



89

## MAO ZEDONG

1893 - 1976

Mao Zedong led the Communist party to power in China, and for the next twenty-seven years presided over a remarkable and far-reaching transformation of that vast nation.

Mao was born in 1893, in the village of Shaoshan, in Hunan province, the son of a well-off peasant. In 1911, when Mao was an eighteen-year-old student, a rebellion broke out against the decaying Ch'ing dynasty, which had ruled China since the seventeenth century. Within a few months the imperial government was overthrown, and China was declared a republic. Unfortunately, the leaders of the revolution were unable to establish a stable, unified government in China; and the revolution inaugurated a long period of instability and civil war—one which lasted, in fact, until 1949.

As a young man, Mao became steadily more leftist in his political ideas, and by 1920 he was a confirmed Marxist. In 1921, he

was one of the twelve original founders of the Communist party of China. However, his climb to the top of the party leadership was rather slow, and it was not until 1935 that he became the leader of the party.

Meanwhile, the Communist party of China was engaged in a long, slow, and quite unsteady path to power. The party suffered major setbacks in 1927 and in 1934, but managed to survive them. After 1935, under Mao's leadership, the party's strength steadily increased. By 1947, it was ready for all-out war against the Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek. In 1949, their forces were victorious, and the Communists gained complete control of the Chinese mainland.

The China that Mao, as head of the party, now came to govern had been torn by war for the better part of thirty-eight years. China was a poverty-stricken, underdeveloped country, whose teeming, tradition-bound millions were mainly illiterate peasants. Mao himself was fifty-six years old, and it appeared that the bulk of his career was behind him.

In fact, however, the period of Mao's greatest influence was just beginning; and by the time of his death, in 1976, Mao's policies had transformed China. One aspect of that transformation was a general modernization of the country. In particular, there was a rapid industrialization, combined with great improvements in public health and education. These changes, though obviously very important, are of a sort that occurred in quite a few other countries during the same period, and they alone would not be sufficient to justify Mao's place on this list.

A second accomplishment of Mao's government was the transformation of China's economic system from capitalism to socialism. Just a few years after Mao died, however, his successor (Deng Xiaoping) started to reintroduce various aspects of a free-market economy into China. We cannot yet be sure just how far this process will go; but it now seems likely that within five or ten years China will abandon socialism and will become a capitalist nation again. The economic policies of Mao therefore seem far less important than they once did.

Mao had originally believed that the industrial workers of the

cities would provide the strongest base of support for the Communist party, an idea which was in accordance with Marx's own thinking. However, about 1925, Mao came to the conclusion that, at least in China, the party's main support would come from the peasantry. He acted accordingly, and, during the long power struggle with the Nationalists, Mao's power base was always in the countryside. This idea was carried over during his years as head of state. For example, whereas Stalin, in Russia, usually stressed industrial development, Mao generally paid more attention to agricultural and rural development. Nevertheless, China's industrial production increased markedly under Mao's leadership.

Politically, of course, Mao installed a thoroughly totalitarian system. At least 20 million of his countrymen—quite possibly 30 million or more—met their deaths at the hands of Mao's regime, making his reign perhaps the bloodiest in all human history. (Only Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan can challenge Mao for this dubious "honor.") There was some liberalization after Mao died; but attempts to convert China into a democracy have been firmly repressed by Deng Xiaoping, sometimes—as in the June 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square in Beijing—quite savagely.

Of course, it was not Mao Zedong alone who determined the policies of the Communist government. He never exercised the sort of one-man control that Stalin did in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it is clear that Mao was by far the most important figure in the Chinese government from 1949 until his death in 1976.

One project for which he seems to bear chief responsibility was the "Great Leap Forward" of the late 1950s. Many observers think that that project, which included an emphasis on small-scale, labor-intensive production methods, which could be carried out on the rural communes, was a failure. (In any event, it was eventually abandoned.) Another project which Mao supported, over the opposition of various other Chinese leaders, was the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" of the late 1960s. This was a major upheaval—in some senses almost a civil war between Mao and his supporters on the one hand, and the entrenched Communist party bureaucracy on the other.

It is interesting to note that Mao was already in his mid-sixties



*Chinese citizens celebrate the 18th anniversary of Mao's takeover of the mainland.*

when the "Great Leap Forward" began, was well past seventy when the Cultural Revolution was instituted, and was almost eighty when, in a dramatic change of policy, he commenced a rapprochement with the United States.

It is always difficult to assess the long-term influence of a recent political figure. In the first edition of this book I gave Mao a very high ranking because I thought that the Communist system which he had established in China was likely to endure for a long time. That no longer seems probable. China appears to be abandoning socialism; and the dictatorial political system which Mao bequeathed China, though still in place, no longer seems secure.

While Mao was alive, it appeared that he might turn out to be as important a figure as Shih Huang Ti. Both were Chinese, and both were architects of revolutionary changes in their country. However, the influence of Shih Huang Ti on China endured for some twenty-two centuries, while the influence of Mao seems to be fading rapidly.

It seems more appropriate to compare Mao with Lenin, who also lived in the twentieth century. Just as Mao was the leader who established Marxism in China, so Lenin was the one who established it in Russia. At first sight, Mao seems the more important of the two: After all, China has more than three times the population of the Soviet Union. But Lenin preceded Mao, set an example for Mao, and influenced Mao's thinking. Furthermore, by establishing the world's first Communist state, Lenin had an enormous *worldwide* influence, far more influence outside his own country than Mao did. Taking that into consideration, it seems that Mao should be ranked somewhat below Lenin.



*Chairman Mao  
participates in Chinese  
scholastic celebrations.*