

Definition: **Mao Zedong** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

1893--1976, Chinese politician; founded the Chinese Communist Party (1921); established a soviet republic in south-eastern China (1931--34); founded the People's Republic of China 1949 and was chairman of this until 1959. He was party chairman until his death; he instigated the Cultural Revolution which peaked from 1966 to 1969.

Formerly Mao Tse-tung

Summary Article: **Mao, Zedong (1893-1976)**

From *Biographical Dictionary of the People's Republic of China*

Mao Zedong was born into a relatively wealthy peasant family in Shaoshan, Hunan Province, on December 26, 1893. His ancestors had migrated from Jiangxi Province during the Ming Dynasty and settled in Hunan as peasants. The marriage of Mao's parents, Mao Yichang and Wen Qimei, was an arranged one, based on time-honored Chinese customs. Altogether, they had six sons and two daughters, but only three sons survived beyond infancy — Mao Zedong, Mao Zemin, and Mao Zetan.

From an early age, Mao loved his Buddhist mother, who was a gentle and tolerant woman. His father was extremely hardworking and thrifty. Though relatively wealthy, his father became a soldier to earn extra money to pay off family debts.

Mao had a rebellious childhood. He clashed frequently with his tutors, who taught him Confucian classics. Such rejection of tradition was a major source of tension between Mao and his father. In the hope it might make him more mature, the father arranged a marriage for Mao in 1908. But Mao disliked the bride Luo Yixiu, and his first marriage made him then a fierce opponent of arranged marriages.

When Luo died, Mao left Shaoshan to attend a nearby modern school. There he studied science, world history, geography, and foreign languages. These subjects broadened Mao's thinking and prompted him to find new opportunities.

In 1911, he enrolled in a teacher's training college in Changsha, the provincial capital. He read extensively, both translations of Western works and radical Chinese writings about the May Fourth Movement. For the first time, he encountered Marxism and Communism. He became a student activist, forming student groups, editing political magazines, and protesting to school authorities. By 1919, Mao was working as an assistant librarian at Beijing University with Li Dazhao as a curator. He read as much as possible there also. His ideas on Communism were strengthened through this reading and by further discussion with radical-thinking university professors.

Mao joined the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921. In 1923, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the CPC. Although the Communists participated in what might be termed "symbolic cooperation" with the Nationalists against the warlords, and later, the Japanese, Mao was involved in continual struggle until 1949. The most notable event of this period is the Long March. In 1934, the Nationalists launched a final extermination campaign against the Communists, who were

driven back across the countryside. The Communist troops suffered enormous hardships along the way. However, Mao saw the Long March as a great success because he was able to establish a strong relationship between the Red Army and the peasants. When they finally settled in Yan'an, Mao and his supporters continued to organize their new guerrilla troops. Now the Communists had secured their own power base in the remote, rural regions of China.

In 1937, Japan invaded China. Both Communists and Nationalists united against the common enemy. This cooperation, however, was followed by another period of three-year civil war beginning in 1946. The Communists won this conflict, and on October 1, 1949, founded the People's Republic of China (PRC). Soon after, Mao, now known as "Chairman Mao," headed the Central Government of the country. As well as undertaking a series of social and economic reforms in the hope of transforming China into a socialist country, Mao then launched several political campaigns to consolidate his power. To a large extent, these reforms and campaigns met his original goals.

In the early 1950s, for example, land reforms and a campaign for suppressing counter-revolutionaries helped eliminate his enemies — former Guomindang officials, anti-Communist merchants, rich peasants, and rightist intellectuals. With the assistance of the Soviet Union, the First Five Year Plan (1953-1957) was also launched. This plan aimed at transforming China into a super industrial power by ending its dependence upon agricultural production. The success of the plan led Mao to implement the Second Five Year Plan, the Great Leap Forward, in 1958. For many historians, the Great Leap Forward was a catastrophe for the Chinese economy, followed as it was by a three-year famine and the Sino-Soviet diplomatic split. This was Mao's first real failure.

In the late 1950s, Mao also launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Anti-Rightist Movement. In theory, Chinese intellectuals were free to express different opinions about how China should be governed. However, as some of them criticized the Communist regime to an extent intolerable for Mao, he decided to eliminate them. In practice, the campaign became a movement in what Jung Chang and Jon Halliday describe as "Killing the Hundred Flowers." The two events led to the condemnation, silencing, and death of perhaps a million Chinese citizens.

The historical verdict on Mao's role in the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 has not been favorable either. Following the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao found himself pushed to the margins politically. Liu Shaoqi became State President. Fearing his removal from Chinese politics entirely, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 under the pretext of eliminating "class enemies" who threatened China's socialist framework. On the one hand, his revolution hoped to restore the original ideals of the Chinese Communist movement. On the other hand, it led to imprisonment and death of thousands of writers, historians, and intellectuals. It was actually a disaster for Chinese culture.

Mao encouraged young people, the Red Guards, to participate in violent, but pro-Mao revolutionary activities throughout China. Confucianism was under severe attack. The philosophical touchstone for the Red Guards was the so-called "Little Red Book" — *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1966)—a collection of excerpts from Mao's past speeches and publications. With over 900 million copies in print, it was circulated widely throughout the country. It became required reading material in schools and workplaces. All units in agricultural, industrial, military, and governmental sectors were required to study the book, and it served as the central means for establishing Mao's personality cult.

The Red Guards were inculcated with the message that they must love Mao more than anyone else, including their parents. As a result, they destroyed Chinese cultural artifacts, criticized university

professors, and sent scholars and writers to prison camps and work farms for ideological indoctrination. When the devastation became uncontrollable, Mao tried to put a swift end to the revolution by armed force.

By some estimates, the revolution cost China nearly three years of economic progress. Although it was successful in helping to eliminate Mao's rivals, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, its cost to Chinese culture, economy, and education are beyond assessment.

After Liu and Deng were gone, radical leaders came to dominate Chinese politics — one of whom was Mao's fourth wife Jiang Qing — and another, Lin Biao, and later on, the “Gang of Four.” China again fell into a period of chaos. Mao died on September 9, 1976. His designated successor, Hua Guofeng, ordered the arrest of the Gang of Four in October, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 officially ended.

Scholarly evaluations of Mao Zedong as a historical figure have been mixed. On the negative side, Chang and Halliday argue that Mao was responsible, during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, for the deaths of over 70 million Chinese in peacetime. According to them, Mao, despite his peasant background, had no sympathy for peasants. For the Great Leap, he was willing to sacrifice millions of Chinese. And he was the “only millionaire” created in Mao's China.

Was Mao then contradictory in his thought? Prominent scholar Stuart Schram argues that Mao's ideas were full of contradictions. He was better at grabbing power than in governing China and developing the country's economy. Jonathan Spence also believes that Mao wielded extraordinary powers neither wisely nor well, yet was able to silence criticism for many years.

However, one should not overlook the major contributions of Mao to modern China. He was a charismatic and heroic leader in helping to reunite China in 1949. He showed exceptional ability in mobilizing the masses to participate in various political and economic campaigns. As Lee Feigon indicates, Mao should be credited for creating a unified central government in the PRC and enriching the lives of the Chinese people; for example, in his support for programs which increased the equality of the sexes, such as literacy for women.

See also Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997); Hua Guofeng (1921-2008); Jiang Qing (1914-1991); Lin Biao (1907-1971); Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969); Wang Hongwen (1936-1992); Yao Wenyuan (1931-2005); Zhang Chunqiao (1917-2005); Zhang Rong (Jung Chang, 1952-)

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