

# Mao Zedong Liberator or oppressor of China?

by Michael Lynch

The setting is Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the capital of China. The date is August 1966. The Square is packed with a vast throng of young people. In unison, their faces a picture of ecstasy, they wave their little red books of the sayings of Chairman Mao and repeatedly scream and chant his name. The object of their adoration, who stands on the balcony of the South Gate overlooking the Square, is a drug addicted 73-year-old womaniser. He is also the ruler of a quarter of the world's population.

Such scenes remain one of the most powerful images of twentieth-century China. The worship of Chairman Mao Zedong was extreme, but it was not wholly irrational. It was a recognition of what he had achieved for China. Those many millions of Chinese who ritualistically invoked 'Mao, Mao, Mao Zedong' saw him as the supreme militation at the hands of the foreigner. One of the titles given him was 'the red sun rising in the east', an apt metaphor for the man who, having led a momentous social and political revolution in China, went on to make his country a nuclear Superpower, defying the USA, displacing the Soviet Union as the leader of international socialism, and becoming the model for the struggle against colonialism.

## Imperial China

The China into which Mao Zedong was born in 1893 was a deeply troubled land. For centuries it had believed itself to be superior to all other cultures and had deliberately avoided foreign contacts. But by the end of the nineteenth century its self-belief had been shattered. Since the 1840s number of Western nations, principally Britain, Germany, France and the USA, had forced the Chinese to enter into a series of 'unequal treaties' which obliged them to surrender sovereign territory and accept trade on western terms. By 1900 over 50 Chinese 'treaty ports' were in foreign possession. The people's bitterness at such humiliation created mounting dissatisfaction with imperial government. The inability of the ruling Qing (hu) dynasty to protect China encouraged the emergence of a revolutionary movement whose chief aim was to achieve 'a revolution against the world to join the

world', to end China's subjection to the West by adopting progressive Western political and economic ways.

## Mao's Early Years

Mao was born into a relatively well-to-do landed family in Hunan province. He was what might be termed a 'natural rebel'. Doted on by his mother, he fell out with his father and refused to show him the respect traditionally expected of Chinese sons. As a teenager, Mao played a small role as a volunteer soldier in Changsha in the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which saw the collapse and abdication of the Qing. He then moved to Beijing where he furthered his education and in 1919 took up a post as librarian in Beijing University. It was there that he was introduced to Marxist ideas and developed the conviction that if China was to be truly regenerated it would have to undergo a profound social and political revolution.

His belief was strengthened by his awareness that the 1911 revolution had brought China little benefit. Although a republican government had replaced the imperial system, it exercised only nominal power. Throughout China local warlords and factions struggled to assert authority. Mao recorded the savagery that became commonplace:

During my student days in Hunan, the city was overrun by the forces of rival warlords—not once but half a dozen times. Twice the school was occupied by troops and all the school funds confiscated. The brutal punishments inflicted on the peasants include such things as gouging out eyes, ripping out tongues, disembowelling and decapitation, slashing with knives and grinding with sand, burning with kerosene and branding with red hot irons. The situation was appalling. People had nothing to eat; families were split up.

The barbarity Mao witnessed greatly affected him. He concluded that the only way to gain power was through violence. This helps to explain why throughout his career he was so ready to use brutal means in crushing political opponents. One of his most revealing sayings was, 'All power grows out of the barrel of a gun'.

By the 1920s two main revolutionary parties were in contention in China: the Nationalists or Guomindang (GMD), created by Sun Yatzen and led after 1925 by Chiang Kaishek, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which came into being in 1921 with Mao as one of its founder members. In 1924 the two parties formed a GMD-CCP united front against the warlords, but the unity was more apparent than real. The GMD's main aim under Chiang was to destroy the Communists. In 1927 it launched the 'White Terror' extermination campaign against them. Mao survived by taking his CCP forces to the mountains of Jiangxi province, where he organised guerrilla resistance, known as the Autumn Harvest Rising.

During the next seven years Mao helped to establish the Jiangxi Soviet, dedicated to the furtherance of peasant revolution. He showed himself unwilling to accept dictation from the Comintern, the USSR's organisation for fomenting international revolution. He frequently rejected orders from Moscow which instructed the CCP to base its activities in the towns rather than the countryside.

It was also during the Jiangxi period (1927-34) that Mao revealed an utter ruthlessness that characterised his whole career. In the notorious 'Futian incident' in 1930 he had no compunction in torturing and executing some 4,000 Red Army troops whom he regarded as rebels. Philip Short, Mao's most recent biographer, visited the site of the horrors:

All along the two sides of the courtyard there are cells with thick wooden doors and lattice work, lattice struts going horizontally and vertically just like the bars of a cage. In here behind these wooden bars the prisoners were held; they were brought out to be tortured, women as well as men ... They were tortured to make them speak and they were tortured on Mao's orders. There is a document in the party archives which Mao approved which says, 'do not kill the important leaders too quickly, but squeeze out of them the maximum information; then from the clues they give, you can go on to unearth others'.

### The Long March, 1934-35

Although the GMD became the official government of China in the early 1930s, it was weakened by its half-hearted response to the Japanese military occupation, beginning in 1931, of many parts of the Chinese mainland. The fact was that Chiang Kaishek was still more intent on crushing his Communist enemies within China than resisting the Japanese invader. This was evident in 1934 when Chang systematically encircled the CCP's base in Jiangxi with a view to destroying it altogether. Again Mao survived, this time by leading his followers on one of the great epics of Communist folklore—the Long March—a 6,000 mile odyssey which crossed 18 mountain ranges, 24 rivers and several deserts. Of the 100,000 who set out, scarcely 20,000 survived to reach their destination at

Yanan. It was during the 18-month march that a critical CCP strategy meeting took place at Zunyi. Mao re-nouvred his opponents in the CCP and imposed his Party his notion of a peasant-based revolution, as opposed to the urban-based campaigns that the pro-Soviet members had wanted.

### The Yanan Years, 1935-45

During the Yanan period Mao, by a combination of political and military skill, luck and utter ruthlessness, succeeded in imposing his personal authority on the CCP. In 1942 he launched a series of 'rectification of conduct' campaigns, which, in effect, were a set of purges by which he removed party opponents. It was also during this time that Mao led the CCP from its northern bases in a spirited resistance to the Japanese occupation. Mao's main strategy was to win over the peasants who made up 80 per cent of the Chinese population. His success in this had the double effect of providing military recruits for the anti-Japanese struggle and political supporters for the CCP in its campaign against the urban-based GMD.

### The Defeat of the GMD

With the defeat of Japan at the end of the Second World War, the CCP turned on the GMD in a renewal of the civil war that had lasted intermittently since the late 1920s. A fierce four-year struggle for supremacy ended with a complete victory of the Communists. By 1949 Chiang and the Guomindang had been driven from the Chinese mainland; their one remaining stronghold was the offshore island of Taiwan. Mao and the CCP were now in a position to establish Communist rule over the whole of mainland China.

### Creating the People's Republic of China

In Beijing on 1 October 1949, Mao formally declared the People's Republic of China (PRC) to have come into being. Between then and his death in 1976, Mao Zedong was revered by the mass of the Chinese people as a living god. But he faced huge problems as leader of the new China. His most demanding task was to bring stability to a nation that had been riven by decades of turmoil. Mao's political approach was a simple one: he would tolerate no opposition to the CCR. All other parties were outlawed and the total obedience of the nation to the new government was demanded.

Mao and the CCP leaders organised campaigns of vilification against anyone in public life who opposed official policy. An atmosphere of fear and uncertainty was systematically created by a series of 'anti-movements', launched against those whom the CCP regarded as socially or politically suspect. The Chinese people were urged to expose all who had cooperated with the former GMD government. China became a nation of informers. The vengeful atmosphere was intensified by Mao's deci-

sion to enter the Korean War (1950–53) in support of the North Koreans. This struggle placed great demands on the new regime and provided further pretexts for the government to harry the population. Some of the worst excesses occurred in the countryside where the landlords were brutally dispossessed of their properties.

Purges were also carried out within the CCP. Members suspected of not totally following the party line were condemned as 'rightists' who were opposed to the progress of the PRC. Purges alternated with periods when party members were encouraged to criticise current policies. This apparent liberalising was invariably followed by the imposition of even tougher restrictions on freedom of expression. A striking example occurred in 1957 when Mao, using the slogan 'Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend', called on members to air their grievances. Those who were rash enough to do so were then attacked as 'rightists'. Such purges were to become a recurrent feature of Chinese politics down to Mao's death in 1976.

### Great Leap Forward and Famine, 1958–66

In economic matters Mao's basic aim was to industrialise China. He hoped that within a short period the new China would be able to match both the Soviet Union and the capitalist West in industrial output. To achieve this, he copied the Stalinist model of a series of five-year plans. These involved prodigious physical efforts by the Chinese workers; but, since Mao deliberately chose to place his faith in mass labour rather than in modern technology, the plans were only partially successful. The limitations of Mao's approach were particularly evident during the Second Five-Year Plan (1958–62). Intended to be 'the Great Leap Forward', the Plan fell far short of its production targets. The extent of the failure was hidden from the people, but what the authorities could not conceal was the widespread famine that accompanied the Plan. The land which had been given to the peasants after its seizure from the landlords had to be forfeited in a mass collectivisation programme which ended private ownership. The dislocation this caused produced a national catastrophe. Between 1958 and 1962, 30 million Chinese died from starvation.

Mao did not openly accept responsibility for the famine, but in the early 1960s he withdrew into the political background, leaving two prominent party figures, Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaogi, to tackle the problem of food shortages. Their attempts to do so led them to abandon collectivisation. Mao, however, saw this as an undermining of the socialist principles on which China's 1949 revolution rested. In a series of dramatic gestures, which included his swimming in the Yangzi river, the ageing Chairman reappeared in public and reasserted his dominance in Chinese politics. What prompted him to return was the fear that had always moved him, and which increased as he grew older, that the revolution he had led

might not survive his death. To prevent this he was determined to impose a political and social structure on China that would permanently define its character as a nation. This was the intention behind his introduction in 1966 of the great Cultural Revolution, an extraordinary movement that plunged China into a decade of deliberately engineered turmoil.

### The Cultural Revolution 1966–76

Mao's objective in unleashing the Cultural Revolution was to oblige the Party to acknowledge its errors and purge itself of all possible rivals to his authority. His chosen instrument for achieving this was the youth of China. In 1966 he called upon the young to set themselves up in judgement over their elders. He urged them to form a mass movement to destroy the 'four olds' that were threatening China's revolution—'old culture, old thoughts, old customs and old habits'. The young people responded with an idealistic enthusiasm that soon degenerated into a brutal fanaticism. Squads of teenagers, known as Red Guards, rampaged through China's cities and towns, assaulting those whom they regarded as the 'bad elements' representing China's corrupt past. No part of China's antique culture was sacred. Buildings—whether universities, libraries, museums or temples—which in the eyes of the Red Guards stood as memorials to Chinese decadence were smashed or burned.

The violence was part of a wholesale attack upon China's traditional culture. All forms of artistic expression were subjected to crippling censorship. They had to pass the test of 'socialist value' imposed by Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, who was entrusted with responsibility for recreating Chinese culture. In the event she achieved the reverse. Her demand that all forms of creativity must conform absolutely with her notions of true socialist culture meant that nothing of real worth was produced or presented. China became an artistic wilderness.

The Cultural Revolution was an act of madness but there was method in it. The Red Guards were a highly visible and terrifying feature of the movement but they were essentially a front. Mao was using the apparent anarchy to enforce his will upon the CCP and the nation. It was a means of fulfilling his concept of 'continuing revolution', the belief that unless the Communist Party was regularly purified it would cease to be a revolutionary force and China would cease to be truly socialist. For ten years after 1966 the Cultural Revolution distorted China both internally and in its relations with the outside world.

In foreign affairs a particularly significant development was the PRC's deepening estrangement from the USSR. In its early years the PRC had looked upon the Soviet Union as its mentor and had sided with it as a natural ally in the Cold War. But China's belief that it was being financially and commercially exploited by the Soviet Union, which refused to accept her as an equal partner in the international revolutionary movement, led to profound mutual hostility in the

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1960s. The Cultural Revolution was confirmation that China under Mao would follow its own path, regardless of Soviet opinion. For a time there was a real possibility that a nuclear war might break out between China and the Soviet Union.

The deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations was balanced by an improvement in China's relations with the West. Largely as the result of the skillful diplomacy of the PRC's foreign minister, Zhou Enlai, there was a break in 'the bamboo curtain' and in 1972 Mao received Richard Nixon in Beijing, the first US president to visit Communist China.

By 1976, after a decade of Cultural Revolution, there were signs that even Mao himself considered that the social and political extremism had gone too far. Yet what he finally thought of the Cultural Revolution is not easy to judge since in the last two years of his life his physical decline and increasing dependence on drugs reduced him to a shambling, incoherent wreck.

### **Mao's Achievements**

Mao Zedong stands with Lenin, Stalin and Hitler as one of 'the makers of the twentieth-century'. Beginning in the 1920s, he created a peasant movement which carried him and his Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949.

It was an extraordinary accomplishment which bore complemented and contradicted the Russian revolt of 1917. Between the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and Mao's death in 1976, Maoism became the inspiration and hope of a range of anti-colonial movements worldwide and was taken up enthusiastically by many revolutionary hopefuls in the Western world. The subsequent abandonment of Maoism in China and its decline as an inspirational force internationally does not lessen the magnitude of Mao's achievement in having led to victory the century's largest popular movement.

Historical controversy still surrounds Mao Zedong. Was it international Marxism or Chinese nationalism that inspired him and characterised the Chinese revolution of 1949? Was Maoism essentially a continuation of the Chinese imperial tradition or was it an entirely new brand of politics? Was Mao the new red emperor or the last great Marxist leader? Was Maoism a genuine development of Marxism-Leninism or a form of heretical socialism whose main purpose was to reassert traditional notions of Chinese cultural supremacy? Such are the questions with which historians continue to grapple.