



UNIT 5 - DEATH OF THE "EMPEROR": WHO WILL LEAD CHINA?

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Introduction

In Mao's view, the Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 to 1969 when the resultant outcomes were officially approved in a revised Chinese Communist Party constitution. In the modern view, however, it lasted a full ten years – a decade of political conflict and social disorder that only ended after Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent arrest and trial of his most radical associates, known as the *Gang of Four* (described later).

Mao had three main objectives in launching the Cultural Revolution. First, he wanted to recover the political power he felt was slipping from his grasp. Second, he sought to further indoctrinate the masses with his ideology of ongoing class struggle; he believed nothing worthwhile could be achieved without a sustained struggle. The third purpose was to train "revolutionary successors" to continue the social reforms he had been espousing.

Aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1969–1976)

The political and social impact of the Cultural Revolution on the Chinese people as a whole was disastrous. As well as the wilful destruction of religious buildings, museums, and historical sites, thousands of middle-class citizens were imprisoned, killed or driven to commit suicide. The education, health and transportation systems were nearly destroyed, and scientific research stopped.

During the summer of 1968, Mao realised that the current situation was no longer tenable. The Red Guards were becoming uncontrollable, with in-fighting and increasing pockets of urban violence. Mao ordered Lin Biao and his Red Army to restore order and summoned the Red Guard leaders to outline his "Down to the Countryside Movement". Over ten million Red Guards and their followers were dispatched to rural areas throughout 1968 and 1969 to "learn from the peasants"; they soon became resigned to the fact that their rural duties were permanent and that

they would miss out on a formal education, as well as other privileges normally afforded to citizens. Their period of "exile" was not lifted until the late 1970s when Deng Xiaoping's modernisation reforms were introduced.

By 1969, it was obvious that Mao's health was deteriorating. Although mentally still alert, physically he was in poor shape, suffering from a terminal motor neurone disease and severe cataracts, which were to leave him almost blind by 1974. These disabilities, compounded in later years by a series of strokes, were carefully concealed from the party and the people at large.

The military commander Lin Biao and Madame Mao (Jiang Qing, leader of the radical Gang of Four) were among those already positioning themselves for the top posts. With the leading moderates out of the way (Liu Shaoqi was in prison and Deng Xiaoping under house arrest), contenders eagerly sought Chairman Mao's blessing. However, as we shall see, each of the contenders for the top post was to suffer in one way or another from Mao's whims.

1976 proved to be a momentous year in China's history, with the deaths of the three leading CCP officials: Zhou Enlai in January, Zhu De (then Chairman of the Standing Committee and the greatest general in the history of the PRC) in July, and Chairman Mao in September, at the age of 82. Whether by coincidence or not (the Chinese people were traditionally superstitious in these matters), a massive earthquake measuring 8.2 on the Richter scale devastated an area close to Beijing, killing over 650,000 people just two months prior to Mao's death. This gave rise a popular belief that the "emperor's" reign was coming to an end, as indeed it did.

Succession Power-plays

Now let us look at the fortunes and misfortunes that befell the three main contenders vying to succeed Chairman Mao.

Lin Biao (1907–1971)

Mao initially selected Lin Biao to be his heir. He had been a Mao supporter since the Long March days and had been of great assistance in implementing the Cultural Revolution; his nomination was met with general approval by the party. But what of the man himself? How did a young country loner, described by some historians as "an unconventional maverick", rise to such an eminent position as second-in-charge to Mao and leader-in-waiting?

Lin always wanted to be a soldier. After graduating from Chiang Kai-shek's Whampoa Military Academy, he caught the eye of Zhou Enlai, who was then deputy director of the academy's political wing. In 1927, Lin joined the Chinese Communist Party and commenced his life-long opposition to Chiang Kai-shek and the ruling Nationalist Party. As a survivor of the Long March, Lin soon established himself as a valued member of the Mao faction, not least because of his military background.

As commander-in-chief of the victorious People's Liberation Army, which had eventually defeated the Nationalist forces and led to the ousting of Chiang Kai-shek from mainland China, he soon became a powerful figure in the party. He assisted Mao in implementing the Cultural Revolution by organising the Red Guards to rekindle the "class struggle" issue. It was through Lin's efforts also that the *Little Red Book* of Mao's quotations was printed and distributed to over 350 million people in an effort to nourish revolutionary enthusiasm and promote the "Cult of Personality". Lin's preface read: *Study Chairman Mao's writings, follow his teachings and act according to his instructions.*

Mao's anointment of Lin as China's second-in-charge and potential successor was officially

confirmed in April 1969 at the CCP's Ninth National Party Congress.



Figure 5.1

Lin Biao (right) with Chairman Mao
during the Cultural Revolution

The Mao-Lin partnership proved to be very successful. Lin had provided the military support needed to restore Mao's authority by purging conservative elements in the party; Mao, in return, had dramatically increased Lin's political power. He even brought in Lin's wife to join Madame Mao as the only two female members of the Politburo, a singular honour.

But in 1970 matters took an unexpected turn – Mao and Lin Biao fell out. Lin's overly ambitious nature encouraged him to build a political powerbase comprising several regional army generals and four of the top five members of the state hierarchy, which posed a real threat to Mao's authority. Mao retaliated by replacing the top military command with generals loyal to him and successfully manipulated events (as only he could) to denounce Lin in the eyes of the party.

Following accusations that Lin was attempting a coup to overthrow Mao (in fact, several failed attempts to assassinate Mao were made at that time), Lin and his family tried to escape to the U.S.S.R., but his plane crashed en route under suspicious circumstances.

Zhou Enlai (1898–1976)



Figure 5.2 Zhou Enlai

Mao had been severely shaken by the Lin Biao plot and turned for assistance to his loyal colleagues Premier Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. (Deng had been purged during the Cultural Revolution but was reinstated as a vice-premier in 1973.) Their moderate line, aimed at modernising all sectors of the economy, was formally confirmed at the Tenth National Party Congress in August 1973. This program, initiated by Zhou Enlai, became known as the Four Modernisations, a reference to the four sectors it embraced: agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology.

In his early years, Zhou spent some time in Paris as a student studying Marxism. Upon returning to China, he became political indoctrination director at Chiang Kai-shek's Whampoa Military Academy during the period of collaboration between the Communists and the Nationalist Party. In 1931, as a committed communist, he joined forces with Mao and endured the hardships of the Long March during 1934 and 1935. Of all the CCP hierarchy, Zhou was the most knowledgeable about world affairs. His negotiating skills were internationally recognised, as he demonstrated at the Bandung Conference in 1955, when twenty-nine Asian and African states met; Zhou worked out a five-point plan for peaceful coexistence that he and the Indian Prime Minister Nehru then promulgated. He held the post of China's Foreign Minister from 1949 to 1958 and was premier of the State Council until his death in early 1976.

Zhou Enlai died from cancer in January 1976, a few months before Mao. In all the ups and downs of Communist Party politics, Zhou displayed a remarkable ability to survive, especially during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution when his management and negotiating skills made him indispensable to Mao.

Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997)

A man with a less than imposing physical presence – he stood barely 1.53 metres (five feet) – and a political background of considerable ups and downs, Deng Xiaoping seemed the least likely member of the CCP hierarchy to succeed.



Figure 5.3 Deng Xiaoping

He was born in Sichuan in 1904, the son of a grain farmer. At the age of 16, he joined a group of worker-students that included his later mentor, Zhou Enlai, to study in France under the aegis of the Sino-French Education Association. By the time he returned to China five years later, he had become a committed Marxist with strong revolutionary ambitions. His years abroad afforded him an early advantage over the future leaders of China, including Mao; they gave him an international outlook, which was to serve him well when in the 1980s, as China's supreme leader, he embarked on his Modernisations program.

Upon his return from France in 1925, Deng was very active politically; with Mao, Zhou Enlai and other potential leaders in the newly established CCP, he participated in the Long March of 1935. By the 1949 proclamation of the People's Republic of China, he had become a regional chief and political commissar; and in 1955, he was admitted to the Politburo. Thus, in only six years, Deng had risen to become one of the most powerful men in China.

Deng's political fortunes took a downturn, however, during the Cultural Revolution, when he was denounced as a "capitalist-roader" by his arch enemy, Madam Mao, and her radical confederates. He was placed under house arrest with his family in 1967 and worked for some time in a provincial tractor factory. In 1973, on Zhou Enlai's strong recommendation, Mao unexpectedly reappointed him to the Politburo as a junior vice-premier, responsible mainly for entertaining visiting statesmen.

(The Politburo, or outer cabinet, consisted of 25 men; below it stood the 210-member Central Committee, where younger people, such as engineers, technicians, and provincial party leaders voiced the growing concerns and pressures from below. Final policy decisions were taken by the six-man Standing Committee or inner cabinet.)

Now the political landscape had completely changed during Deng's six years in exile: Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao were dead, most of his principal supporters were in prison, and his patron Zhou Enlai was suffering from cancer. Mao still dominated the party, but his health was deteriorating rapidly following a series of strokes. In 1974, Mao further promoted Deng to the position of first vice-premier, apparently in an effort to counterbalance the increasing power of the Gang of Four. When Premier Zhou died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping, as the first vice-premier, was the logical successor to the top post, but he suffered a severe setback after the Gang of Four, led by Madame Mao, persuaded the ailing Mao to denounce him (yet again) and strip him of all public posts.

Mao's next move surprised everyone. He nominated Hua Guofeng, a relatively junior vice-premier from Mao's home province Hunan, to be acting premier and apparent successor.

Why Hua Guofeng – a relatively minor player in the CCP hierarchy who had not even put his hand up for consideration? Mao had become increasingly suspicious of his wife and her colleagues' political ambitions (he had been estranged from her for some time), and he was keen to ensure that his legacy was left in more moderate hands after his death. Hua's background appealed to him: he was from the same province; and he had moved up the political ladder, albeit slowly, holding such positions as head of Hunan's Cultural and Education Office (leading the movement to end illiteracy) and then personal assistant to Premier Zhou Enlai in the State Council office. He also played a significant part in the investigation and subsequent downfall of Lin Biao.

Hua had subsequently been elected junior vice-premier and made Minister of Public Security, where he developed a close relationship with Mao. After Deng's 1976 demotion, Hua was named acting premier and vice-chairman of the party, second in seniority to Mao, who was quoted as telling Hua "with you in charge, I'm at ease". After Mao's death, Hua

Guofeng was officially confirmed as CCP chairman and premier, and he immediately set about purging the radical elements from the party structure (including the Gang of Four).

In July 1977, Deng, the perennial survivor, was reinstated to all the posts that had been stripped from him the previous year. As vice-premier he held positions of considerable influence, being directly responsible for education, science and technology, the military, and foreign affairs; he was later appointed chairman of the powerful CCP Military Commission.

In 1978, Deng's powerbase had become strong enough to replace Premier Hua with his own protégé Hu Yaobang; and together Hu and Deng proceeded to introduce a series of pragmatic economic modernisation programs.

Although still first vice-premier, he subsequently held no top government posts, such as president or general secretary. However, there was no doubt that Deng, by virtue of his direct control of the army, as well as his broad experience and status, was regarded as the "paramount leader". By the end of 1981, Deng had gathered into his hands control of China's three pillars – the army, the government and the party. From this position of power, he was then able to guide China's progress towards modernisation and global involvement for the next decade or so.

Throughout the 1980s, Deng recognised the need to abandon the party's long-held Sinocentric outlook; and his visionary strategies set China on a path of rapid economic development through his encouragement of "socialism with Chinese characteristics – to get rich is glorious". These strategies transformed China into a significant player on the world's political stage and in the global trading economy. As an example of his efforts to bring China into the mainstream of international affairs, Deng accepted President Jimmy Carter's invitation to visit the United States in 1979, resulting in full diplomatic relations being restored between the two countries. A photo of Deng sitting on a stagecoach wearing a "wild-west" Stetson hat was flashed around the world. However, his international image was later tarnished when he condoned the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 (described later in this unit).

In 1992, Deng, 88 years old and ailing, named Jiang Zemin, former mayor of Shanghai and the CCP General Secretary, as his successor. In May 1993, he stepped down as paramount leader and commander-in-chief of the army. Ever the pragmatic optimist, Deng Xiaoping will also be remembered for his pithy comments, such as: "even a blind cat sometimes trips over a dead mouse" and "it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice". He died in February 1997.

The Gang of Four



Yao Wenyuan



Jiang Qing



Zhang Chungqiao



Wang Hongwen

Figure 5.4 The Gang of Four 1980

Jiang Qing (Madame Mao) and her three principal advisers, Zhang Chungqiao, Wang Hongwen, and Yao Wenyuan – all members of the Politburo (the executive and policy-making committee of the CCP) – formed a radical clique during the Cultural Revolution. Mao had dubbed them his "Gang of Four" – a sobriquet that is still used by historians today.

On Premier Hua's orders, the Gang of Four and many of their supporters were arrested and imprisoned to await trial. The Cultural Revolution was finally over, and the process of attributing blame began in earnest.

The Gang of Four were considered to be convenient by the new leadership, who were most reluctant to blame Mao directly. The official party view was that Jiang Qing and her cohorts

were largely to blame for the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. They were put on trial in 1980, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Eleven years later, Jiang Qing was found hanging in her cell. She had taken her own life. Yao Wenyuan, the last surviving member, died in obscurity in December 2005.

Some prominent historians assert that, had the Gang of Four succeeded, modern-day China might more closely resemble North Korea, suffering from poverty, oppression and isolation from the rest of the world.

As for Mao's legacy, historians still dispute his rightful place in China's history. The party's official version suggests that the Cultural Revolution was a serious mistake by Mao. Even so, they maintain that his overall contribution to China's history was 70% good and 30% bad. On the other hand, Mao biographers, such as Jung Chang and her husband Jon Halliday (authors of *Mao: The Unknown Story*), are damning in their assessment of Mao's legacy, asserting that his contribution to China's history and the overall effect on the Chinese people was disastrous. Nevertheless, a large image of Mao is today portrayed conspicuously on one wall of Tiananmen Square, a symbol of the current leadership's continuing regard for "The Great Helmsman".

Tiananmen Massacre – National and International Consequences

On 4 June 1989, China became the focus of world attention through a disastrous human rights violation referred to by the Chinese as the "June 4 incident", but described by western media even today as the "Tiananmen Square Massacre".

During the years following Mao's death and the rise to power of the more moderate party leaders, such as Deng Xiaoping, there was a general expectation among the students and intellectuals that a more democratic style of government would evolve. However, the pace of progress was slow; and student protests were regularly held in the main cities. Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang was tolerant of student concerns and took no action provided the protests remained peaceful. Party hard-liners criticised Hu for being too lenient, and he was demoted and sidelined in 1987; students immediately hailed him as a hero.



Figure 5.5 Tiananmen Square

Hu's death in April 1989 prompted large pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing and Shanghai; wreaths were placed to commemorate him. In late April, over 100,000 students held a sit-in rally in Tiananmen Square, and supporters arrived from most of the provinces. They demanded greater democracy (freedom of speech and a free press) and more transparency in the financial dealings of CCP leaders to allay concerns of rampant corruption.

A second problem brewing for the government was a growing movement by the workers, who were affected by the introduction of stringent economic policies. Inflation was high and the unemployment rate, particularly in urban areas, was spiralling to alarming levels. Drastic measures were needed to stabilise the situation.

On 20 May, the hard-line faction led by Li Peng imposed martial law in Beijing; brought People's Liberation Army troops, supported by tanks, into Tiananmen Square; and warned students to disperse or be fired upon. (Coincidentally, U.S.S.R. President Gorbachev was on a state visit to Beijing at that time. This had the double effect of embarrassing the CCP leaders and providing a respite for the demonstrators.)

On the fateful day of 4 June, Li Peng ordered the army to make its move, and the shooting began. Estimates of fatalities, both in Beijing and other cities, ranged from nil (government sources) to 2,600 (Red Cross) to 7,000 (student figures). The Chinese people were shocked by the massacre, since students had always been held in high regard. Li Peng, a leading contender for high office, was to pay the price for his rather impetuous actions as he was later criticised and demoted by Deng. He was subsequently replaced as president by Jiang Zemin (see above).

The brutal nature of the massacre, which could have been prevented with more prudent handling, immediately strained international relationships with China – the more so as it was observed first-hand by the foreign correspondents covering Gorbachev's visit. It was a minor blessing that Gorbachev had departed a few weeks earlier and did not observe the massacre. The incident was also telecast around the world by the American network CNN. International trade sanctions were imposed on China; the United States and European Union also placed a weapons embargo on the PRC, which remains in place today.

The internal repercussions were also significant, and the government acted swiftly to suppress publication of the event within China. That part of the country's history has been expunged from all public records, and the media is forbidden to make any reference to it. Internet websites remain censored; and in January 2006, Google agreed to censor their mainland China site by preventing access to any information about the massacre, as well as any websites that discuss Tibet, the Falun Gong spiritual movement, or Taiwan's political status in non-condemnatory terms. This strict censorship regime still remains.

As an aside, the brave young man facing the tank in the above photo has never been identified and his fate remains unknown.

Activity 5

- 1. What social consequences resulted from the CCP's decision to send millions of young people to rural areas to "learn from the peasants" during the late 1960s?*
- 2. Why do you think Deng Xiaoping was "the perennial survivor"?*
- 3. Were the Gang of Four scapegoats for the Cultural Revolution debacle?*

*Join the discussion on the **Course Discussion Forum***

Next - Spotlight on three women of destiny

In Unit 6, we will look at three women of destiny and see to what extent each of them succeeded in their respective areas of influence.

