

THE MAOIST ERA: 1949 – 1976



The end of the Second World War in 1945 set the stage for the final showdown between the Nationalist and Communist parties of China. Six weeks of negotiations between Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao Zedong in August of 1945 yielded no result and in early 1946, civil war flared up once more. Although the Nationalists received substantial American support, Chiang's forces were too spread out compared to the Communists, who worked their way from north to south China in concentrated numbers. In December 1948, Beijing fell to the Communists, followed by Nanjing in April 1949. The People's Republic of China was thus declared on October 1st, 1949, by a triumphant Mao Zedong who announced the defeat of the *Kuomintang* at Tiananmen Square. The remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek's government fled to the island of Taiwan and some to Chiangmai in Thailand.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, the People's Republic of China engaged in its first international military action. At the end of the Second World War, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel, with the northern side supported by the Communist Soviets and the southern government backed by the United States. In June of 1950, North Korean forces launched a surprise attack on the south and quickly subdued it. In September of 1950, UN forces under US General McArthur landed at Incheon and routed the North Korean forces occupying the south. When the Americans advanced beyond the 38th parallel, however, Communist China responded by immediately dispatching over a million soldiers to face the Americans. The Chinese forced the Americans into retreat and captured Seoul in January of 1951. The Korean War soon degenerated into a conflict of attrition, and in July 1953, a cease-fire was reached, re-establishing the border at the 38th parallel. China's military involvement in Korea came at a huge cost. Over one million Chinese soldiers, including the eldest son of Chairman Mao, died in combat in Korea.

The end of the Korean War brought some degree of stability and normalcy back

to China. Mao, however, feared that China in peacetime would lose its revolutionary fervor, and attempted to propel China quickly along the path to socialism. Unfortunately, as a result, Mao's efforts would plunge China into two decades of chaos and turmoil. Mao's positive reforms included the land reform program of confiscating all farmland and redistributing it to landless peasants, and the reformation of marriage laws, which outlawed concubinage, polygamy, and eradication of social ills such as prostitution.. On the other hand, negative development included a nationwide round-up and execution of over 500,000 individuals who Mao labelled "counter-revolutionaries". These included former Nationalist party members, as well as anyone who voiced their disapproval of the Communist party.

At this time, Mao adopted Soviet models and its system of five-year plans to try and achieve China's socialist transformation. Early efforts focused on education, industrialization and an improved health care, but from the mid-1950s onwards, Mao was concerned primarily with increasing China's agricultural and heavy industrial production. Although industrial output increased steadily, Mao's plan for agricultural reform (known as "The Great Leap Forward") may have been the most disastrous of his policies, resulting in the deaths of millions of individuals. Mao himself was shielded from the disastrous results of his agricultural reforms, as nobody was willing to openly offend Mao or the Communist party leaders. When Mao visited the rural villages, there were even carefully staged performances of prosperity and artificially inflated production figures awaiting him. Foreign dignitaries who visited China at this time were also taken to carefully selected industrial and agricultural sites to showcase the supposed accomplishments of Mao's "Great Leap Forward".



One brave individual who stood up for the Chinese people was a man named Peng Dehuai, who circulated a letter among the Communist politburo which was extremely critical of Mao's policies. Peng's criticism forced Mao to admit the errors of the "Great Leap Forward", but as a

consequence, Peng Dehuai was denounced as a traitor to China. Today, however, Peng's reputation has been restored, and he is admired for his courageous criticism of Mao's failures. Although Mao never admitted that the Great Leap Forward was a complete failure, he was forced to finally admit that at least some responsibility for the disaster lay on his shoulders. It is said that at this time Mao became depressed and rarely attended party meetings. Agricultural production in China did not recover from pre-1957 figures until the 1970s.

From the 1962 to 1966, there was once again a return to normalcy in China. All this would change however, with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. The instigator to this was Mao's view that the majority of the Chinese government was apparently abandoning China's socialist revolution, and following a revisionist path similar to the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev. In June of 1966, anarchy descended upon China. Mao appealed primarily to young students, whom he openly urged to denounce their parents and elders for being "counter-revolutionary". In August of 1966, Mao publicly announced the designation of his youthful supporters as "Red Guards" and approved of their slogan "to rebel is justified". One million red guards attended this rally on August 18, 1966. Millions of youth Chinese left their schools to travel to Beijing for the occasion. Who were the supposed "counter-revolutionaries" which Mao and his Red Guards targeted? Thousands of foreign-educated Chinese who had returned to China were hunted down and sent to rural labor camps. Intellectuals, doctors and scientists were treated in a similar fashion. In fact, Mao drew up a list of "undesirables" in China who needed to be re-educated – such intellectuals were labelled as the most undesirable of all. Red Guards would storm the homes of their teachers and elders, in search of anything that could be labelled foreign or intellectual. Western books, music, artwork and clothing were strictly prohibited at this time. "Undesirable" individuals were publicly abused – physically and verbally.



By 1967, the Cultural Revolution had descended into complete and utter chaos, as rival groups of Red Guards were fighting one another, with each side claiming to be more fervent in their support of Mao's

revolutionary goals. In large cities such as Guangzhou, mob rule prevailed on the streets. Mao had to finally conclude that his Cultural Revolution had gone too far and tried to restrain it. In 1968, Mao instructed the People's Liberation Army to restore order, using military force if necessary. In 1969, Mao forced millions of students (who were essentially ruling the large cities) to the countryside, to work in the same rural labor camps which the “counter-revolutionaries” and intellectuals had been sent to.

In addition to its brutality, the Cultural Revolution caused unimaginable destruction to China's artistic heritage. Red Guards destroyed countless relics and objects of art.. The fall of 1968 signalled the end of the Cultural Revolution and of the tumultuous first 20 years of the People's Republic. All in all, tens of millions of Chinese lost their lives due to unrealistic government expectations, famine and senseless violence. In the 1970s, Mao would take on more of a “backseat” role in the daily handling of affairs in the People's Republic – paving the way for a struggle for power between a moderate faction led by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping and the so-called Gang of 4, consisting of Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyan, Wang Hongwen and Mao's widowed wife Jiang Qing.

It is believed that in the early 1970s, as Mao's health was declining, the Gang of 4 effectively controlled power within the Communist party. Zhou died in early 1976, and after Mao's death, the Gang of 4 arranged for a public deposition of Deng Xiaoping. However, Mao named as his successor the relatively unknown Hua Guofeng, who would join forces with Deng to oust the Gang of 4 from power. A massive campaign was launched to discredit these individuals, which Hua and Deng blamed for the atrocities and excesses of the Cultural Revolution. In late 1976, the Gang of 4 was arrested and in 1981, they were subjected to a show trial in which they were convicted to life imprisonment. Jiang Qing committed suicide in 1991, while the other three members of the Gang have perished of natural causes since then. The removal of the Gang of 4 caused a power struggle between former political allies Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng, which ended with a political victory for Deng. In the 1980s and 90s, Deng Xiaoping would thus emerge as the more moderate figure whose job was to essentially rescue China from the chaotic two decades following the birth of the People's Republic.