The Hundred Flowers Campaign was an intense, but short-lived, period that encouraged open criticism and discussion of the Communist regime in the otherwise tightly controlled intellectual climate of 1950s China. It resulted in another campaign aimed to purge those considered to be at the “right” of the party.

In May 1956 Mao Zedong (1893–1976), leader of the People’s Republic of China, announced that the government would relax its strict control over thought and expression. The policy later became known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign, or Hundred Flowers Movement. The new freedoms promised under the campaign, however, lasted only a little more than a year.

As part of the campaign, Mao invited intellectuals to voice their criticism of party and government policies and leaders. The intellectuals, especially educators, had lost faith in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after it introduced a Soviet-style education system to China in the early 1950s. Under this system liberal arts education was discarded in favor of science and technology education. Mao thought to win over the alienated intellectuals by giving them a degree of intellectual freedom. For example, intellectuals who worked in schools, colleges, and universities were given more access to foreign publications.

The campaign was slow to catch on. Leaders within the party resisted the possibility of criticism. The intellectuals were reluctant to criticize the government for fear of reprisals. It was only in the spring of 1957, after Mao made a desperate plea to get the campaign moving with the slogan “Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” that members of political parties, writers, journalists, teachers, and professionals began to openly criticize Communist rule, government policy, and party members. (The phrase “a hundred schools of thought” reverberates throughout China’s history in reference to the myriad philosophies, from Confucianism to Daoism to Legalism and more, that proliferated during the Warring States period 475–221 BCE.) In some extreme cases, wall posters appeared in public attacking the entire Communist system. Some people even publicly questioned the legitimacy of CCP rule. Mao and other party leaders were not prepared for the volume and intensity of the criticism.

By early July, just five weeks after the inauguration of the campaign, the party launched the dramatic new Anti-Rightist Campaign that shifted the target of criticism from the Communists to the intellectuals. Critics of the regime were themselves severely criticized by party members. An estimated 500,000–750,000 intellectuals were denounced or blacklisted. Some were arrested, and many were sent to the countryside to “rectify their thinking through labor.” In 1979, three years after the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), the new leader of the CCP, finally restored a “decent name” to (i.e., rehabilitated) these vilified intellectuals, but the damage had
Mao Zedong introduces the “Hundred Flowers”

These notes from Mao’s speech to the Politburo on 25 April 1956 are the first published reference attributed to Mao on the policy of “letting a hundred flowers bloom.”

In their speeches [many comrades] displayed a lack of vigor. The relationship of the low-level [cadres] to the upper-level [cadres] is like that of a mouse when it sees a cat, as though its soul has been eaten away. There was so much [on their minds], they didn’t dare speak out. This same problem of a lack of democracy also exist in the various provinces. However, there were some model workers who did speak out quite spiritedly. Our Financial and Economic [Work] Conference and the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee had some side effects. Because of several stipulations, people did not venture to speak their minds. At the Economic and Financial [Work] Conference, certain comrades did not give appropriate speeches, and there were some who didn’t dare speak up at all…

We must delegate certain powers to the lower levels. Our [system of] discipline has come mostly from the Soviet Union. If the discipline is too strict, we will be fettering people. It is not possible to smash bureaucratism this way. The dictatorship of the proletariat requires an appropriate system. The Political Bureau and the State Council have not yet decided on either the problem of the division of power between the central government and the local areas, or how to the one-person management system of the Soviet Union came about. The various provinces should share power, they should not be afraid of being called people who clamor for independence. As the Center has not yet arrived at a decision, we are free to speak up. Every locality can draw up on its own regulations, bylaws, and methods as provided for by the Constitution. We must enable the various localities to be creative, spirited, and full of vigor. Beginning next year, we should convene a large conference annually…

In art and literature, to “let a hundred flowers bloom,” and in academic studies, to “let a hundred schools of thought contend” (as a hundred schools contended during the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States period) should be taken as a guideline. This was the view of the people two thousand years ago.


already been done. Mao’s distrust of the intelligentsia had a long-standing effect on China’s efforts at modernization efforts.

Stephanie CHUNG

Further Reading

