

MAO Zedong

Máo Zédōng 毛泽东

1893–1976 *Founder of the Chinese Communist Party*

Mao Zedong was a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party and the architect of China's Communist revolution. Some of his socialist policies failed, but his legacy as a firm nationalist leader and the “founding father” of an independent China still inspires post-Mao generations.

Mao Zedong, raised in central Hunan Province by a middle-class peasant family, was the leading architect of China's twentieth-century Communist revolution. After receiving both a traditional education and a Westernized normal school

training and being inspired by the antiforeign revolutionary nationalism of the May Fourth Movement, Mao in 1921 became a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

While cooperating with the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) Mao worked on rural issues, serving as principal of the Sixth Session of the Peasant Movement Training Institute in 1926. He wrote one of his most important early works, “Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” just as the Communist alliance with the Nationalists unraveled in 1927. As the Communist Party collapsed in the urban areas, Mao retreated to the countryside. His view that the peasants, as the most oppressed social class, were the most revolutionary clashed with the more

A young Mao Zedong, leader of China's Communists, addresses some of his followers on 6 December 1944. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT LIBRARY.





Chairman Mao's huge portrait in Tiananmen Square looms over the crowds with an imposing presence; Mao is said to have purposefully cultivated his resemblance to the iconic, chubby-cheeked representations of Buddha.

traditional Communist view of other party leaders, who concentrated on China's rather small industrial-worker class. Mao from 1927 to late 1934 championed the peasant struggle, building with Zhu De (1886–1976) and others the Red Army that used guerrilla tactics against GMD forces. Between late 1927 and late 1934 Mao headed a Communist base area in the Jiangxi region that for a

brief time functioned as a Soviet republic but soon became the target of encirclement campaigns launched by Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek. Mao and others, forced to flee their bases in southeastern China, led the army to northwestern China on what became known as the "Long March." Mao became the chairman of the CCP in 1935—a position he retained until his



Mao's Little Red Book, with a color portrait of Mao on the cover. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.

death—and his views on the importance of the peasants to China's revolution became dominant.

The takeover of Manchuria by Japan in 1932 and China's War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945, known outside China as the Second Sino-Japanese War) caused Mao to shift his attention from internal struggle to the external imperialist threat. While the Communist Party fought anti-Japanese rear-guard actions from 1936 to 1945, Mao formed his views of a socialist revolution in China. He differed from traditional Marxist doctrine in the emphasis he put on peasants, but he retained the concepts of class struggle and the vanguard role of the party. In 1945 his concepts were enshrined in the CCP's Seventh Congress constitution as "Mao Zedong Thought."

During the war years nationalist spirit spread support for the CCP. In 1945 halfhearted attempts at a coalition government presaged civil war against the GMD. The Communist Party renamed its military the "People's Liberation Army" (PLA) and used Mao's strategy in North

China of surrounding cities from the countryside to gain advantages over the GMD. This strategy led to the Communist victory by Mao, who in October 1949 oversaw the founding the People's Republic of China. However, by the summer of 1950 China was drawn into Cold War struggles in Korea (Mao's son was killed in U.S. bombing there) and fought U.N. forces to a draw, setting the stage for anti-Americanism triggered by continued U.S. support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan.

"Land to the Tiller"

On the domestic front Mao turned attention to China's socialist transformation. The first priority was land reform. Vowing to keep the promise of "land to the tiller" made by Nationalist revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), Mao pushed policies that by 1955–56 created the basic collectivization of newly distributed land into agricultural producers' cooperatives. China, following the Soviet Union's definition of socialism, also established basic state ownership of industry by the time the Eighth CCP Congress convened in 1957. While other party leaders, especially Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) and Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969), were ready to consolidate early achievements, Mao, who was worried by the problems of corruption and bureaucracy, first invited and then quashed criticism by intellectuals in the Hundred Flowers initiative and the ensuing anti-Rightist campaigns against those who were deemed reactionary. Mao argued that consolidation could result in a loss of momentum, even reversal, by entrenching a new generation of elites. His campaign to achieve the natural socialist potential of the newly released peasant masses led to his policies of the Great Leap Forward (1958–59), which was aimed at creating a "new socialist man." Rightist intellectuals and other party critics were to be reformed by physical labor, especially by working at the poorly conceived backyard steel furnaces, which, Mao promised, would allow China to overtake England in steel and iron production. This campaign also was meant to transfer technology to the countryside using the new People's Communes as the economic, social, and political interface with the center. But famine and failures resulting from the Great Leap Forward created the first serious fissure within the CCP leadership and disillusion with Mao among the general Chinese population just as

he began to form his own cult of personality as the senior leader and, as he envisioned it, heir to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin within the international socialist camp.

Relations with the Soviet Union suffered, however, from Mao's failed policies. Criticism of his deviations from Soviet models led to Soviet withdrawal of technical experts. This withdrawal disrupted major infrastructure

projects. Mao struck back by criticizing the Soviet Union for following the "capitalist road." He defended his policies as the logical next step in the world socialist movement, a posture that worsened the Soviet-Sino split. In China, even as the country recovered from the disasters of the Great Leap Forward, Mao denounced many within the party for "taking the capitalist road" like the Soviets,



This statue of Mao Zedong with upraised hand evokes the pronouncement he made on 1 October 1949, the day the People's Republic of China was born: "China has stood up."

and for failing to continue the revolution. In response he launched the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Helped by General Lin Biao (1907–1971), who promoted the study of Mao's ideas among the ranks of the PLA in the ubiquitous, Western-dubbed Little Red Book, Mao began his attack first against noncompliant party intellectuals and then against the central core of the party leadership, again accusing them of being “capitalist roaders.” By mobilizing the masses, especially Red Guard youth, closing schools, and using his own cult image, Mao intended to create a generation of revolutionary successors deserving of the sacrifices of parents' and grandparents' generation. But over-exuberant attacks on authority threatened chaos. Many party members were sent to May Seventh Cadre Schools (established after Mao's 7 May 1966 directive, these rural schools demanded that students perform hard labor when not studying Mao's philosophies. By the summer of 1968 Mao was sending hordes of students to the countryside to “learn from the peasants.” Mao institutionalized the Cultural Revolution at the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969 by forming Revolutionary Committees in government offices, factories, and communes. Mao also rewarded Lin Biao for his work in building the Mao cult by naming him as his successor.

Mao's growing suspicion that he had been betrayed by Lin Biao, China's admission to the United Nations, and continued Sino-Soviet border disputes prompted Mao in 1972 to invite U.S. president Richard Nixon to China, despite U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. From 1972 until Mao's death in 1976, ideologues, including Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (1914–1991), attempted to assert power under cover of Mao's name.

Mao's death concluded an era of radical ideological leadership in China, but his legacy as a firm nationalist leader and the “founding father” of an independent China still inspires post-Mao generations. Mao's preserved body continues to lie in state in his mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, whereas the bodies of Stalin and

Russian Communist leader Vladimir Lenin have been buried. While their statues have been removed from public places, Mao's remain on display, and Mao souvenirs are still popular items among both Chinese and foreigner tourists.

“People's War”

In addition to their influence in China, Mao's concepts of a “people's war” using guerrilla tactics were adopted by Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh even during Mao's lifetime. His ideas on this subject are also used in Western military training to teach counterinsurgency. In other parts of the world Maoist groups exist, such as the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru, the Naxalite movement in India, and in 2008 the Maoists in Nepal who won a civil war under the leadership of the self-proclaimed Maoist leader Comrade Prachanda. These groups have emphasized Mao's strategy of a peasant-led anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeoisie struggle to seizing power rather than his economic development model.

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Further Reading

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