



An introduction to Mao's China



Part 1



Tasks

Note down your answers to the following questions:

- a) What was the character of imperial China?
- b) What changes did China experience between 1911 and 1949?
- c) What were the main influences that shaped Mao as a revolutionary?
- d) What basic changes occurred in China under Mao's leadership?
- e) What economic changes were introduced under the Great Leap Forward?
- f) What were Mao's motives in deliberately creating disruption through the Cultural Revolution?
- g) What problems confront historians studying Mao's China?
- h) How did official attitudes towards Mao change after his death?
- i) How did the Cold War influence interpretations of Mao's China?
- j) What special contributions have Western scholars brought to the study of modern China?

1

Introduction: China Under Mao 1949–76

POINTS TO CONSIDER

On 1 October 1949 Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, stood on a balcony of the old imperial palace in Beijing to proclaim the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China. His pronouncement marked the final victory of the Chinese Communists over their enemies after two decades of civil war. How Mao went on to reshape China and the impact this had on the world at large are the main themes of this book. To lay the ground for this analysis the first chapter covers the following areas:

- China before 1949
- Mao's career before 1949
- The reshaping of China under Mao 1949–76
- Mao's China and the historians

Key dates

1840s	Europe began to impose itself on China
1911	Collapse of the ruling Qing dynasty
1925	Chiang Kaishek became leader of GMD
1937	Japanese occupation of China
1945	Japan defeated at the end of the Second World War
1945–9	Civil war between Communists and Nationalists
1949	Communist takeover of mainland China PRC established under Mao Zedong
1950–3	Korean War
1951	'Anti-movements' launched
1952	Political parties other than CCP banned
1952–6	China's first Five-Year Plan
1957	Hundred Flowers campaign launched
1958–62	The Great Leap Forward
1966–76	The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution
1976	Death of Mao Zedong

1 | China Before 1949

Imperial China

At the start of the twentieth century, China was one of the oldest cultures and nations in the world. By tradition, Chinese society and politics were deeply conservative. China's principal shaping influence had been **Confucianism**, a philosophy that required the Chinese people to accept without complaint their place in an unchanging social order. Over two and a half millennia of development, this had produced a **hierarchical structure** in which the first duty of the citizen was to obey lawful authority, expressed in its highest political form in the rule of the emperor.

China's conservative character was also reflected in its attitude towards the outside world. Until the nineteenth century

Key question

What was the character of imperial China?

Confucianism

A pattern of thought based on the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BC), who emphasised the need for harmony in human relations.

Hierarchical structure

A pattern of government in which each class or group owes obedience to the authority above it.

Key terms



Map of China 1900–49, showing its main provinces, the treaty ports and the Jiangxi and Yanan Soviets.

Key terms

Unequal treaties

Agreements forced on China in the nineteenth century, which obliged it to surrender territory and accept trade on Western terms.

Republic

A form of government in which there is no monarch and power is exercised by elected representatives.

Key question

What fundamental changes did China experience between 1911 and 1949?

Key terms

Warlords

Powerful local generals in China who exploited the weakness of the central government to set themselves up as rulers in their own areas.

Nationalists

A Chinese revolutionary party created in the early twentieth century and based on the 'Three People's Principles': socialism, democracy and national regeneration.

Chinese**Communist Party**

Formed in 1921 and committed to a Marxist revolution in China.

China had essentially been a closed society. For over 2000 years it had deliberately avoided contact with other nations wherever possible. Largely isolated from foreign influences, it had developed a deep sense of its own superiority over all other cultures. However, this self-belief was suddenly and profoundly shaken in the 1840s when a number of Western industrial nations, principally Britain and France, used their greater military strength and more advanced technology to impose themselves on China. The Chinese were forced to open their ports to foreign commerce and to enter into a series of '**unequal treaties**'. By 1900 over 50 of China's key ports and towns were in foreign possession.

Chinese bitterness at such humiliation created mounting dissatisfaction with the imperial government. The Qing (Manchu) dynasty's inability to protect China encouraged the growth of a revolutionary movement. The remarkable feature of this movement was its desire 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.

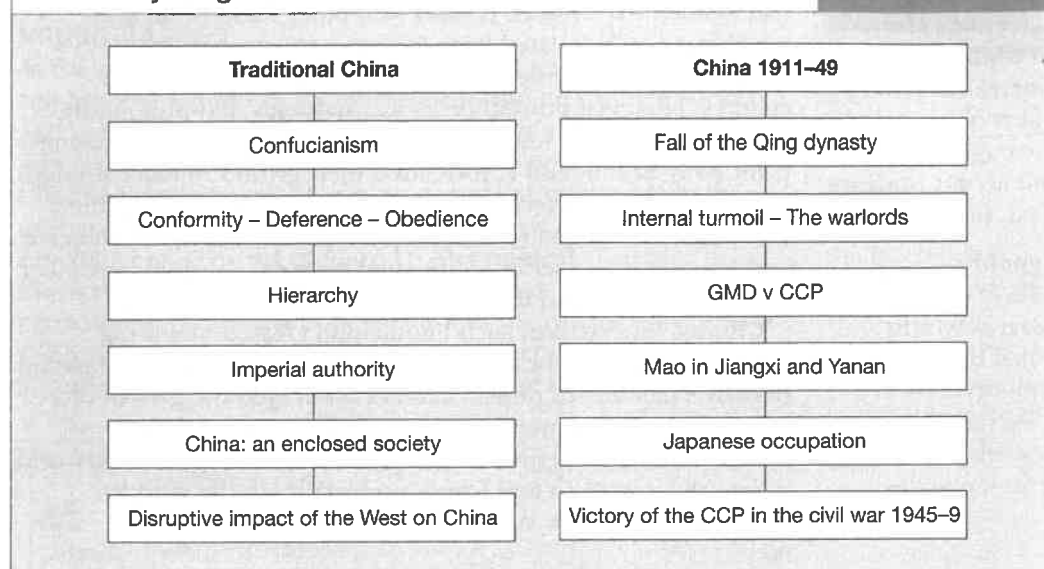
China from revolution to revolution 1911–49

In 1911 China underwent the first of its modern revolutions when the Qing government collapsed. Although a **republic** was set up in place of the imperial system, it was unclear where the real power in China now lay. For the next 40 years, rival **warlords** and factions struggled to assert authority. Two main revolutionary parties were in contention: the **Nationalists** or Guomindang (GMD) led after 1925 by Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi), and the **Chinese Communist Party** (CCP), whose leader from the later 1920s was Mao Zedong. Although the GMD was the nominal government of China from the early 1930s, it was never able to crush its Communist rivals.

Moreover, such power as the Nationalists had was seriously compromised after 1937 by their apparently half-hearted response to the military occupation of many of the richest and most densely populated parts of the Chinese mainland by China's neighbour and traditional enemy, Japan. In contrast to Chiang Kaishek's lack of fight, Mao Zedong led the CCP from its bases in Jiangxi (Kiangsi) and Yanan (Yenan) in a spirited resistance to the Japanese occupation.

By the time the Japanese had been defeated in 1945, Mao's Communists had become a more powerful force in China than the Nationalists. This was proved beyond doubt 4 years later when Chiang and the GMD forces were forced to take refuge on the island of Formosa (Taiwan) after suffering a series of shattering military defeats at the hands of Mao's armies. Mao and the CCP were now in a position to establish Communist rule over the whole of mainland China.

Summary diagram: China before 1949



2 | Mao's Career Before 1949

'A clean sheet of paper has no blotches, and so the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it.' This was Mao Zedong's poetic description of the opportunity that lay before the new China in 1949. But behind the fine words was a fierce resolution. The picture that Mao intended to paint would allow no space for brushwork other than his own. He intended to create China in his own image. He would continue to use the methods that had brought him to power in 1949. Mao had been shaped by the brutal world in which he grew up.

The lessons that Mao learned as a young man in China were violent ones. All his experiences as a young revolutionary convinced him that unless he was prepared to use unyielding methods he could achieve little. He despised his countrymen who were not willing to use extremism in pursuing their goals for China. In the end, as he saw it, it was force which made things happen. Mao believed in the **dialectic** as the explanation of life. That was why he had become a **Marxist** and a founder member of the CCP in 1921. He held that all change, all progress, resulted from suppression of the weaker by the stronger. It was a belief that characterised his behaviour in all the major episodes of his career.

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 a Chinese son. As a

Key question

What were the main influences that shaped Mao as a revolutionary?

Dialectic

The Marxist notion that historical development occurs through a progressive series of conflicts between social classes.

Marxist

A believer in the theories of the German revolutionary Karl Marx (1818–83), who used the notion of the dialectic to explain history as a continuous conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', the exploiters and the exploited.



Profile: Mao Zedong (up to 1949)

- 1893 Born in Hunan province
- 1901–6 Attended primary school
- 1912 Joined anti-Qing army in Hunan
- 1912–18 Trained as a teacher
- 1918 Joined the Hunan independence movement
- 1919 Worked as a librarian at Beijing University
Helped to organise strikes in Hunan
- 1921 Became a founder member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
- 1923 Joined Guomindang (GMD)
- 1924–7 Involved in planning CCP–GMD alliance against the warlords
- 1927–34 Created the Jiangxi Soviet
- 1930 Suppressed a mutiny in the Red Army at Futian
- 1934–5 Led the Long March to Yanan
- 1935–45 Created the Yanan Soviet
- 1942 Crushed opposition within the CCP
- 1945–9 Led the CCP to victory over Chiang Kaishek and the Nationalists
- 1949 Declared the creation of the People's Republic of China

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.

Mao as a Chinese revolutionary 1911–27

Mao's 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 war lords – 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 included 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 barbarity Mao witnessed greatly affected him, but it was not the cruelty that moved him so much as his realisation that it was the strongest and most ruthless who always won. 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'. Another was, 'a revolution is not a tea-party; it is an act of violence, by which one class overthrows another'. He was impressed by the extreme methods used by the **Bolsheviks** in the Russian revolution that began in 1917.

Mao at Jiangxi 1927–34

In 1924 China's two major revolutionary parties, the Nationalists and the Communists, had formed a united front against the warlords, but the GMD–CCP unity was more apparent than real. The GMD's main aim under Chiang was to destroy the Communists. In 1927 it launched a systematic extermination campaign against them. Mao survived by taking his CCP forces to the mountains of Jiangxi province, where he organised guerrilla resistance against the Nationalists.

During the next 7 years Mao helped to establish the Jiangxi **Soviet**, dedicated to achieving a peasant revolution. While there, he showed himself unwilling to accept dictation from the **Comintern**. He frequently rejected the orders from Moscow that 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 the calculated ferocity that marked his whole career. In the notorious 'Futian incident' in 1930 he had no qualms in torturing and executing some 4000 **Red Army** troops whom he regarded as rebels.

[T]hey 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 1934–5

Although the GMD became the official government of China in the early 1930s, it was weakened by the Japanese military occupation, beginning in 1931, of many parts of the Chinese mainland. Chiang Kaishek was seen to be more intent on crushing his Communist enemies within China than resisting the Japanese invader. In 1934 Chiang encircled the CCP's base in Jiangxi with a view to destroying it altogether. Again Mao survived, this time by joining and eventually leading the besieged Communists in their escape north to Yanan in Shaanxi province.

The journey to Yanan, which took over a year to complete, was later elevated by CCP propaganda into one of the great epics of Communist folklore: the Long March. It was never as glorious as the propagandists made out; of the 100,000 who fled from Jiangxi, scarcely 20,000 survived to reach their destination. Nevertheless, the march was certainly an important stage in the development of Chinese Communism. It was during the March that a critical

Bolsheviks

Communist revolutionaries who seized power in Russia in 1917.

Soviet

A system of government organised on Communist principles.

Comintern

Communist International, the body set up in Moscow in 1919 to organise world-wide revolution.

Red Army

The title given to the Communist troops that Mao led, later to be known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

strategy meeting took place at Zunyi. Mao outmanoeuvred his opponents in the CCP and imposed on the party his idea that to be successful the revolution in China must be based on the peasants in the countryside, not on the workers in the towns.

The Yanan years 1935–45

During the Yanan period Mao, by a combination of political and military skill and brutal suppression, succeeded in imposing his personal authority on the CCP. At the same time he fought off attempts by the Comintern to dominate the party. In the early 1940s he launched a series of ‘**rectification of conduct**’ campaigns to consolidate his hold. It was also while he was at Yanan that Mao wrote his major political works setting out his revolutionary ideas.

Victory over the GMD 1945–9

With the surrender of Japan at the end of the Second World War in 1945, Mao turned on the GMD in a renewal of the civil war that had lasted intermittently since the late 1920s. A fierce 4-year struggle for supremacy ended with the complete victory of the Communists. Chiang and the GMD were driven from the Chinese mainland to their one remaining stronghold, the offshore island of Taiwan. In October 1949 Mao triumphantly declared that a new Communist society had come into being – the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Mao’s policy in the countryside 1945–9

One of the most remarkable features of the civil war period was the brutal treatment of the peasants by Mao’s Communists in the areas they controlled. Between 1945 and 1949, the CCP, continuing the policies that they had followed during the Jiangxi and Yanan periods, committed fearful atrocities against the peasants in order to force them to join the struggle against Chiang Kaishek’s Nationalists.

It is interesting that Mao sent his son, **Anying**, to take part in the suppression of the peasantry. Mao thought his son needed toughening up. What Anying then experienced came close to unhinging him mentally.

One incident illustrates the type of horror he witnessed. In one set of villages which the Red Army had seized, the locals were rounded up and made to attend an anti-landlord rally. It was the middle of winter with temperatures well below zero. For five days the villagers were not allowed to leave the unsheltered area they had been herded into. They were forced to chant Maoist slogans and denounce the landlords who were publicly paraded before them. Some people froze to death standing up. The climax came on the fifth day when the condemned landlords were kicked and punched to death as the crowds shouted ‘Kill, Kill, Kill’.

Anying recorded in his diary that the barbarity was worse than anything he had seen or heard of while studying Soviet Communism in **Stalin’s USSR**. His attempt to come to terms with what he now saw in China caused him agonies of doubt. He was ‘so full of pain’ that he wept. What particularly disturbed him was

Key terms

Rectification of conduct campaigns

A series of ferocious purges by which Mao removed any member of the CCP he suspected of opposing him.

Stalin’s USSR

Between 1929 and 1953, the Soviet Union (USSR) was under the rule of Joseph Stalin.

Key figure

Anying

(1922–50) Mao Anying was Mao Zedong’s oldest son. He led a lonely and unhappy life in his father’s shadow before dying in 1950, aged 28, in the Korean War.

8 | The People's Republic of China 1949–76

the realisation that the party cadres carrying out the land policies were among the worst types of people in China. Anying described them as 'thugs' and 'the dregs of society'.

The reason why the savage policies of the CCP did not lose it the support of the peasants as a whole was that the record of the Nationalists was little better. Both Communists and Nationalists treated the Chinese peasants with deep contempt. The great difference was that while this might be understandable in the GMD since it was the party of the exploiting propertied classes, it defied sense for the CCP, a party that had come into being to liberate the people of China, to engage in their savage oppression.

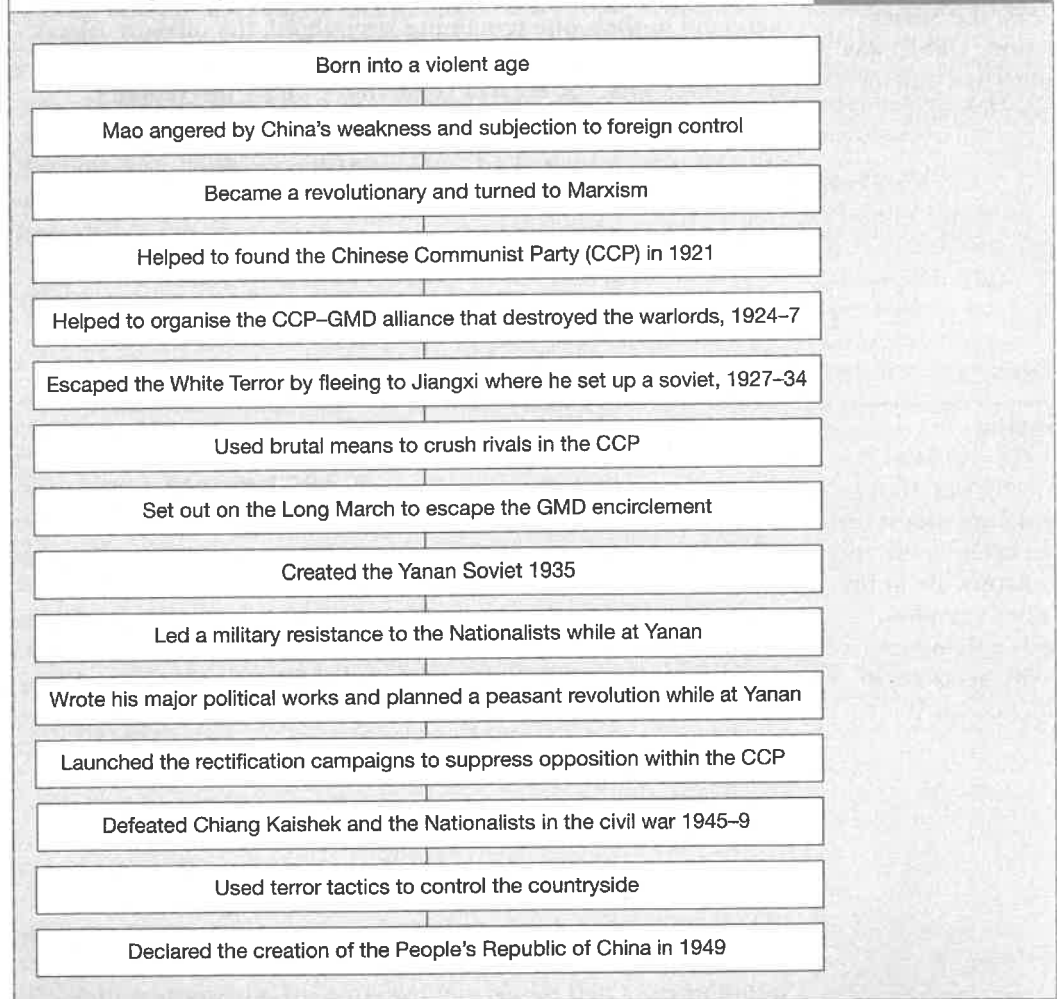
It was their embarrassment over this that led many members of the CCP to protest against the appalling things being done in their name in the countryside. Mao, as he invariably did when his policies became excessive, simply blamed the mistakes on the failings of others. He declared himself guiltless and told **Liu Shaoqi** to shoulder the blame. Liu did as he was told, confessing to the party that he had let things slide until corrected by Mao.

Liu Shaoqi
(1898–1968)

A gifted party organiser who was to become President of the PRC in 1959.

Key figure

Summary diagram: Mao's career before 1949



Key question
What basic changes occurred in China under Mao's leadership?

Key dates

PRC established under Mao Zedong: 1949
'Anti-movements' launched: 1951
Korean War: 1950–3

Key term

Class enemies
Those reactionaries who refused to accept the new China that the Communist government was creating.

3 | The Reshaping of China under Mao 1949–76

The consolidation of Communist authority 1949–57

During the Jiangxi and Yanan periods of the 1930s and 1940s, Mao Zedong had remorselessly enforced his authority on the CCP. His dominance became even greater with the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Between then and his death in 1976, he was revered by the mass of the Chinese people as a living god. But the adulation that was lavished on him could not hide the huge problems he faced as leader of the new China. Mao's most demanding task was to bring stability to a nation that had been riven by decades of turmoil. His approach was a simple one; he would tolerate no opposition to the CCP. All other parties were outlawed and the total obedience of the nation to the new government was demanded.

Removal of officials

Initially, the officials and public figures who had previously served the GMD Nationalist government but had not fled to Taiwan were asked by the Communist authorities to stay in their posts. They were promised that if they pledged themselves to the new China they would suffer no retaliation for their past behaviour. For a short period this undertaking was honoured, but, once the officials had served their purpose by providing the young PRC with the necessary continuity of administration, they were turned on and persecuted as **class enemies**.

The 'anti-movements'

The concept of class enemies was basic to the social and political strategies of the Communists in government. Invoking the traditional Chinese duty of respecting authority, Mao and the CCP leaders began public campaigns against anyone in public life who opposed official policy. From 1950 onwards 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 encouraged to expose all who had co-operated with the former GMD government. China became a nation of informers. It was enough for individuals to be charged by their neighbours with having belonged to the privileged classes for them to be publicly denounced and to have their property seized. Their pleas of loyalty to Mao's new China were ignored.

The vengeful atmosphere was intensified by China's being drawn into the Korean War of 1950–3 (see page 28). This struggle placed great demands on the young PRC and made those who were less than whole-hearted in supporting it open to the charge that they were imperilling the nation's existence. Some of the worst excesses occurred in the countryside where millions of landlords were brutally dispossessed of their lands, which were then redistributed among the peasants.



A landlord being tried in 1953 by a people's court, one of many set up to deliver summary justice in the countryside. What clues does the picture offer regarding the way in which trials in the people's courts were conducted?

Purges of party members

Purges were also carried out within the CCP. Members who did not slavishly follow the **party line** were liable to be condemned as 'rightists' who were opposed to the progress of the PRC. Purges were 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.

Party line
Official CCP policy.

Key term

Key question
What economic changes were introduced under the Great Leap Forward?

The Great Leap Forward 1958–62

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 the Soviet Union and the capitalist West in industrial output. To achieve this, he copied the Stalinist model of a series of 5-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 advanced technology, the plans were only partially successful.

Key date
The Great Leap Forward: 1958–62

The Second Five-Year Plan 1958–62

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 true figures of the failure were hidden from the people, but what the authorities could not conceal was the widespread famine that accompanied the plan. The collapse of the food supply system was directly attributable to two factors, collectivisation and 'Lysenkoism':

Key term
Lysenkoism
The agricultural theories of Trofim Lysenko.

- The land that 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 and obliged the peasants to live and work in communes.
- The dislocation this caused was made worse by Mao's decision to introduce into China the fraudulent crop-production theories of the quack Soviet scientist, Trofim Lysenko.

This combination of social disruption and false science produced a catastrophic famine throughout China. Deaths were numbered in millions. Characteristically, Mao declined to acknowledge responsibility for the famine, but in the early 1960s he withdrew into the political background, leaving two prominent party figures, Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-ping) and Liu Shaoqi (Liu Shao-chi), to tackle the problem of food shortages. Their attempts to repair the economic damage led them to reverse some of Mao's earlier policies. One major adjustment was the abandonment of collectivisation. Mao was upset by this move since he judged it to be 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 (Yangste) River in 1966, the ageing chairman reappeared in public and reasserted his dominance in Chinese politics.

What inspired 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. He determined, therefore, 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 aim in unleashing the Cultural Revolution was to oblige the party to acknowledge all its current errors and in so doing purge itself of all possible rivals to his authority. His chosen instrument for achieving this was the youth of China. In 1966 he called on the young to set themselves up in judgement over their elders. He urged them to form a mass movement to destroy everything from China's past that threatened its present revolution.

The Red Guards

The young people responded with an idealistic enthusiasm that soon deteriorated into a brutal fanaticism. Squads of teenagers, known as **Red Guards**, rampaged through China's cities and towns. 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.

Jiang Qing

The violence was part of a wholesale attack on China's traditional culture. All forms of artistic expression were subjected to crippling censorship. They had to pass the test of '**socialist integrity**' imposed by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (Chiang Ching), who was entrusted with the responsibility for re-creating Chinese culture. In the event she achieved the reverse. Her demand that all forms of creativity must conform absolutely to her judgement of what constituted genuine socialist culture meant that nothing of lasting significance 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 on 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.

Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution

For 10 years after 1966 the Cultural Revolution caused massive disruption within China and harmed its relations with the outside world. By the early 1970s, there were signs that even Mao himself considered the social and political extremism had gone too far. Although he never formally abandoned the Cultural Revolution, he allowed it to run down. By the time of his death in 1976 the movement had lost much of its violent fanaticism.

Key question

What were Mao's motives in deliberately creating disruption?

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: 1966–76

Death of Mao Zedong: 1976

Red Guards

The revolutionary students whose name derived from their practice of wearing red arm bands, supplied to them by Maoist officials. Red was the traditional colour of the Communist movement.

Socialist integrity

The notion that a true work of art in Communist China must portray the triumph of the workers and peasants over their class enemies.

Continuing revolution

Mao's notion that revolution was not a single event but a continuous process.

The link between the PRC and imperial China

An important point to stress is that the PRC rather than being a break from China's past was in all major respects a continuation of it. The major question facing the PRC at the time of its creation was how could it establish the stability and permanence that all the preceding regimes since the fall of the Qing in 1911 had failed to achieve. The short answer was by a successful return to absolutism (see Figure 1.1).

The political character of China after 1949 has been much analysed and discussed. It is possible to argue that the PRC was no different in essentials from the traditional Chinese political system. Despite its title, the People's Republic, the PRC allowed no involvement in government by the vast majority of the people. The rule of the CCP was as uncompromising and self-perpetuating as that of the emperors. Maoist China was not, therefore, a new China except in certain outward appearances. The change in 1949 was one of form rather than of substance. Despite its revolutionary claims, China remained a politically reactionary society. All authority came from the top and the people's duty was to obey.

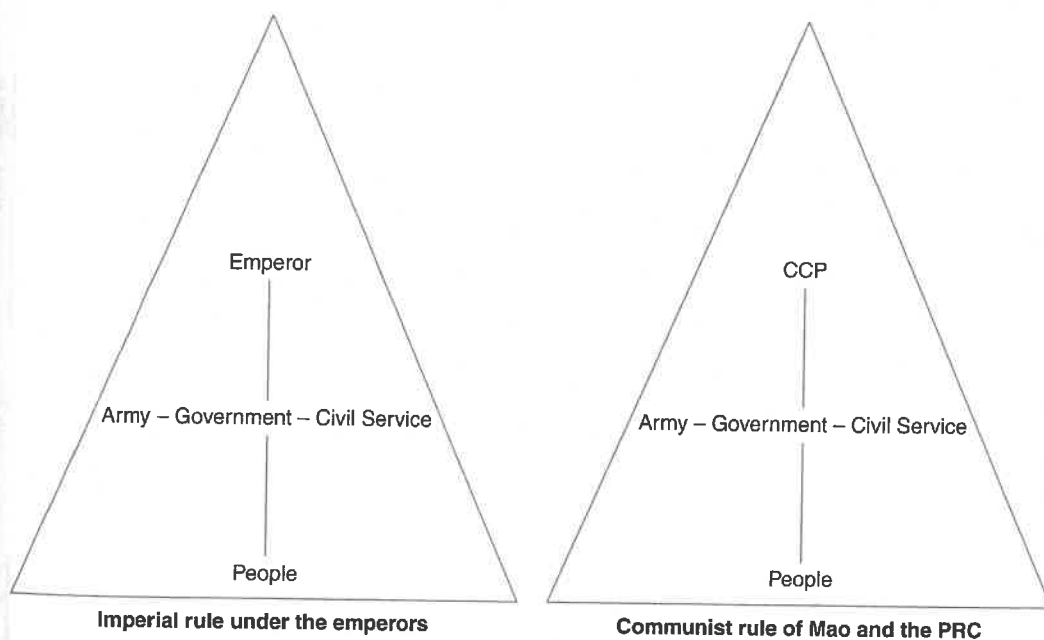
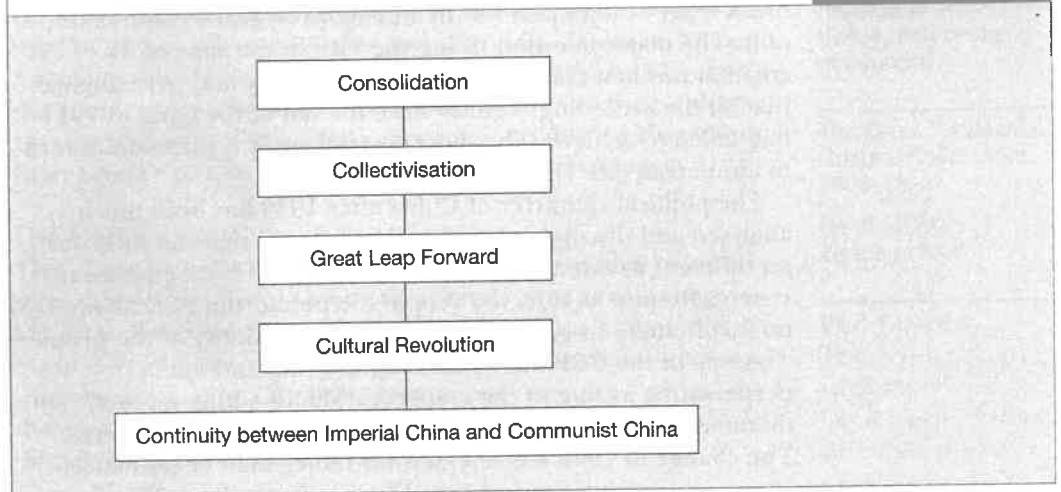


Figure 1.1 The unchanging nature of Chinese government.

Summary diagram: Reshaping of China under Mao 1949–76



4 | Mao's China and the Historians

The writing of history in China

China has always had chroniclers of its history, but it has no tradition of historical writing as the term is understood in the West, where the pursuit of evidence and its impartial interpretation are the ideal. China's ruling authorities have always required that writers and commentators when describing the past do so in such a way that reflects well on the present. Indeed, to Chinese governments the purpose of history is to justify the present.

Control of the media under Mao

After the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist authorities continued the practice of controlling all official publications. The news media in the PRC have always been heavily centralised. The state controls practically all of the output of the Chinese press. This means that the media are effectively the mouthpiece of the Beijing government, whose policies are invariably greeted with universal approval from China's newspapers and journals. The line established by **Xinhua** (Hsinhua) is toed both by the mass circulation dailies and by the internationally published Chinese newspapers and journals.

During the half-century of the PRC's existence from 1949 nothing was printed in these papers or in any other official publication that was critical of the CCP's record or its policies in government. Before 1976, everything that was published praised Mao Zedong without reservation and condemned China's internal and foreign enemies.

Key question
What problems confront historians studying Mao's China?

Xinhua
The PRC's government-controlled news agency.

Key term

Key question

How did official attitudes towards Mao change after his death?

Key term**De-Stalinisation**

A campaign begun in the USSR 3 years after Stalin's death to reveal the truth about his development of a 'cult of personality', a reference to his having put his own reputation and interests above the needs of the Communist Party during his rule between 1929 and 1953.

Key figure**Deng Xiaoping**

(1904–97) The dominant force in Chinese politics from 1978 to 1997. Deng reversed many of Mao's policies.

Mao's changing reputation

With the death of Mao in 1976 his reputation began to decline and a number of adjustments to the official record were made. But these were very limited. There was no equivalent to the **de-Stalinisation** that occurred in the USSR in the wake of Stalin's death in 1953. The ensuing power-struggle between the hardline Maoists and the more progressive Communists, who believed that changes were necessary for party and national survival, resulted in the defeat of the die-hards. But this did not leave the victors entirely free to reject Maoism. If the members of the CCP had admitted that serious mistakes had been made by the party under Mao's direction it would have undermined their own standing.

So the CCP adopted a form of compromise. Mao could not be rejected entirely by his successors; after all, they had risen to prominence under him and had carried out the Cultural Revolution on his orders. But **Deng Xiaoping** in introducing his own revolution was eager that China should deliberately overlook those aspects of its recent past that it could not undo. He let it be known that the Cultural Revolution was now to be regarded as a closed topic. In 1984, the PRC government formally instructed China's book publishers not to produce any more works on the Cultural Revolution.

Forgetting the Cultural Revolution

The result has been that the Cultural Revolution, the great centrepiece of Chinese history since 1949, is now largely ignored in China. Politicians deliberately avoid referring to it and students are seldom taught about it. Middle-aged men and women who were once Red Guards will sometimes own up to the fact, but they will wearily, though politely, explain that it is a topic that no longer interests them.

Controlling the past

In 2006 China's education ministry announced that the history textbooks used in Chinese schools would not dwell on the 'negative' aspects of the country's past; instead they would be concerned with 'producing innovative thinking and preparing students for a global discourse'. This was a coded way of saying that China's pupils would not be taught any history that reflected badly on the record of the ruling Communist Party. When a celebrated historian, Yuan Weishi, protested against this in a powerfully written article in which he argued that China must face up to the dark incidents in its past, such as the Cultural Revolution, the newspaper which had published his piece was forced by the authorities to apologise and print a denunciation of Yuan.

The influence of the Cold War on Western attitudes towards Mao's China

The PRC's reluctance to face its past has meant that Chinese academics who are desperate for information about their country's history tend to rely on foreign **sinologists** for enlightenment. This obviously throws a great responsibility on non-Chinese historians. Here a particular difficulty applies. Keen though Western historians have been to convey the truth about China, they have understandably tended to interpret Chinese history very much from the standpoint of the West. The history of the PRC under Mao Zedong coincided with the **Cold War**. For much of that time China was looked on as the ally of the USSR and therefore as a threat to Western interests.

The American attitude in this respect is particularly instructive. The Communist victory in China in 1949 forced the USA, which had invested considerable time, energy and money in east Asia before 1949, to reassess Chinese history. A large number of universities in the USA established departments of Chinese studies in the 1950s. Their concern was to explain what they regarded as a Cold War calamity, the 'loss' of China to Mao's Communists and the forming of a Communist alliance between the PRC and the Soviet Union.

Western historians and Mao's China

Whatever the political motives behind it, the US initiative had a very valuable outcome. It produced some outstanding scholarship that made a major contribution to Western understanding of China. Particularly distinguished American sinologists were Stuart Schram, the first major Western biographer of Mao Zedong, Orville Schell, who produced invaluable collections and translations of Chinese documents, and John King Fairbank, whose published studies of China placed the PRC in the wider context of Chinese historical development. British historians have also contributed significantly to the study of China. Prominent among them are Roderick MacFarquhar, a leading authority on the Cultural Revolution, and Jonathan Spence, whose many studies of China's transition from an antique culture to a modern state have become required reading world-wide.

Balance and bias

The outstanding attribute of these historians is their objectivity. They treat the Chinese record in a balanced form, presenting both the creditable and the discreditable aspects of the PRC's history. Their approach has provided a valuable corrective to the one-sided accounts that had been produced earlier by writers who had allowed their political bias to influence their work. For example, at the height of the Cold War, many US-based studies had been distorted by their distaste for Communism, whether in its Russian or Chinese form.

There had been equal distortions at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Left-wing radicals, most notably in France and

Key question
How did the Cold War influence interpretations of Mao's China?

Sinologists
Experts on China.

Cold War
The period of tension (1945–91) between the Communist Eastern bloc, led by the USSR, and the Western democratic nations, led by the USA.

Key terms

Key question
What special contributions have Western scholars brought to the study of modern China?

the USA, had glorified Mao Zedong as a great liberator whose progressive brand of Communism had superseded the decaying Soviet variety. It took a generation before such Western liberals were prepared to accept the truth about the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Even now, in the early twenty-first century, there are Western writers who take a sympathetic view of Mao. One such is the American scholar Lee Feigon, who does not deny that the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution caused 'horrific damage', but argues that, nevertheless, without these movements the modern Chinese economy could not have developed in the powerful way that it has.

Co-operation among international historians in the study of China

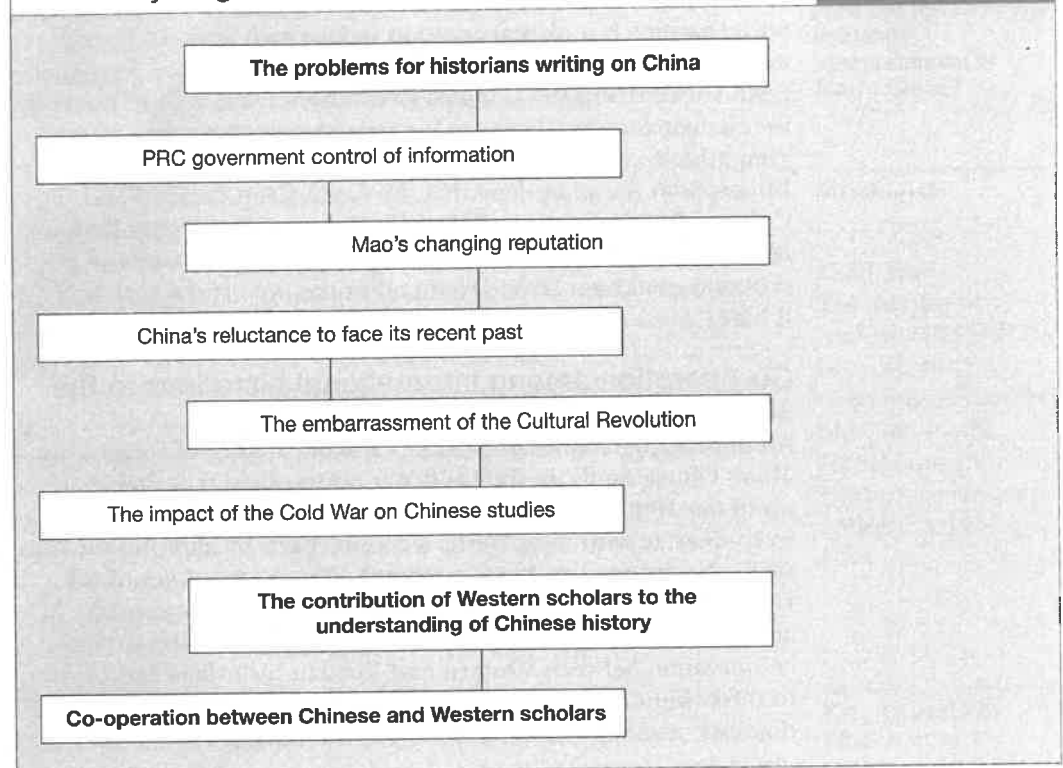
An interesting fact is that Russia is a major holder of sources on Mao's China. Sadly, in the Cold War atmosphere that prevailed up to the 1990s the Soviet experts on China were not permitted to co-operate with their Western counterparts by allowing them to study the documents. It was not until after the break-up of the USSR in the early 1990s that Western scholars were granted access to the former Soviet archives. By the late 1990s co-operation between Western and Russian historians had begun to throw light on many previously hidden aspects of both the domestic and international history of the PRC.

Jung Chang's biography of Mao

In 2005 a book appeared which claimed to tell the 'unknown story' of Mao. It did not quite do that since many of the 'discoveries' in the book had already been presented in a less dramatic way by other scholars. Nonetheless, the biography of Mao by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday quickly caught the imagination of students of China in the West, largely because the writer was already popular with readers for her *Wild Swans*, a book which sold 10 million copies throughout the world and provided a fascinating account of her family's bitter experiences during the Cultural Revolution. As might be expected, Jung Chang paints a very dark picture of Mao, portraying him as a driven monster responsible for the deaths of 70 million of his people.

Given her sufferings under Mao, Jung's approach is understandable, but it is arguable that her book is too strongly critical of its subject. The insights of someone who lived through the grim times she describes are obviously highly valuable, but there is a danger that she may be too close to it all to give a balanced appraisal. It may be one of those cases in which the player does not see the game as well as the spectator. This is why it is important to pay attention to other biographies of Mao, such as those by Philip Short and Jonathan Spence, which are written from a more detached, dispassionate angle.

Summary diagram: Mao's China and the historians

**Some key books on Mao's China:**

- Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (Jonathan Cape, 2005).
- Jung Chang, *Wild Swans* (HarperCollins, 1991).
- Delia Davin, *Mao Zedong* (Sutton, 1997).
- Lee Feigon, *Mao: A Reinterpretation* (Ivan R. Dee, 2002).
- John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Belknap Press, 1992).
- Michael Lynch, *Mao* (Routledge, 2004).
- Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Belknap Press, 2006).
- Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-Tung* (Penguin, 1966).
- Frank Schurmann and Orville Schell, *Communist China* (Penguin, 1976).
- Philip Short, *Mao: A Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1999).
- Jonathan Spence, *Mao* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).
- Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (W.W. Norton, 1990).
- Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography* (Stanford UP, 2000).



Part 2



Complete a table similar to the one below:

Reasons for the Communist victory in the Civil War

Strength of Mao's communists	Weaknesses of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists

1. Background to China in 1949



LEARNING OBJECTIVES – AFTER THIS LESSON YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND:

- ❖ The political situation in 1945
- ❖ The events of the Chinese civil war, the reasons for communist victory and the aftermath of the civil war of 1946-49
- ❖ The role and influence of those involved in the civil war
- ❖ First steps for establishing rule in China for the Communist Party

The global political situation at the end of World War II in 1945 was notable for a rapidly changing landscape and indicators of an unpredictable and uncertain future. The threat of nuclear conflict between the **capitalist** USA and the **communist** Soviet Union became a very significant concern, and as each superpower tried to bring a wider range of nations under its influence, the scope of international relations expanded right across the globe, absorbing a greater number of countries into the realities of international diplomacy.



Key Event

The Cold War: A state of political tension and military rivalry between nations that stopped short of full-scale war, especially that which existed between the United States and the Soviet Union following World War II.

In this context, as the world recovered from a devastating world war and the superpower rivalry of the Cold War began in earnest, a further ‘revolutionary’ development in the Far East would have major international repercussions in the years ahead. The impact of World War II and the subsequent evolution of further international conflict certainly impacted on the long-term fortunes of China, a country that was rising in independent power after years of foreign encroachment, and which was already experiencing significant post-war upheavals of its own.

Capitalism

A political and economic system under which ownership of and investment in the means of production and distribution depends chiefly upon corporations and private individuals.

Communism

A system of government in which the state plans and controls the economy and a single, often authoritarian, party holds power, claiming to make progress toward a higher social order in which all goods are equally shared by the people. The Marxist-Leninist version of communist doctrine advocates the overthrow of capitalism by the revolution of the proletariat.

Background: The Chinese Civil War 1946–1949

In the aftermath of the destabilising and destructive World War II, China erupted into a damaging and divisive conflict of its own in 1946, resuming an internal war that had originally begun in 1927. The war was fought between the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-Shek’s Kuomintang, who had been in power since the early twentieth century, and the communist opponents led by Mao Zedong.

Once the Second World War was over, therefore, China’s warring factions turned their attention to each other in order to determine once and for all the future independent direction of the Chinese nation, free from external and foreign domination following years of colonial rule.

Why did the communists win the civil war?

Several key factors would determine the outcome of this conflict:

1. The military strength of each faction
2. The role and influence of the respective leaders
3. The impact of the war on wider Chinese society and how it influenced the sympathies of the wider population

It is worth looking at each of these points in more detail to analyse their effect on the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940s.



1. Military strengths

Chinese troops had been primarily engaged with the Japanese during World War II, a conflict that stemmed from Japan's invasion of the Manchuria region in 1931. From 1937 onwards both Kuomintang and communist forces fought Japanese troops in this region, although for much of this time they also fought each other for internal Chinese supremacy. By the end of World War II and in the aftermath of Japan's eventual defeat following the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in mid-1945, the balance of power in China's civil war had significantly shifted in the direction of Mao's communists.

This was evident in their army numbers, with an enlarged 1.2 million troops, along with a further two million as part of a militia army. The 'Liberated Zone' controlled by communist forces featured a quarter of the country's geographical territory and a third its population, including many key towns and cities, a significant factor in a country with a vast amount of rural terrain. As a further bonus, communist allies within the Soviet Union gave all of their captured Japanese weapons and a substantial amount of their own military supplies to the communists, along with some key northern territory. This Soviet assistance would be a major factor in the war's eventual outcome in favour of Mao's communist forces.

By contrast, the Kuomintang had approximately 1.6 million troops from early 1946 onwards and within two years of the end of the Second World War had received approximately 4.5 billion dollars from the USA, with President Truman keen to prevent communism spreading further in the post-war era. American military personnel were also utilised to support China's forces. In both numbers of armed troops and in economic terms the Kuomintang were, therefore, in a strong position, but the military tide was turning against them and public support was also declining. In damaging clashes during 1946, the Kuomintang suffered heavy losses and they were overtaken in numbers of military personnel by the communist forces, who abandoned some territory in order to pursue the tactical strategy of drawing in Kuomintang forces to their positions of strength, maintaining their troop numbers and forcing their opponents to suffer heavy losses in battles on their terms.

2. The role and influence of the respective leaders:

Comparison: Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek

Mao Zedong

Mao came from humble beginnings and was born in Chaochan in rural China in 1893 and had become a Marxist while still a teenager. His humble background and origins arguably made him more aware of the struggles of ordinary Chinese people during this period and would perhaps explain the attractions of the Marxist ideology and its promise of a better deal for the poorer members of society. During the 1930s he participated in the 'Long March' (1934–1935), which saw communist activists flee the nationalist onslaught and experience significant hardship in the process.

After wartime activity against the invading Japanese, by the late 1940s Mao had become established as the head of the **People's Liberation Army** and was instrumental in the evolution of the civil war in the communists' favour. He also had the title of first Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, hence his often being referred to as '**Chairman Mao**' in subsequent years. His endurance of the 'Long March' of the 1930s and his adherence to the ideology of Marxism from an early age instilled firm and clear beliefs and determination into his personality, and this shaped his leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. However, given these humble beginnings, there is some irony to allegations by some historians that later in his career Mao behaved like an 'Emperor' in the way that his governance affected China.

Chiang Kai-shek

Chiang was born in 1887 into an upper-middle-class merchant family. He developed a political and military background and served as a minister in the nationalist government of China in the 1920s. He was a conservative in political and social terms and he favoured an authoritarian style of dictatorial government. Such conservatism meant that he fiercely opposed the spread of communism and focused on its growing development rather than the encroachment of Japan in the years before World War II.

Chiang's wealthier background made him less sympathetic to the demands of the communists for greater equality and would explain his position as a leading figure of the pro-capitalist, nationalist government of China from the late 1920s until the late 1940s. However, many have criticised his government as being corrupt and incompetent in the run up to World War II, with government officials delivering foreign investment to their personal financial benefit, and this ultimately resulted in the country being ill-prepared for the prolonged war with Japan.



Chiang's more affluent and mercantile background ultimately detached him from the experiences and desires of many ordinary Chinese people during the period of internal conflict in the late 1940s. Although he could offer promises of greater stability after many years of war, unlike Mao, he did not offer the masses of the Chinese peasantry the promise of better things with a distinct ideological vision.

The legacy of the Chinese civil war

Although the communist victory signalled an end to foreign domination of China, such ongoing foreign exploitation had meant that the country was in a weak position to begin its independent journey. The sustained nature of the civil war was also very destructive for the development and evolution of the new Chinese nation. The country was also significantly divided in political terms, with the ideological nature of the conflict sharpening the differences between the two sides, and this left a legacy of bitterness within Chinese society among ordinary citizens. The prolonged and destructive nature of the war had also hampered the development and modernisation of China's urban centres, while many rural areas continued to remain backward and unproductive. The wider Chinese infrastructure was ultimately damaged by the destruction and devastation caused by this internalised war.

In addition to this, the defeated 'Nationalists', the Kuomintang under **Chiang Kai-Shek**, fled into exile on the island of **Taiwan**, a development that would prove to be the source of further international and domestic conflict in future years, with many claiming the war never conclusively ended as a result. The 'Taiwan Question' would be a source of concern for Mao's communist regime in the years that followed, causing further instability and uncertainty within Chinese government and society. Overall, the Chinese Civil War created a legacy that undermined the unity and viability of the Chinese state as it sought to establish itself in the modern world.



Establishing communist rule, 1949–57

China: Communist and Revolutionary

On 1st October 1949, following a period of prolonged unrest within the country, **Mao Zedong** (*left*) established the **People's Republic of China** after seizing control of the country's new capital, the so-called 'forbidden city' of Beijing (Peking). This followed the lengthy and divisive civil war with the 'Nationalists' which had occurred on either side of the turbulence and destruction of World War II (1939–45), and which had begun back in the 1920s.

This legacy of sustained domestic conflict, therefore, meant that China faced some significant challenges under Mao's leadership from 1949 onwards. On an international level, the allegiance of Mao's government with communist ideology was a development that caused major anxieties within the USA and the Western world as the Cold War erupted in the late 1940s. The American political leadership feared that the spread of this political doctrine was evidence of a 'domino effect', with one regime toppling to communism after another. International relations would continue to have an impact on the domestic developments within communist China as the years progressed. However, the short-term priority for the new governing regime on a domestic level was to establish an effective system of government that could rule and administer mainland China after many years of turbulence and upheaval.

People's Liberation Army

This body represents the unified organisation of China's land, sea, and air forces and is one of the largest military forces in the world. Its roots can be traced to the 1927 Nanchang Uprising of the communists against the nationalists. Initially called the Red Army, it grew under **Mao Zedong** from 5,000 troops in 1929 to 200,000 in 1933.

Only a fraction of this force survived the **Long March** (1934–1935) in retreat from nationalist forces. After World War II, communist forces were renamed the People's Liberation Army, and the body was a key factor in the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. All army ranks were abolished by Mao in 1965, and the PLA was a key tool in keeping Mao's leadership in place and in control of the government machinery, particularly during the various 'power struggles' within the Chinese communist leadership from the early 1960s onwards. In the later years under Mao's rule, the PLA helped to keep Mao in power despite internal pressures, and was influential in preventing the 'Gang of Four' seizing power after his death in 1976. The PLA has a force of approximately 3 million (2010).



Questions and Talking Points

1. Why was China in need of stability in the late 1940s?
2. Why did Mao Zedong face a hostile world in establishing the communist regime in China?