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Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong, (born Dec. 26, 1893, Shaoshan, Hunan province, China—died Sept. 9, 1976, Beijing), principal Chinese Marxist theorist, soldier, and statesman who led his nation's communist revolution. Leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1935, he was chairman (chief of state) of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1959 and chairman of the party until his death.

When China emerged from a half century of revolution as the world's most populous nation and launched itself on a path of economic development and social change, Mao Zedong occupied a critical place in the story of the country's resurgence. In the early years of the Chinese Communist Party, he was a secondary figure, though by no means a negligible one, and even after the 1940s (except perhaps during the Cultural Revolution) the crucial decisions were not his alone. Nevertheless, looking at the whole period from the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 to Mao's death in 1976, one can fairly regard Mao Zedong as the principal architect of the new China.

Early years

Born in the village of Shaoshan in Hunan province, Mao was the son of a former peasant who had become affluent as a farmer and grain dealer. He grew up in an environment in which education was valued only as training for keeping records and accounts. From the age of eight he attended his native village's primary school, where he acquired a basic knowledge of the Confucian Classics. At 13 he was forced to begin working full-time on his family's farm. Rebelling against paternal authority (which included an arranged marriage that was forced on him and that he never acknowledged or consummated), Mao left his family to study at a higher primary school in a neighbouring county and then at a secondary school in the provincial capital, Changsha. There he came in contact with new ideas from the West.

Enlisting in a unit of the revolutionary army in Hunan, Mao spent six months as a soldier. While he probably had not yet clearly grasped the idea that, as he later put it, "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," his first brief military experience at least confirmed his boyhood admiration of military leaders and exploits. In primary school days, his heroes had included not only the great warrior-emperors of the Chinese past but Napoleon and George Washington as well.

The spring of 1912 saw the birth of the new Chinese republic and the end of Mao's military service. For a year he drifted from one thing to another, trying, in turn, a police school, a law school, and a business school; he studied history in a secondary school and then spent some months reading many of the classic works of the Western liberal tradition in the provincial library.

Mao eventually graduated from the First Provincial Normal School in Changsha in 1918. While officially an institution of secondary level rather than of higher education, the normal school offered a high standard of instruction in Chinese history, literature, and philosophy as well as in Western ideas. While at the school, Mao also acquired his first experience in political activity by helping to establish several student organizations.

From the normal school in Changsha, Mao went to Peking University, China's leading intellectual centre. The half year he spent there working as a librarian's assistant was of

disproportionate importance in shaping his future career, for it was then that he came under the influence of the two men who were to be the principal figures in the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party: Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu. Moreover, he found himself at Peking University precisely during the months leading up to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which was to a considerable extent the fountainhead of all of the changes that were to take place in China in the ensuing half century.

In an editorial published in July 1919, Mao wrote:

The world is ours, the nation is ours, society is ours. If we do not speak, who will speak? If we do not act, who will act?

Mao and the Chinese Communist Party

In September 1920 he became principal of the Lin Changsha primary school, and in October he organized a branch of the Socialist Youth League there. That winter he married Yang Kaihui (Yang K'ai-hui), the daughter of his former ethics teacher. In July 1921 he attended the First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, together with representatives from the other communist groups in China and two delegates from the Moscow-based Comintern (Communist International). In 1923, when the young party entered into an alliance with Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang [Pinyin: Guomindang]), Mao was one of the first communists to join the Nationalist Party and to work within it. During the first half of 1924, he lived mostly with his wife and two infant sons in Shanghai, where he was a leading member of the Nationalists' Executive Bureau.

In the winter of 1924-25, Mao returned to his native village of Shaoshan for a rest. There, after witnessing demonstrations by peasants stirred into political consciousness by the shooting of several dozen Chinese by foreign police in Shanghai (May and June 1925), Mao suddenly became aware of the revolutionary potential inherent in the peasantry. Although born in a peasant household, he had, in the course of his student years, adopted the Chinese intellectual's traditional view of the workers and peasants as ignorant and dirty. His conversion to Marxism had forced him to revise his estimate of the urban proletariat, but he continued to share Marx's own contempt for the backward and amorphous peasantry. Now he turned back to the rural world of his youth as the source of China's regeneration. Following the example of other communists working within the Nationalist Party who had already begun to organize the peasants, Mao sought to channel the spontaneous protests of the Hunanese peasants into a network of peasant associations.

The road to power

Mao Zedong's 22 years in the wilderness can be divided into four phases. The first of these is the initial three years when Mao and Zhu De, the commander in chief of the army, successfully developed the tactics of guerrilla warfare from base areas in the countryside. These activities, however, were regarded even by their protagonists, and still more by the Central Committee in Shanghai (and by the Comintern in Moscow), as a holding operation until the next upsurge of revolution in the urban centres. In the summer of 1930 the Red Army was ordered by the Central Committee to occupy several major cities in south-central China in the hope of sparking a revolution by the workers. When it became evident that persistence in this attempt could only lead to further costly losses, Mao disobeyed orders and abandoned the battle to return to the base in southern Jiangxi. During this year Mao's wife was executed by the Nationalists, and he married He Zizhen, with whom he had been living since 1928.

The second phase (the Ziangxi period) centres on the founding in November 1931 of the Chinese Soviet Republic in a portion of Jiangxi province, with Mao as chairman. Since there was little support for the revolution in the cities, the promise of ultimate victory now seemed to reside in the gradual strengthening and expansion of the base areas. The Soviet regime soon came to control a population of several million; the Red Army, grown to a strength of

some 200,000, easily defeated large forces of inferior troops sent against it by Chiang Kai-shek in the first four of the so-called encirclement and annihilation campaigns. But it was unable to stand up against Chiang's own elite units, and in October 1934 the major part of the Red Army, Mao, and his pregnant wife abandoned the base in Jiangxi and set out for the northwest of China, on what is known as the Long March.

During the years 1936–40, Mao had, for the first time since the 1920s, the leisure to devote himself to reflection and writing. It was then that he first read in translation a certain number of Soviet writings on philosophy and produced his own account of dialectical materialism, of which the best-known portions are those entitled "On Practice" and "On Contradiction." More important, Mao produced the major works that synthesized his own experience of revolutionary struggle and his vision of how the revolution should be carried forward in the context of the united front. On military matters there was first *Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War*, written in December 1936 to sum up the lessons of the Jiangxi period (and also to justify the correctness of his own military line at the time), and then *On Protracted War* and other writings of 1938 on the tactics of the anti-Japanese war. As to his overall view of the events of these years, Mao adopted an extremely conciliatory attitude toward the Nationalists in his report entitled *On the New Stage* (October 1938), in which he attributed to it the leading role both in the war against Japan and in the ensuing phase of national reconstruction. By the winter of 1939–40, however, the situation had changed sufficiently so that he could adopt a much firmer line, claiming leadership for the communists. Internationally, Mao argued, the Chinese revolution was a part of the world proletarian revolution directed against imperialism (whether it be British, German, or Japanese); internally, the country should be ruled by a "joint dictatorship of several parties" belonging to the anti-Japanese united front. For the time being, Mao felt, the aims of the Communist Party coincided with the aims of the Nationalists, and therefore communists should not try to rush ahead to socialism and thus disrupt the united front. But neither should they have any doubts about the ultimate need to take power into their own hands in order to move forward to socialism. During this period, in 1939, Mao divorced He Zizhen and married a well-known film actress, Lan Ping (who by that time had changed her name to Jiang Qing).

The issues of Nationalist-communist rivalry for the leadership of the united front are related to the continuing struggle for supremacy within the Chinese Communist Party, for Mao's two chief rivals—Wang Ming, who had just returned from a long stay in Moscow, and Zhang Guotao (Chang Kuo-t'ao), who had at first refused to accept Mao's political and military leadership—were both accused of excessive slavishness toward the Nationalists. But perhaps even more central in Mao's ultimate emergence as the acknowledged leader of the party was the question of what he had called in October 1938 the "Sinification" of Marxism—its adaptation not only to Chinese conditions but to the mentality and cultural traditions of the Chinese people.

Mao could not claim the firsthand knowledge possessed by many other leading members of the Chinese Communist Party of how communism worked within the Soviet Union nor the ability to read Marx or Lenin in the original, which some of them enjoyed. He could and did claim, however, to know and understand China. The differences between him and the Soviet-oriented faction in the party came to a head at the time of the so-called Rectification Campaign of 1942–43.

In March 1943 Mao achieved for the first time formal supremacy over the party, becoming chairman of the Secretariat and of the Political Bureau. Shortly thereafter the Rectification Campaign took, for a time, the form of a harsh purge of elements not sufficiently loyal to Mao. The campaign was run by Kang Sheng, who was later to be one of Mao's key supporters in the Cultural Revolution.

Formation of the People's Republic of China

Nevertheless, when the communists did take power in China, both Mao and Stalin had to make the best of the situation. In December 1949 Mao, now chairman of the People's Republic of China—which he had proclaimed on October 1—traveled to Moscow, where, after two months of arduous negotiations, he succeeded in persuading Stalin to sign a treaty of mutual assistance accompanied by limited economic aid. Before the Chinese had time to profit from the resources made available for economic development, however, they found themselves dragged into the Korean War in support of the Moscow-oriented regime in P'yöngyang. Only after this baptism of fire did Stalin, according to Mao, begin to have confidence in him and believe he was not first and foremost a Chinese nationalist.

Despite these tensions with Moscow, the policies of the People's Republic of China in its early years were in very many respects based, as Mao later said, on "copying from the Soviets." While Mao and his comrades had experience in guerrilla warfare, in mobilization of the peasants in the countryside, and in political administration at the grass roots, they had no firsthand knowledge of running a state or of large-scale economic development. In such circumstances the Soviet Union provided the only available model. A five-year plan was therefore drawn up under Soviet guidance; it was put into effect in 1953 and included Soviet technical assistance and a number of complete industrial plants. Yet, within two years, Mao had taken steps that were to lead to the breakdown of the political and ideological alliance with Moscow.

While the Cultural Revolution was an entirely logical culmination of Mao's last two decades, it was by no means the only possible outcome of his approach to revolution, nor need a judgment of his work as a whole be based primarily on this last phase.

Few would deny Mao Zedong the major share of credit for devising the pattern of struggle based on guerrilla warfare in the countryside that ultimately led to victory in the civil war and thereby to the overthrow of the Nationalists, the distribution of land to the peasants, and the restoration of China's independence and sovereignty. These achievements must be given a weight commensurate with the degree of injustice prevailing in Chinese society before the revolution and with the humiliation felt by the Chinese people as a result of the dismemberment of their country by the foreign powers. "We have stood up," Mao said in September 1949.

In September 1967, with many cities on the verge of anarchy, Mao sent in the army to restore order.

Mao appeared victorious, but his health was deteriorating. His later years saw attempts to build bridges with the United States, Japan and Europe. In 1972, US President Richard Nixon visited China and met Mao.

Mao died on 9 September 1976. Mao's death in 1976, plunged China into national grief.