



UNIT 4 - MAO ZEDONG'S POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IDEOLOGIES

ABOUT THIS UNIT

- *Mao Zedong's Background - Personal and Ideological*
- *Economic and Social Reforms*
- *Great Leap Forward*
- *The Cultural Revolution Decade (1966-1976)*

Introduction

In our previous units, we followed the gradual transformation of China from a long-standing feudal empire into a communist republic – the People's Republic of China (PRC). Over the first half of the 20th century, major events, such as the fall of the last dynasty, the revolution of 1911, the rise of the Communist Party in 1921, the civil war between the Nationalists (KMT) and the Communists (CCP), and the War of Resistance against Japan, all contributed, in differing ways, to shaping China's political and social fabric.

In this unit, we will review some of the main reforms that were introduced by the CCP upon taking power in 1949, most of which – both political and social – reflected Mao's own personal ideologies; and we will look at their rather tragic impact on the lives of the Chinese people over the following decades until his death in 1976.

Mao Zedong's Background – Personal and Ideological



Figure 4.1
Mao Zedong

Mao was the eldest of four children born into a fairly prosperous peasant family in Shaoshan, Hunan Province, in central China. After working on the family farm for several years, he returned to school and graduated as a teacher before going to Beijing to work as a librarian. As with many notable leaders throughout world history, where political and social views are often influenced by early exposure to the thinkers and political dynamics of their time, so it was with Mao; revolution was in the air and he became a protégé of the brilliant revolutionary thinker Li Dazhao at the prestigious Beijing University. On his own, he also read widely on such subjects as traditional Chinese literature and translations of Western works on philosophy, politics and economics.

Mao became increasingly active in revolutionary causes and participated, in 1919, in the May Fourth Movement led by students of Beijing University, which rekindled revolutionary fervour in China. He studied Marxist theory; and by 1920, three years after the Bolshevik October Revolution in 1917 in Russia, he regarded himself as a committed Marxist.

At the First National Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 – regarded as the official date of its founding – Mao attended as a delegate from Hunan Province; and so began his long involvement with the CCP and its eventual rise to power in 1949 when he was appointed chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC), with his Long March colleague Zhou Enlai as premier.

To consolidate his long-held views of reforming the economic and social characteristics of China along the Marxist model, Mao made two trips to Moscow in 1949 and 1950 and met with Stalin, where he negotiated the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. As a result, considerable technical expertise and assistance flowed from the USSR to China until an irreparable rift occurred between the two countries – a rift that had a very damaging effect on the Chinese economy and its people.

Economic and Social Reforms

To fulfil his Marxist ideological aims, Mao's first main goal was to introduce land reform to distribute the landholdings of the "capitalist gentry" more equitably among the peasantry. The Communists had begun this practice some years before in villages they controlled in northern China during the civil war with the Kuomintang (KMT). As a student of Chinese history, Mao was aware that previous changes in Chinese dynasties had been sparked by peasant unrest, often resulting in the perceived loss of the mandate of heaven, and he was keen to ensure that his hard-won peasant support was maintained. In the event, his land reforms were to completely change the life and culture of the Chinese people for the worse, but mostly for the bourgeois landowners – anathemas to Marxists.

Mao's second main goal was to promote social equality; he gave women the right to own property and equal rights in marriage and divorce; he even gave children the right to denounce parents not following the communist line. Mao's third main goal focused on the economy and institutional reform – denouncing bribery, tax fraud and bureaucratic malpractice.

Let us now look at these reforms in some detail and see what effect they had on the Chinese economy in general and on the everyday lives of the people in particular over the following decades.

Land Reform (1950–1953)

The Agrarian Law of 1950 legally underpinned Mao's ambitious land reforms, which were soon introduced throughout the whole of China – a sizeable undertaking largely completed by the end of 1953. To implement this policy, small cadres, or communist groups with some training, would encourage villagers at organised "struggle meetings" to denounce landlords who had exploited them. Depending on their level of "guilt", the landlords either had their lands confiscated and distributed amongst the workers or, in extreme cases, were tortured or even executed. Many were forced to undergo humiliating re-education and rehabilitation in oppressive labour camps.

The government succeeded in redistributing small areas of land to over 100 million poorer families and, by 1958, had combined these small farms into large collectives known as people's communes. Officials in the State Planning Commission told commune members what crops to grow and how much to produce each year. Profits were distributed to members based on the level of "work points" accumulated during the year. Through this land reform policy Mao hoped to improve the lot of the poor, to provide them with a stake in their country and, hopefully, to engender a sense of loyalty to the new government.

On the other side, however, it was a time of terror for the bourgeois capitalist landowners; and it is estimated that over one and one-half million people were executed during this period. In the short space of three years, the Communists had destroyed China's traditional rural structure under which the landlords and wealthy peasants had controlled most of the rural landholdings: "the land belongs to the man who plows it" – another Mao slogan.

The First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957)

The main aim of this plan, based on the Marxist model, was to maximise agricultural production to support the cost of developing heavy industry, as well as to pay for the USSR's considerable technical advice and loans. This was to be achieved through collective farming under the commune system described above and by government control, through ownership, of most

industries and transport infrastructure.

Targets were set to complete the state takeover of industry by 1955 and to have 98% of farmers participating in communes by 1957. To be successful, it was necessary for both administrative personnel and workers to be sufficiently trained; the government placed considerable emphasis on education, especially the enhancement of technical skills. Large numbers of Soviet technicians and engineers were arriving in China, and many Chinese went to the USSR for training.

Although the First Five-Year Plan was largely a success in economic terms, providing China with a relatively stable industrial base, a high social and economic cost was borne by China's vast peasant population, who continued to be exploited. While the urban areas were busy with industrial development, agricultural production was stagnating; further social problems were arising with millions of peasants migrating to the urban areas; unemployment and underemployment were rife; and poverty levels increased.

The situation deteriorated further as China and the USSR grew apart ideologically – a split known as the Sino-Soviet Conflict. Stalin had died in 1953; and Mao considered that his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, with his "de-Stalinisation" program, had become a "revisionist" by moving away from pure Marxist ideology towards a more capitalist approach; that he had adopted a softer line towards the West, giving more prominence to technocrats over revolutionaries; and that he had placed more stress on consumer goods and similar "capitalist" tendencies, thus betraying the true communist cause.

The result of this confrontation was to prove disastrous for China, for the USSR abruptly withdrew all technicians and technical expertise from China. The situation was compounded by the deterioration in peasant morale, the collapse of the commune system, unusually severe floods, and the onset of widespread famine – overall, a chaotic combination of events.

In an effort to retrieve the situation, Mao embarked on two further social and economic campaigns – the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Great Leap Forward, both of which were to prove disastrous. Mao lost credibility within his party and subsequently resigned in 1959 as chairman of the PRC.

As we will see, however, he rose to power yet again through another of his equally disastrous social engineering efforts, the Cultural Revolution (officially referred to as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), which commenced in 1966.

Hundred Flowers Campaign (1957)

Although Mao and his government had broadly followed the USSR model, they were becoming concerned over the implications of the uprising in Hungary against rigid Soviet rule. To avoid the possibility of a similar rebellion, Mao initiated the Hundred Flowers Campaign with the slogan "let a hundred flowers blossom together, and a hundred schools of thought contend", a reference to the so-called hundred schools of thought that had flourished from the sixth to the third centuries B.C. (Mao was very fond of slogans). The hundred flowers represented the development of the arts, and the hundred schools of thought represented the development of science. Mao believed that, by encouraging intellectual and cultural leaders to speak freely and participate in political issues, he would build a stronger and more open form of government.

Although cautious at first, several people ventured to publish critical comments about the

practices and policies of the government. Many academics, especially those who had been educated in Europe and America, were the first to speak out, often denouncing party cadres as being unqualified, incompetent, and biased towards their own personal interests.

The government never expected such a strong response and abruptly replaced the campaign with a stringent Anti-Rightist Campaign, during which thousands of intellectuals – political leaders, writers, musicians, scholars – were persecuted as "bourgeois rightists". Critics of the party were thus silenced, and few were left to oppose the excesses of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution that were to follow.

The Great Leap Forward



Figure 4.2 Propaganda poster

This campaign, the result of another of Mao's ideological views, was aimed at speeding up the development of China's heavy industries to achieve the targets set out in the First Five-Year Plan, with the goal of overtaking Great Britain's steel production within 15 years. By utilising the millions of workers available in the newly created people's communes throughout the Chinese countryside – each one set up as a local centre for economic and technical progress – it was expected that industrial goods could be manufactured in "backyard furnaces" using materials available locally, usually only scrap iron. The Great Leap Forward was given another one of Chairman Mao's slogans – "General Line for Socialist Construction". By this time, there were approximately 23,500 people's communes, each of which had been given control of all the needed means of production, and all expected to be self-supporting.

The policy was doomed to economic failure through a combination of lack of technical expertise, poor product quality and mismanagement, often leading to the deterioration of factories and equipment.

During this extensive foray into industrialisation, agriculture was largely ignored, resulting in severe famine in large areas of the country and the erosion of thousands of acres of productive farmland. Over 30 million people are estimated to have died through starvation and exhaustion. In 1959, the CCP admitted, in its national production report, that it had exaggerated the success of the Great Leap Forward, and the government was forced to cancel the program.

Although the commune remained as the main rural unit, it was divided into small production

brigades corresponding in size to the old-style village – with more manageable and family-oriented units. Private plots were given back to the people to encourage them to pay more attention to the needs of agricultural production.

Mao paid the price for his over-ambitious initiative and, in 1959, having lost the confidence of many high-ranking party members, he resigned as chairman of the People's Republic of China to be replaced by Liu Shaoqi, although Mao did remain chairman of the CCP until his death in 1976.

The Great Leap Forward has been called, rather facetiously by some later historians, the "Great Leap Backward".

The Cultural Revolution Decade (1966–1976)



Figure 4.3
The Chinese Peoples Liberation
Army is the Great School of
Mao Zedong Thought

After his resignation as chief of state in 1959, Mao's real power had moved into the hands of his successor, Liu Shaoqi, and the more moderate party bureaucrats. Mao withdrew from the policy-making process, referring to himself as a "dead ancestor"; and by the early 1960s, he was hinting that he had been put on the shelf like an old statue; he later told visiting French writer Andre Malraux that he was "alone with the masses, waiting".

What Mao was waiting for, it turned out, was the momentous cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution (formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) through which Mao set out to purge the CCP of opponents to his revolutionary ideology, to regain the power he had lost through the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the famine, and to enshrine forever his mass revolutionary cause. How did he manage to achieve this and rise again, like a phoenix from the ashes?

By early 1965, China was well on the way to economic recovery under the more moderate leadership of Party Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Secretary General Deng Xiaoping. Despite their opposition to his plans, Mao continued to work behind the scenes in his efforts to "purify the party and intensify class struggle".

To arrest the trend towards his perception of "creeping capitalism", Mao launched the Socialist Education Movement (1962–1965) to foment class struggle. This movement was linked rather strategically to a work-study program that involved the "re-education" of intellectuals and officials to accept the need for their participation in manual labour in communes and factories. In addition, Mao encouraged high school students throughout the country to seek out and identify "class

enemies".

Despite these initiatives being opposed by the more moderate party elite, Mao was able to gain strong support from the Minister of National Defense, Lin Biao, who controlled the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The revolutionary fervour then spread steadily to rural workers and the peasantry – long-time potential support groups for Mao's ideology.

The Red Guards Militant Phase (1966–1968)



Figure 4.4
A poster encouraging
the destruction of
Buddhist and other
anti-socialist images

By the middle of 1966, Mao's progressive revolutionary campaign, to become known as the Cultural Revolution, had erupted in the first mass action ever against the CCP apparatus itself. Mao had gradually, but systematically, regained control of the party, supported by the army under Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai (later to become chief of state), and Jiang Qing (Mao's third wife, who was to play a significant political role during the following years).

(Mao's first wife, Yang Kai-hui, whom he married in 1920, was executed ten years later by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. He married Ho Tzu-chen shortly after and, although not officially divorced from her, then married Jiang Qing, who had accompanied him on the Long March, in 1939. All three wives offered him loyal support through good times and bad. We will talk more about Jiang Qing later.)

Under Mao's patronage, a Cultural Revolution Group (CRG) was established, with Jiang Qing as vice-chairwoman in August 1966. Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Lin Biao presided over a massive rally in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, to officially launch the Cultural Revolution. Schools were closed and students were given free transport passes to travel to Beijing to attend this rally and those held in other major cities. Mao put on a Red Guard armband and spent several hours mingling with the young protesters.

Mao's ideology, reflecting revolutionary enthusiasm and the destruction of "counter-revolutionary" symbols and values, was politicised by Lin Biao through the use of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* – excerpts from Mao's ideological writings, to become known as the *Little Red Book*. (Within a few years, millions of copies of this *Little Red Book* had been published and widely distributed.) Support was recruited from tens of thousands of idealistic youths, particularly those not from cadre families, who were resentful of the privileges enjoyed by the children of the bureaucrats.

These students provided the basis for the so-called Red Guards; and for most of 1966 and 1967, they carried out Mao's reckless order to "bombard with criticism" the party headquarters in

Beijing and other party offices, carrying Mao's *Little Red Book* – by then a sacred text – and chanting their patriotic theme song *The Great Helmsman*, in the process wreaking havoc throughout the country.

The movement became increasingly violent; and the Red Guards, believing in Mao's slogan of "rebellion is justified", invaded old homes, destroyed books, Western-style clothes, paintings and art objects; they also defaced temples, monuments and statues all over China.

Any evidence of contact with Western education, businessmen or missionaries was cause for suspicion and provoked a violent reaction; thousands of scholars and professional people were beaten to death; many committed suicide; thousands more were either banished to far-flung provinces to engage in menial rural labour or were condemned to years of imprisonment, often in solitary confinement.

Chinese schools and universities closed and did not reopen until many years later. Educated people and academics were forced to leave cities and work on farms, resulting in a "lost generation" – people whose education and careers were permanently blighted by the Cultural Revolution.

With great publicity, Mao had a famous swim in the Yangtze River at Wuhan in 1966 to counter rumours that he was ill and to show that he was willing and able to lead the Cultural Revolution. The chairman thus succeeded in returning to his ideological revolutionary ambitions through the manipulated turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. There have been few better examples in history where a leader has established such a powerful personality cult following, without any form of religious support.

By 1968, China was on the verge of anarchy and Mao, faced with increasing chaos among the unruly and violent Red Guards, began to have second thoughts about placing his faith in the students; he finally called in the military, led by his close ally Lin Biao, to restore order through the establishment of a series of party disciplinary committees. This strategy succeeded; and the Red Guards, who had served their purpose, were officially disbanded. The impetus and apparent success of this revolutionary movement helped Mao eliminate his more powerful political enemies, such as Liu Shaoqi, who was expelled from the party in 1968 and placed under house arrest.

The treatment of this chief of state and former deputy chairman of the party provided another insight into Mao's ruthless nature. Liu was subjected to constant interrogation, underwent physical abuse in prison, and was refused medical care, all of which contributed to his early death in 1969. (The party reinstated him, posthumously, in 1980 and belatedly honoured him with a state funeral.) Other prominent officials who were purged included Deng Xiaoping, the party general secretary, and Zhu De, the leader of the Red Army during the Long March.

Conclusion

Although the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution was over by the end of 1968, the turmoil did not end until Mao's death in 1976. In **Unit 5**, we will look at the political and economic aftermath of this disastrous period; at Mao's loss of influence through a combination of rapidly declining ill-health and power plays following his death and at the daunting task that the new, more moderate party leaders faced in trying to bring stability to a nation in turmoil and to a people who had lost their way through Chairman Mao's radical ideology.

In **Unit 6** we will also put a spotlight on the lives of three outstanding women who were destined to play a significant role during these eventful decades of China's political history.

Activity 4

1. Please look at:
 - http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_mao for a comprehensive overview of the life of Chairman Mao
 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Revolution for a more detailed account of the Cultural Revolution, a momentous event in China's history.
2. Historians are still ambivalent as to whether Mao's social engineering reforms were motivated by megalomania or by an ideological desire to improve the lot of the people. Based on your reading, what conclusions have you reached??
3. How were the rampaging Red Guards eventually brought under control?

*Share your thoughts on the **Course Discussion Forum**.*

Next - Death of the "Emperor": Who will lead China?

In Unit 5, we will look at the political aftermath of the Cultural Revolution.

