaugurating a lengthy process destined eventually to make China a great world power. Ultimately, Mao
Mao Zedong

His ruthless vision united a fractured people and inspired revolutions far beyond China's borders

By JONATHAN D. SPENCE

Mao Zedong loved to swim. In his youth, he advocated swimming as a way of strengthening the bodies of Chinese citizens, and one of his earliest poems celebrated the joys of beating a wave through the waves. As a young man, he and his close friends would often swim in local streams before they debated together the myriad challenges that faced their nation. But especially after 1955, when he was in his early 60s and at the height of his political power as leader of the Chinese People's Republic, swimming became a central part of his life.

Shang Yang had instituted a set of ruthlessly enforced laws, designed "to punish the wicked and rebellious, in order to preserve the rights of the people." That the people continued to fear Shang Yang was proof to Mao they were "stupid." Mao attributed this fear and distrust not to Shang Yang's policies but to the perception of those policies: "At the beginning of anything out of the ordinary, the mass of the people always dislike it." —

After the communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Mao's position was immeasurably strengthened. Despite all that the Chinese people had endured, it seems not to have been too hard for Mao to persuade them of the visionary force and practical need for the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. In Mao's mind, the intensive marshaling of China's energies would draw manual and mental labor together into a final harmonious synthesis and throw a bridge across the chasm of China's poverty to the promised socialist paradise on the other side.

In February 1957, Mao drew his thoughts on China together in the form of a rambling speech on "The Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." Mao's notes for the speech reveal the curious mixture of jocularity and cruelty, of utopian visions and blinkered perceptions, that lay at the heart of his character. Mao admitted that 15% or more of the Chinese people were hungry and that some critics felt a "disgust" with Marxism. He spoke too of the hundreds of thousands who had died in the revolution so far, but firmly rebutted figures — quoted in Hong Kong newspapers — that 20 million had perished. "How could we possibly kill 20 million people?" he asked. It is now established that at least that number died in China during the famine that followed the Great Leap between 1959 and 1961. In the Cultural Revolution that followed only five years later, Mao used the army and the student population against his opponents. Once again millions suffered or perished as Mao combined the ruthlessness of Shang Yang with the absolute confidence of the long-distance swimmer.

Rejecting his former party allies, and anyone who could be accused of espousing the values of an older and more gracious Chinese civilization, Mao drew his sustenance from the chanting crowds of Red Guards. The irony here was that from his youthful readings, Mao knew the story of how Shang Yang later in life tried to woo a moral administrator to his service. But the official turned down Shang Yang's blandishments, with the words that "1,000 persons going 'Yes, yes!' are not worth one man with a bold 'No!'"

Mao died in 1976, and with the years those adulatory cries of "Yes, yes!" have gradually faded. Leaders Mao trained, like Deng Xiaoping, were able to reverse Mao's policies even as they claimed to reverence them. They gave back to the Chinese people the opportunities to express their entrepreneurial skills, leading to astonishing rates of growth and a complete transformation of the face of Chinese cities.

Are these changes, these moves toward a new flexibility, somehow Mao's legacy? Despite the agony he caused, Mao was both a visionary and a realist. He learned as a youth not only how Shang Yang brought harsh laws to the Chinese people, even when they saw no need for them, but also how Shang Yang's rigors helped lay the foundation that Mao's successors have been able to build, even as they struggled, with obvious nervousness, to contain the social pressures that their own more open policies are generating.

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Spence, Jonathan. Time Magazine Top 100. 2009. 16 August 2009

Mao's role as a pioneer of socialism will receive less attention and will appear far more problematic than his legacy as a nationalistic modernizer.
CIVIL WAR IN CHINA

The use of two atomic bombs by the Americans against Japan in August 1945 ended the war sooner than anyone in China expected. Chiang Kai-shek returned in triumph to Nanjing in the fall of 1945, but soon the ebullient mood in China was muted by what everyone knew was on the horizon: the final showdown between the Nationalists and the Communists. For a time the Americans tried to mediate in China and prevent civil war. This, however, turned out to be an impossibility because each side was determined to defeat the other and was not sincerely interested in any sort of reconciliation. At the same time, however, both sides attempted to curry favor with the United States and tried to humor the idealistic American diplomats who sought to reconcile the Nationalists and the Communists. The U.S. government was sympathetic with the Nationalists for the simple reason that Chiang Kai-shek’s regime was almost universally recognized as China’s government at the time.

Immediately after Japan’s surrender, American diplomat Patrick Hurley, a cantankerous and apparently prematurely senile man, tried to get the two sides together to conduct discussions. Yielding to U.S. pressure, Chiang Kai-shek invited Mao to Chongqing, but Mao balked because he feared a KMT trap. After Hurley gave the assurances of the U.S. government that there would be no trap, Mao boarded an airplane for the first time in his life and flew from Yan’an to Chongqing in mid-August 1945. Six weeks of talks yielded no practical results, however, and Mao went back to Yan’an determined to prepare for all-out war with Chiang Kai-shek. Hurley returned to the United States a discouraged and disillusioned man, but the Americans were not yet ready to give up on China. In December 1945 the United States sent another envoy to China, General George C. Marshall, the originator of the Marshall Plan for the postwar recovery of Europe. Because of Marshall’s enormous prestige, the Nationalists and Communists came to the negotiating table once more in early 1946 and feigned a tentative settlement of their differences. By March, however, both sides were fighting once again. “Talk, talk, fight, fight” was the guiding principle for the Communists at this time, and it might as well have been for the Nationalists as well. Marshall finally left China in January 1947, thoroughly disgusted with the refusal of both sides in the Chinese civil war to engage in peace talks in good faith.

After Marshall’s departure from China, civil war flared up in Manchuria. American military advisors had encouraged Chiang to maintain his hold over southern China rather than spread his forces too thin in the Communist-dominated north. Chiang, however, stubbornly refused to heed their advice and had the American military airift thousands of Nationalist troops to areas throughout northern China. Chiang’s insistence on attempting to recapture the north was simple from the Nationalists’ point of view: Manchuria and other parts of northern China had been occupied by Japanese invading forces since 1931, and one major reason for China’s war with Japan was over these very areas. Strategically, however, Chiang’s moves against the north were quite foolish, and his campaigns turned out to be just as American military advisors had feared: his widely spread forces were eventually outmaneuvered and overwhelmed. By late 1947 his armies in Manchuria had been largely wiped out, and in December 1948 Beijing (then still called Peiping) fell to the Communists.

Nanjing itself fell to the Communists in April 1949, and on October 1, 1949, Mao was confident enough in the Communists’ ultimate victory that he proclaimed in Beijing (now renamed Beijing) the liberation of China and the founding of the new People’s Republic of China to jubilant throngs of celebrants in Tiananmen Square. He announced to China and the world that China had stood up. Meanwhile, the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek’s corrupt government and discouraged military fled to the island of Taiwan, where it has remained ever since.

The fall of China to the Communists was bemoaned in the United States during the 1950s by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and other far-right extremists who sought a scapegoat for America’s “loss” of China. In reality, of course, China was never America’s to lose in the first place. Chiang Kai-shek and his government lost mainland China because of corruption, incompetence, and utter ignorance of the countryside. The Nationalists were overwhelmingly city oriented in their thinking. Chiang Kai-shek’s economic advisors had been educated at Ivy League universities and knew the inner workings of the economies of industrialized nations, but they had only the faintest idea of how China’s overwhelmingly rural society and its peasant masses really worked. Many people in China’s government were corrupt and cynical manipulators who saw in China’s turmoil a chance for their own enrichment. The Communists, on the other hand, based their power and influence on the support of China’s peasantry, and this made them unstoppable. Peasant armies eventually overwhelmed Chiang’s fortified cities and sent his government packing to Taiwan.


NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS, 1949–1956

The end of the Korean War brought some stability and normalcy to China for the next few years. Ultimately, however, Mao became concerned because China was getting down to the practical tasks of peacetime reconstruction and rational economic planning and seemed no longer to possess the ideological focus and revolutionary ardor of preliberation days. Longing to see China realize its revolutionary objectives before his own death, Mao attempted to propel China quickly along the revolutionary path to socialism. In this he was excessively theoretical and idealistic and ignored the real-world on-the-ground consequences of his adventurism. As a result, China was plunged into two decades of chaos and turmoil. From 1954 until his death in 1976, Mao more or less had his way with China and set the cause of modernizing his country back twenty years. In retrospect it is clear that Mao was a fine fighter and theoretician but largely a failure as a practical peacetime leader. Mao’s contributions to China essentially ended with liberation in 1949.

The first decade of the People’s Republic started out well enough. The Korean War was a brief but significant interruption to China’s plans for domestic reconstruction and political consolidation. Even during the Korean War, however, some reforms proceeded. Positive reforms included the land reform program of confiscating all farmland and redistributing it to landless peasants and reform of marriage laws, which outlawed concubinage and polygamy and made it easier for women to obtain divorces. Negative development included a nationwide roundup and execution of more than 500,000 “counterrevolutionaries” basically anyone deemed hostile to the new Communist regime, including former Nationalist officials and people who had voiced
message, and it eventually backfired on him.

The magnitude of the response might have surprised Mao. Thousands of intellectuals took Mao at his word and criticized the Soviet Union, Mao’s impatience with the agricultural collectivization movement, and even socialism and the CCP itself. Some posters put up by students in Beijing were almost frenetic in their denunciations. By May 1957 Mao announced that criticisms of socialism and the party would no longer be tolerated, and a distinction was drawn between “fragrant flowers” and “poisonous weeds.” Those who had already uttered “poisonous weeds” were tracked down by the hundreds of thousands and “sent down” to the countryside for backbreaking agricultural “reform through labor.”

Did Mao plan all of this from the start and use the Hundred Flowers movement as a ruse to smoke out his critics and then crack down on them, or did he start the movement with the best intentions, only to be taken aback by the magnitude of the negative response? Many scholars, as well as many Chinese people who lived through this period, disagree on the answer to this question.


THE HUNDRED FLOWERS CAMPAIGN

Mao and his ideological colleagues viewed these disbandments with alarm but for a time could do nothing about them. Mao was careful and deliberate in conducting warfare, but when it came to peacetime national reconstruction he proved to be an impatient and impetuous man. He saw the relative peace and prosperity of the 1950s as a step away from the old revolutionary commitment he had known in the Long March and Yan’an days. He sat and stewed at the dissolution of the APCs but could do little about it because he was oustved in the Politburo. But votes were not everything, and Mao knew quite well that he was still the dominant personality of the Communist party and had an enormous reservoir of esteem and good will among the common people. In early 1957 he published an important essay entitled “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” in which he urged those who disagreed with his policies to come forward and offer constructive criticisms and suggestions. “Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend” was his principle.

Despite the smooth completion of the First Five-Year Plan in 1957 with help from the Soviet Union, Mao became impatient with the Russian modernization strategy, which emphasized bureaucratic planning, capital accumulation, and the heavy industry and urban sectors. As a man with a big ego but little knowledge of economics, Mao believed that he could use some of the principles developed during the guerrilla war period, such as mass movement, to better mobilize China’s population for economic growth. He put forward a new “General Line for Socialist Construction” that aimed at greatly accelerating economic growth by organizing the people into various kinds of quasi-military units and institutions, such as militias and communes, so that he could easily drive them to fulfill high production quotas.

Mao was able to launch the GLF without much opposition. In 1957, Mao had just cracked down on dissident intellectuals in the Anti-Rightist Campaign. In early 1958, he forced some of the top leaders, including then premier Zhou Enlai, to make self-criticisms on being too conservative in making production plans. Thus Mao set the stage for the tragedy by silencing all public opinion that disagreed with his radical ideas. Governments at all levels were competing to report one miracle output after another. The greatly inflated outputs were then reported in newspapers or broadcast by radios nationwide, leading the whole nation to believe that China was making a great leap in production and was catching up with the Western developed nations rapidly.

To Mao, the outputs of iron, steel, cotton, and grain were the ultimate symbol of a nation’s economic and military prowess. Under his pressure, the Chinese government frequently upwardly revised production quotas. The fulfillment of the iron and steel quotas was viewed as the whole nation’s responsibility. Homemade furnaces were erected in school playgrounds, government office compounds, residential...
of 1959 not only fell far below the planned goals for that year, but also below those of 1958. The culprit first was bad weather, later the main culprit became the Soviet Union when the ideological split between China and its main ally became public in 1961. The Chinese people were told that much of the grain was shipped to Russia because the latter demanded that China pay back its debts immediately.

It has now become clear that bad weather and debt-service obligation could not be the main causes of the famine, nor could the famine have been triggered first by production collapse, as some earlier studies tried to prove. The weather in 1958 was very favorable, and the fall harvest in that year was a record high. It is true that the commune system deprived peasants of incentives to work hard, but during the period 1961–1984, when the commune system was still the dominant rural institution, China never saw any famine again. Heavy procurement could be a factor, but the procurements in 1958 and 1959 were comparable with those of some years in the earlier 1950s. Therefore, procurement alone could not be the main cause of the famine. Since exports came from the pool that was procured by the government, they would not further reduce the grain stock controlled by the communal dining halls. The industrial mass movement was mostly concentrated in urban areas. Given the fact that the abnormal death rate in urban areas was much lower than that in rural areas, physical exhaustion could not be the main cause of the high abnormal death rate that was observed in rural areas. After these factors are excluded as the main factors, the communal dining halls loom large as a more plausible main cause of the famine.

Under the communal dining hall system, food was controlled completely by the communal dining halls. Peasants were not allowed to eat at home. Food distribution in these dining halls was not based on contributions of a commune member to production, but on his or her membership only. At first, these dining halls were popular because they let peasants eat as much as they wanted for free. This policy led to a big demand shock and caused a significant amount of grain stock to be consumed or wasted within a short period of time before the summer harvest of 1959 was ready. When the food shortage developed in the spring of 1959, the egalitarian distribution of food in these dining halls led to rampant shirking and free-riding behavior that in turn led to the collapse of production. As soon as the communal dining halls were abolished in mid-1961, all the food was divided up and allocated directly to individual households. Despite the fact that the level of per capita grain consumption was still lower at this time than that in 1959, the famine ended.

See also Central Planning; Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); People’s Communes/Household Responsibility System.

Bibliography


THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

Mao was an unpopular man in China in the early 1960s, and he knew it. In 1961 a play called Hai Rui Dismissed from Office became quite popular and was performed in Beijing before sellout audiences. The play was an allegory and was based on historical condemnation of Mao’s role in the Great Leap Forward and a celebration of Peng Dehuai’s courage in criticizing him over it. The historical Hai Rui was a loyal and upright official during the Ming dynasty who bluntly criticized a Ming emperor’s policies and was, as a result, dismissed from office in disgrace. Anyone who saw the play and had a finger on the pulse of political developments in China knew that the character Hai Rui was the historical and literary counterpart to Peng Dehuai, while the stubborn and obstute Ming emperor who failed to heed the loyal minister’s remonstrations was none other than Mao himself. Jiang Qing, a woman with literary and cultural interests who had been Mao’s wife since Yen’an days, quickly caught on to this and urged Mao for years to do something about it.

Mao made only one public appearance in 1962. During this year he was told that if he did not do something progovernment officials had more or less shunted him aside and regarded him as a “dead ancestor.” He feared that bureaucrats and governmental cogs were now in control of China and that the country was slowly watering down Marxist-Leninist dogma. In his youth he had accepted Marxism-Leninism and saw class struggle as the driving force of history. Now, in the wake of attempts to recover from the Great Leap, there was little evidence of continuing class struggle, and this troubled him.

One segment of Chinese society that was not critical of Mao was the People’s Liberation Army (or PLA), led by Lin Biao. Lin knew that the basis of his power and authority was his loyalty to Mao, and that during the early 1960s his role was made even more obsequious in his behavior to him. When others criticized Mao for the Great Leap catastrophe, Lin praised it and glorified Mao for attempting it. Lin fostered a personality cult centered on Mao in the PLA, and he printed and circulated among PLA troops the famous “Little Red Book,” or Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, which he encouraged officers and men to read and memorize reverently. Mao was pleased with all this attention, and by 1965 was encouraging China to learn from the PLA’s ideological zeal and personal dedication to him. Mao encouraged the formation of a personality cult centered around himself, partly for his own glorification but mainly for the mass dedication to his ideology that it might produce.

By late 1965 Mao was once again confident enough in his own leadership to fire a salvo at his critics and detractors. He finally unleashed the fury of his wife Jiang Qing and her ultra-left cronies against those they regarded as impeding class struggle in China, and in November they had newspapers in Beijing and Shanghai publish a tirade against the Hai Rui play. By the end of the year, Mao had convoked a meeting with top Chinese officials about the play and lashed out at his critics, questioning their devotion to the revolutionary cause. In February 1966 he told Lin Biao and the PLA about his vision of a “great socialist cultural revolution” that would “root out the vestiges of old or feudal ways.” With this done, Mao believed, his critics would finally be silenced and China could proceed farther and faster along the revolutionary path toward the ultimate goal of pure communism.


Mao was intensely dedicated to the task of seeing the revolution through in China during his lifetime. Rather than see his revolution derailed, he threw China into a decade of chaos and turmoil that would, he hoped, maintain China’s revolutionary ardor and keep the nation on track to achieve socialism in his lifetime. Mao plunged China into one of its darkest decades of the twentieth century because the revolutionary ideals and goals of his youth remained unrealized. He was, as his physician wrote in the 1990s, dedicated to socialism’s sake and cared little about the practical consequences or real-world human suffering that his attempts to realize his theoretical ideals entailed (li 1994, 377).
Frustrated that the majority of the Chinese government was apparently abandoning China’s revolutionary charter and following a more revisionist path similar to the Soviet Union, Mao essentially threw a temper tantrum; he went over the heads of the government and appealed directly to the people for support. Mao tapped into a vast reservoir of youthful discontent in China and told a generation of Chinese youth that it was acceptable for them to rebel against authority figures in families, schools, workplaces, and local and provincial governments; many personnel in these organizations were, after all, revisionist or counterrevolutionary and deserved contempt and censure. That was all that a generation of angry and disenfranchised young youth needed to hear, and by the summer of 1966 China was in the throes of a nationwide upheaval that would last, to a greater or lesser extent, until Mao’s death in September 1976.

May 1966 was a big month in the developing momentum for the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s most prominent critics were dismissed in May, and this same month Lin Biao asserted that these critics were part of a “black line” in the party that was out to restore bourgeois interests in Chinese society. Only a thorough cleansing within the party and an intensified revolution in Chinese society and culture could reverse these ominous developments. Sensing which way the wind was blowing, Mao’s longtime associate Zhou Enlai named the developing movement the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Also in May, an ultra-leftist philosophy professor at Peking University (Beida) placed “big-character posters” throughout the campus condemning the university president’s policies forbidding student protest movements. Mao’s discovery and approval of the posters had two results: the dismissal or assailing of many professors and administrators at Peking University and the popularization of big-character posters (large posters written with bold Chinese characters) as a means of airing opinions and attacking ideological opponents.

In June 1966 the anarchy in China began. Many young students left their studies and joined the exciting new movement to protect Chairman Mao and his Thought from revisionists, the standard bogyman label for anyone who dared voice disagreement with Mao. Revisionists were made scapegoats for the over-thirty generation; how could young people ever dare resist the smiling Chairman Mao who was telling them it was acceptable to rebel against the older generations? In August 1966 Mao publicly and approvingly repeated his new young supporters the “Red Guards” and heartily approved of their slogan “to rebel is justified.” And rebel they did, in the name of a personality cult centered on the thought, and the person, of Chairman Mao. Mao took his famous swim in the Yangtze River in July 1966 to announce to China and the world that he had the renewed political and physical prowess necessary to direct the turmoil he was about to unleash in China. (In reality, the swim as a feat of physical endurance and propaganda appeal, Mao simply let the current carry him along as he floated on his back, supported by the buoyancy of his considerable stomach.)

Mao’s phalanxes and foot soldiers in the PLA were proud of the role they had played in starting the movement. Happy to be included in Mao’s vision of cultural revolution and ideological purification in China, the PLA’s Liberation Army Daily published the following piece in its August 1, 1966 edition:

Chairman Mao wants us to run our army as a great school. Working mainly as a fighting force, it concurrently studies, engages in agriculture, runs factories, and does mass work; it carries on and further develops the fine traditions of our Party and our army, and trains and tempers millions of successors to the proletarian revolutionary cause, so that our people’s army of several million can play a still greater role in the cause of socialist revolution and socialist construction. It is a great school for the study, implementation, dissemination, and safeguarding of Mao Zedong’s Thought. (Schurmann and Schell 1967, 623)

In this same piece the Liberation Army Daily ingratiated itself with Mao by lashing out at his critics at Lushan:

...the big struggle took place at the same time as our Party’s struggle against the right opportunists anti-Party clique in 1959. Taking advantage of the important posts they had usurped in the army, the principal members of the anti-Party clique—who were exposed at the Party’s Lushan Conference—made a great effort to go away with the Party’s absolute leadership over the army, to abrogate political work, to reject the army’s tasks of participating in socialist construction and doing mass work, and to abolish the local armed forces and the militia; in this way, they tried to completely negate Chairman Mao’s thinking on the people’s army and the people’s army. They vainly hoped to relaunch our army according to the bourgeois, revisionist military line so that it would become an instrument for their usurping leadership of the Party and the government, and for realizing their personal ambitions. The Enlarged Session of the Military Commission held after the Party’s Lushan Conference thoroughly settled accounts with them in regard to their crimes and dismissed them from office. This was a great victory for Mao Zedong’s Thought! (625)

On August 5, Mao egged the Red Guards on by posting his own big-character poster saying “Bomb the headquarters!” at the door of the Communist Party Central Committee Headquarters. Unnerved, the Central Committee gave in to Mao’s tactics by dismissing moderates and recruiting radical Maosites into its ranks.

On the dawn of August 18, 1966, Mao propelled his new personality cult to a new high by issuing his ‘Red Guards’ when he spoke to one million of them at a rally in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. He mingled and chatted with the crowds for several hours, and the next day news of the rally was splashed all over China’s newspapers. This produced a craze for Red Guard rallies at Tiananmen Square for much of the rest of the year. The last rally, held in November 1966, was the largest, with more than 2.5 million people attending.

These huge Red Guard rallies were possible because students all over China simply quit school and adventurously traveled all over China to “make revolution” and do quixotic battle against the phalanxes of counterrevolutionaries and reactionaries. They were given free passage on China’s train and bus system to just about anywhere, which enabled the Red Guard generation to see more of China than any other generation in Chinese history. The ultimate destination for millions of Red Guards was, of course, Beijing, especially after the news media reported that Mao himself was known to review the rallies at Tiananmen Square. The fondest dream of any Red Guard was to lay eyes on the Chairman, even if only for a few fleeting and triumphant seconds. Liang Heng, a young student who traveled all the way from Hunan in southern China to attend a Red Guard rally at Tiananmen Square, conveys in his memoirs the intensity and flavor of the rallies:

...if there was any single thing that meant ecstasy to everyone in the crowd, then it was to have a chance to see Mao. I had been an ardent reader of Peking (Beijing), the possibility had been in the back of my mind, and, like every other Red Guard, I would have laid down my life for the chance.

Chairman Mao’s car was first, a Peking-brand army jeep. As in a dream, I saw him. He seemed very tall to me, magnificent, truly larger than life. He waved his hat as the jeep drove slowly through the throng. The soldiers forming the guard of honor stood at attention, but the tears poured down their faces in rivulets. Nevertheless they managed to snuffle their refrain, “Please revolutionize our order! Please revolutionize our order!”

I was bawling like a baby, crying out incoherently again and again, “You are our hearts’ reddest, reddest sun!” My tears blocked my vision, but I could do nothing to control myself. Then Chairman Mao’s car was past, and Premier Zhou’s followed.

The people in front hadn’t realized what had happened, and were still shouting. “We were all like children who had their books turned to all the action. As they discovered him in their midst, however, they nearly mobbed the car, obstructing its passage completely... it was only when the crowd was told that the Chairman wanted to climb the gate tower to see the fireworks that they separated and let the car go through.

When it was all over everyone ran to the post office to telegraph the good news to their families all over China. I waited more than two hours to trace out the trembling words, “This evening at 9:15 I became the happiest person in the world.” I knew my father would need no further explanation. (Liang and Shapiro 1983, 121, 124–25)

The throngs of Red Guards collected Mao memorabilia, wore red armbands emblazoned with three characters meaning Red Guard, sang songs in praise of Chairman Mao’s wisdom and benevolence, and took all kinds of photos, especially the Little Red Book or Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong. Mao’s Quotations were carried by every good Red Guard wherever he or she went. The original edition of the Quotations, issued by the PLA in a cheap, red plastic cover, had 370 pages of text and measured about 5 × 3½ × 3 inches. A generation of Red Guards reverently pored over the Quotations and knew them by heart; many even committed the entire book to memory. (The Quotations achieved popularity with the 1960s hippie generation in the United States and Canada.) Stridently anti-American, the Quotations contained frequent and shrill denunciation of the United States:

People of the world, unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs! People of the world, be courageous, dare to fight, defy difficulties and advance wave upon wave. Then the whole world will belong to the people. Monsters of all kinds shall be destroyed. (Mao 1976, 82)

Mao was supremely confident in the ultimate victory of the socialist revolution all over the world:

The socialist system will eventually replace the capitalist system; this is an inevitable law of history. However much the reactionaries try to hold back the wheel of history, sooner or later revolution will take place and will inevitably triumph. (24)

It is my opinion that the international situation has now reached a new turning point. There are two winds in the world today, the West Wind and the East Wind. There is a Chinese saying, “Either the East Wind prevails over the West Wind or the West Wind prevails over the East Wind.” I believe it is characteristic of the situation today that the East Wind is prevailing over the West Wind. That is to say, the forces of socialism have become overwhelmingly superior to the forces of imperialism. (80–81)

The ultimate victory of the socialist and communist revolutions would be accomplished through brute force of arms: Every Communist must grasp the truth, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” (61)

...only with guns can the whole world be transformed. (63)

We are advocates of the abolition of war, we do not want war; but war can only be abolished through war, and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun. (63)

Revolution was, in fact, a brutal and messy business, and in what was probably the most famous statement of his life, Mao told his followers that they should not expect it to be otherwise: A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined,
so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another. (11–12)

The Cultural Revolution was an exciting time for the Red Guards and other perpetrators, but far its victims (variously called counterrevolutionaries, reactionaries, revisionists, capitalist roaders, and the like) it was a time of enormous suffering and hardship. Mao was preoccupied with another matter, the growing Sino-Soviet rift, which had distanced itself from China in horror after the lunacy of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and had begun menacing China along the Sino-Soviet borders.

The Cultural Revolution was a complex phenomenon, and making sense of it is not an easy task. Indeed, several scholars who have devoted their careers to plumbing its depths have not been able to come to full grips with its causes and the course of its development. The Cultural Revolution was more or less officially launched in mid-1966, but after that it seems to have assumed a momentum and meaning all its own, quite apart from what Mao originally foresaw or intended. It ended with the deaths of more than one million Chinese and massive disruptions in the lives of almost all of China’s urban population. (Disruptions were less extensive in the countryside.) Perhaps we never will fully understand the Cultural Revolution, but at present it appears that it was more or less a failed attempt by Mao and his ideological supporters to see the revolution through to completion. Mao’s appeal to China’s angry young people was an attempt to harness their energy and restlessness for the revolutionary cause, but instead of furthering the cause, it was not quickly restored, and in July 1968 Mao had to instruct the PLA to restore order to China’s cities through all the necessary means, including military force. That same month he summoned student and Red Guard leaders to a discussion and more or less told them that the party was over now. One way to get the Red Guards out of the cities was to send them out to the countryside to learn from the peasants. This he did in 1969, and millions of students went to work on farms. Some went willingly and enthusiastically, but most had to be compelled. In the countryside they learned nothing but bitterness for Mao, who seemed to have no concern for them now that they had outlived their usefulness.

The fall of 1968 was the end of the Cultural Revolution proper, and it was officially declared over in the spring of 1969. Its lingering effects, however, continued to reverberate until Mao’s death in 1976. After 1969 movements reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution flared up occasionally but were not given the full rein they had in 1966 and 1967. Mao knew that his Cultural Revolution was, like his Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, a monumental failure, but this time he made sure that nobody like Peng Dehuai would dare come forth and criticize him. This time the odds were stacked in his favor; the highest levels of the CCP were packed with his allies, and he always had Jiang Qing and her group of literary hatchet men ready to slice up any potential critics.

Mao continued to be concerned about the state of the revolution in China, but by the late 1960s and early 1970s he was becoming preoccupied with another matter, the growing Sino-Soviet split. Mao became convinced during this time that the greatest threat to Chinese and international security was not the United States but the Soviet Union, which had distanced itself from China in horror after the lunacy of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and had begun menacing China along the Sino-Soviet borders.
Chronology of the People’s Republic of China

1949
The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is founded on October 1 in Beijing. The Nationalist government withdraws to Taiwan. Mao Zedong declares the “People’s Democratic Dictatorship.” Mao is appointed chairman of the Central People’s Government; Zhou Enlai is named premier; and Zhu De becomes general commander of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

1950
The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance is signed in Moscow by Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin. In June, Mao denounces American aggression in Korea. In October, the Army of the Chinese People’s Volunteers publicly enters Korea in support of North Korea. Also in this year, the Marriage Law is promulgated by the central government, together with the Trade Union Law and the Agrarian Reform Law of the PRC.

1951
The Korean War progresses, with Chinese troops taking Seoul. Mao Zedong’s son, Mao Anying, is killed in Korea. Domestically, the Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Liberation of Tibet is signed in Beijing; the agreement recognizes Tibet as part of China and grants the region autonomous status.

1952
The Three-Antis Campaign is launched in January; it targets corruption, waste, and bureaucratism. In February, the Five-Antis Campaign is started; it targets business operations and is commonly viewed as the precursor to a looming deprivation campaign. Deng Xiaoping becomes deputy premier.

1953
The armistice ending the Korean War is signed on July 27. The First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) starts. Deng Xiaoping becomes finance minister for one year.

1954
Zhou Enlai and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru sign a joint communiqué that becomes the first international declaration to include the PRC’s “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.” The first National People’s Congress (NPC) convenes. Deng Xiaoping becomes deputy chairman of the National Defense Council.

1955
Zhou Enlai attends the Asian-African Conference (Bandung Conference) in Bandung, Indonesia; the conference seeks to build a united front of Asian and African nations against colonialism and racism. Deng Xiaoping is elected to the Politburo. The Chinese Language Reform Committee releases the first batch of simplified Chinese characters, which are first used in newspapers in Beijing and Tianjin.

1956
In April, Mao Zedong delivers his influential speech “On the Ten Major Relationships.” In September, the Eighth Party Congress elects Mao Party chairman; Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Chen Yun are elected deputy chairmen; and Deng Xiaoping is elected as secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In May, Mao Zedong calls for greater artistic and academic freedom with the slogan “let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend.”

1957
Mao Zedong delivers his speech “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.” In June, the People’s Daily states that rightists are trying to overthrow the Communist Party, and an Anti-Rightist Campaign is launched.

1958
In May, the Great Leap Forward is launched with the phrase “more, faster, better, and more economically soundly” as its general guiding principle. In August, at the Politburo’s Beidaihe Conference, the people’s communes plan is endorsed; the plan results in the organization of 26,000 communes in less than two months.

1959
In March, the State Council appoints the Panchen Lama to chair the Preparatory Committee for the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Democratic reforms start in April in Tibet. In April, Liu Shaoqi replaces Mao Zedong as president of the PRC, with Song Qingling and Dong Biwu as deputies. During July and August, an extremely serious drought hits vast areas of China, affecting 30 percent of production from the land. Rebellion erupts in Tibet. Lin Biao replaces Peng Dehuai as defense minister.

1960
In July, the Soviets notify China of their withdrawal of technological support. With the exception of Xinjiang and Tibet, serious famine occurs across China, causing tens of millions of deaths.

1961
Wu Han’s controversial play Hai Rui’s Dismissal is published in January. The Twenty-sixth World Table Tennis Championships takes place in Beijing, with the Chinese winning both the men’s and women’s singles titles.

1962
In October, Chinese troops launch major offensives on the Sino-Indian border. A cease-fire is declared in November. Mao Zedong steps up emphasis on class struggle.

1963
In May, Mao Zedong launches the socialist education movement in rural areas.

1964
In January, Zhou Enlai launches an extensive tour of Africa. In August, the United States bombs North Vietnam. In October, China carries out its first nuclear test.

1965
In May, China carries out its second nuclear test. In June, the Wenhuibao newspaper denounces Wu Han’s drama Hai Rui’s Dismissal as an anti-Party poisonous weed, thereby signaling the coming of the Great Cultural Revolution. The Tibetan Autonomous Region is formally inaugurated in September.

1966
In May, the Politburo sets up the Cultural Revolution Group and calls for attacks on all representatives of the bourgeoisie who have infiltrated the Party, government, army, and cultural world. In July, Mao Zedong swims in the Yangzi River at Wuhan, refuting the rumor that he is sick. In August, Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai preside at a Cultural Revolution rally in Tiananmen Square at which Red Guards make their first appearance. The Guards subsequently begin destroying historical relics. Chairman Mao’s Quotations are first published in the form of the “Little Red Book.” Deng Xiaoping is ousted from his offices.

1967
In June, China tests its first hydrogen bomb. By December 25, China has distributed 350 million copies of Mao’s Little Red Book.

1968
The army takes control of government offices, schools, and factories. Millions of young people are sent to the countryside to receive re-education from peasants.

1969
In March, Chinese and Soviet forces clash at Zhenbaodao Island in the Ussuri River. More clashes occur in the following months. In July, the United States lifts restrictions on travel to China; the United States lifts its partial trade embargo of China in December. Liu Shaoqi dies.

1970
In April, China launches its first satellite.

1971
In April, the U.S. Ping-Pong team visits China and is followed by U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, who comes to Beijing in July. In October, China is admitted to the United Nations.

1972
In February, President Richard Nixon visits China, where he signs the joint Shanghai Communiqué admitting that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. In September, China purchases ten Boeing 707 civilian jet airliners from the United States.

1973
Deng Xiaoping becomes vice premier in August. The
United States and China announce their intention to establish liaison offices in each other’s capital.

1974

In April, Deng Xiaoping addresses the United Nations and denounces the world hegemony of the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

1975

In January, Deng Xiaoping is elected deputy chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC).

1976

A huge earthquake in Tangshan, a city near Beijing, kills more than 250,000 people. Premier Zhou Enlai dies in January, and Mao Zedong dies in September at age eighty-two. Mao’s death ends the Great Cultural Revolution. The radical group called the “Gang of Four,” led by Mao’s widow Jiang Qing, is arrested by Hua Guofeng, Mao’s handpicked successor.

1977

University admissions based on college entrance examinations start. Enrollment based on recommendations ends. Deng Xiaoping is politically rehabilitated.

1978

The “Deng era” begins. Deng Xiaoping emerges as a key leader and sets about repairing the damage caused during the last years of Mao Zedong’s rule. Deng’s market-oriented reforms, embodied in the maxim “to get rich is glorious,” spark more than two decades of phenomenal growth that lifts hundreds of millions of people out of abject poverty. In December, the Coca-Cola Company reaches an agreement with China to sell its soft drinks in the country and open up bottling plants. In the same month, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC) shifts the Party’s focus to modernization, which is also seen as the onset of the economic reforms.

1979

In January, Deng Xiaoping visits the United States and resumes the Sino-American diplomatic relationship. From January to February, Chinese troops invade Vietnamese territory and destroy logistics facilities. In July, the Fifth National People’s Congress (NPC) announces the Criminal Law and the Organic Law of the Local People’s Congresses and Local People’s Governments. Special economic zones are opened, including Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. In September, the Party criticizes Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution as ill judged and calamitous. In October, political dissident Wei Jingsheng is sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

1980

In February, the NPC Standing Committee declares regulations on issuance of academic degrees. In December, the People’s Daily declares that Mao Zedong made great mistakes during his last years and that his Great Cultural Revolution was a disaster.

1981

Deng Xiaoping is elected chairman of the Military Commission, and Hu Yaobang replaces Hua Guofeng as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC). Both Zhao Ziyang and Hua Guofeng are appointed deputy chairmen. The trial of the Gang of Four is held.

1982

In September, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher arrives in Beijing to start discussions with regard to the future of Hong Kong.

1983

The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping is published in July. Sino-British talks over Hong Kong’s future begin.

1984

In October, the Third Plenum of the Twelfth Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC) adopts a decision on reform of the economic structure, shifting the focus to urban enterprises. Measures are taken to strengthen the Tibetan economy. Fourteen coastal cities and the island of Hainan are opened to foreign investment. A Sino-British declaration on Hong Kong’s return is signed.

1985

In May, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC) releases its Decision on the Reform of the Educational System.

1986

In September, Deng Xiaoping, during a 60 Minutes interview with Mike Wallace of CBS, endorses Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union and indicates that China’s economic reforms are not in conflict with communism. In September, the Shanghai Stock Market reopens for the first time since 1949. The Bankruptcy Law is issued in December. In May and December, students in large cities stage demonstrations demanding more rapid reforms and more democracy.

1987

Faced with rising democratic pressures, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reiterates its determination to stick to the “Four Cardinal Principles.” Hu Yaobang resigns in January. Writer Liu Binyan is expelled from the Party. Zhao Ziyang is appointed general secretary of the CCP, replacing Hu Yaobang. Student unrest occurs in twenty-two Chinese cities. In November, Deng Xiaoping remains in control of the Central Military Commission. In December, Zhao Ziyang resigns as premier and is replaced by hard-liner Li Peng. In October, 2,000 Tibetan monks demonstrate in Lhasa in favor of Tibetan independence; the demonstrations lead to clashes with Chinese authorities.

1988

China slides into economic chaos triggered by rising inflation that peaks at more than 30 percent in the cities. Public discontent sets the stage for prodemocracy demonstrations in 1989. Hainan is approved for provincial status. The first nude paintings exposition is opened in Beijing in December.

1989

On May 16, Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev meet and announce the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations. On June 4, after weeks of protests by students in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, troops backed by tanks crush the demonstrations, allegedly killing hundreds of people. The event once again isolates China on the world stage. On June 5, President George Bush suspends high-level relations with Beijing in protest against the massacre. On December 10, U.S. national security adviser Brent Scowcroft meets Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. After the crackdown, Deng plucks Jiang Zemin from relative obscurity in Shanghai to be the new Communist Party chief. Jiang replaces Zhao Ziyang.

1990

In January, almost 500 students who participated in the demonstrations of the previous year are released from detention. In April, President Yang Shangkun promulgates the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) adopted by the Seventh National People’s Congress (NPC). The law is scheduled to take effect on July 1, 1997. Campaigns that aim at strengthening patriotism and discipline are launched at educational institutions.

1991

The first partial direct elections are held in Hong Kong.

1992

During his tour to Hainan and coastal cities, Deng Xiaoping reiterates his determination to continue China’s economic reforms. Beijing establishes diplomatic relations with South Korea.
A Red Guard slogan of the early Cultural Revolution period (1966-68), Chairman Mao had encouraged attacks on virtually all of the existing party apparatus, and this rebellion extended to all forms of authority: parents, teachers, doctors, scientists, musicians, artists and intellectuals of every kind were targets of attack. Many committed suicide, many more were sent to work on the land in remote areas.

批林批孔 Pi Lin pi Kong : Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius

The campaign against Lin Biao started after his 1971 attempt to assassinate Mao, and his own death in a plane crash, were made public. At first Lin was accused of being ultra-leftist, but later he was (somewhat bizarrely) labelled as ultra-right and in 1974 linked with Confucius, the sage of ancient China. The campaign to criticise Lin Biao and Confucius was really a covert attack on Zhou Enlai and his policies, viewed as pro-modernisation and as less 'radical' than those promoted by Mao himself.

實事求是 Shishi qiu shi : Seek truth from facts

This was the credo of the reformers who from 1977 onwards began 'to set the political agenda for China after the death of Mao. It meant that facts rather than ideology should be the criterion of the 'correctness' of a policy; the policy had to work in practice. Deng Xiaoping himself had said, 'It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches the mouse.' Mouse-catching (expertise) was now at a much higher premium than political colouring. This of course contrasted completely with Mao's suspicion of hard-headed empiricism. For Mao, the Foolish Old Man (a character in an ancient Chinese fable retold by Mao to encourage people to continue to struggle despite enormous difficulties), had shown that 'human will conquers heaven' and had refuted the scepticism of the so-called experts.

實現四個現代化 Shixian sige xiandaihua : Achieve the Four Modernisations

The Four Modernisations are the modernisation of science, industry, agriculture and defence. The reformers see modernisation of China in all these fields as the primary task facing China in the late twentieth century. Science, rather than mass movements and ideological upheaval, is seen as the means by which China will achieve socialism.

只生一個孩子好 Zhi sheng yige haizi hao : It is good to have just one child

Since Mao's death, the problem of rapid population growth has been treated with great seriousness by the Chinese government. On 14th April 1989 China marked 1.1 billion population day with exhortations to strengthen family planning. Predictions of severe hardship and even starvation if the rate of growth is not stemmed have been reinforced by campaigns to encourage the one-child policy. This has not been completely successful, partly because it is difficult to impose sanctions on couples in the countryside who have more than one child.

Even today slogans do still arise and will continue to appear, as governments of any political colour need to get messages across to the population, and slogans are a convenient and effective way of packaging ideas. The huge roadside boards in Beijing and other big cities used to be covered with quotations from Mao, Marx, Engels and Lenin; now for the most part these have disappeared, replaced by commercial advertisements and government posters of a less political kind: promoting health campaigns or birth control. Yet slogans are still very much part of political life.