

The Political Leadership of Mao Zedong

Donia Zhang^{1,2}

¹Director, Neoland School of Chinese Culture, Canada, ²Associate, City Institute, York University, Canada

Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of the former Chinese Communist Party leader Chairman Mao Zedong's political career (reigned 1949–1976), with regard to his success and failures. Mao was one of the most prominent Communist theoreticians who governed a quarter of humankind for a quarter of a century. His political philosophy, particularly his Method of Leadership, focusing on the “masses” is discussed here. The analytical arguments are centered on three phases of his leadership: The rise, the apex, and the fall. In the first phase, the paper attributes his victory before 1949 to his profound understanding of Chinese peasants. In the second phase, it elaborates on his successful method of leadership in the early 1950s. And in the third and last phase, it criticizes his disastrous political movements, particularly the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. The study hopes to offer an objective and a balanced view of Chairman Mao, who had a complex personality and was a highly controversial figure in human history. The article also wishes to help readers gain a better understanding of China's top leader in recent history, and how China came to be what it is today.

Keywords: *history; politics, society; Cultural revolution; Mao era; China*

Publication date: September 2018

Publication online: 3rd September 2018

Corresponding Author: Donia Zhang, doniazhang@hotmail.com

0 Introduction

The year 2016 marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976, reigned 1949–1976), the Founding Father of the People's Republic of China (PRC); and the 50th anniversary of

the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the Zhushigang village of China's central Henan province, a 36.6-m-high gold statue of Chairman Mao, which took 9 months to complete, was reportedly knocked down a month later, because according to the Chinese newspaper People's Daily, local authorities had not approved the giant monument.^[1]

Mao has remained a controversial figure until today. For some, he may have represented a divine personality whose political achievement of establishing the People's Republic of China in 1949 making him incomparable in human history. He governed a quarter of the humankind for a quarter of a century. Whereas for others, Mao may have been one of the world's biggest dictators who manipulated and exploited his people for his political stability, and who had brought many calamities to Chinese people during the two political movements: The Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

In June 1981, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued an official judgment of Mao Zedong, assessing him 70% right and 30% wrong, which is to say that his leadership and theories through 1957 were commended, but the two political movements in the next two decades were highly condemned.^[2-5] The author generally agrees with this assessment and offers the chronological analysis based on it.

Although Western commentators are often immensely critical of Mao's wrongdoings, several made rational appraisals.^[3,6,7] Yawei Liu, Director of the Carter Center's China Program in Atlanta, stated: “An honest, earnest, serious assessment of Mao based on facts” is “necessary” because “without such a thorough verdict, it would be hard for China to launch meaningful political reform.”^[8]

During the author's primary and secondary schools in China (1974–1986), we were frequently taught that

Mao was the man who freed Chinese people from the oppression of three “mountains:” Imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism, and finally led Chinese people to a brighter future under the new socialist system. He led the CCP succeed in the Civil War (1927–1949) and the second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945).^[9] He chaired the central government council of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and became the most powerful person in China.

Mao established equality between the genders and liberated Chinese women from their traditional triple roles as daughter-in-law, wife, and mother, who were obliged to tie their feet in their teenage so that they had to stay at home to fulfill their domestic duties. He eliminated polygyny (as had always been practiced in federal China) and replaced it with monogyny. He also initiated the devastating “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976) that mobilized the whole country to follow his instructions, which made millions of people fight against each other and many died during the catastrophe.

After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) chaired the country in 1978 and launched an economic reform to allow a small number of Chinese people to get rich first. This policy has not only led China to rapid economic development over the past 40 years (1978–2018) but also it has resulted in a social polarity between the rich and the poor and generated countless corruptions, which the current Chinese President Xi Jinping (1953-) has attempted to rectify.

However, there is a growing sentiment in China among peasants and the working poor, who most cherished Mao’s socialist era when housing, health care, and education were virtually free, and when corruption was almost non-existent.^[10] It is, therefore, necessary to reflect on Mao’s success and failures to offer hindsight for China to better move forward, which may also have implications for leaders in other countries. This historical analysis is structured along three timelines of Mao’s leadership: The rise before 1949, the apex in the early 1950s, and the fall from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s.

1 The Rise: Before 1949

Mao Zedong came from a peasant’s family. His profound understanding of the hardship of the working class, particularly the peasants in old China, helped him win the Civil War (1927–1949) against the Nationalists and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945). He

became the leader of the CCP in 1927, whose political goal was to beat the local tyrants, divide the cropland, give land to the tillers, reduce, or exempt from taxes. Although the policy targeted at the landlords who were just a small number of the country’s middle class, it had won the hearts of Chinese peasants who were the majority of the population struggling to survive in a turbulent era of frequent wars.

While the Chinese Nationalist Party was on the side of the national bourgeoisie and the bureaucratic capitalists who held the power and positions in finance, industry, business, and other important arenas of the society, these people were the minority in China. Furthermore, there were severe corruptions among the Nationalist Government officials. Heavy inflation was extremely burdensome for the ordinary citizens, which had caused deep social dissatisfaction and despair. Mao’s self-appointed task was to move this decayed, corrupt, and inefficient China into modernity.

Mao’s decisive shift both for the success of Chinese Communism and for his own leadership was his adaptation of Marxist tenet to Chinese context. Marxism was the product of urban culture, whereas China was essentially rural. He marvelously adjusted the needs of Chinese “agrarian masses” by returning to the peasants as the motive force for revolution. These factors had contributed to Mao’s success in his earlier undertakings.

2 The Apex: In the Early 1950s

Mao increased his credibility in the early 1950s due to his upright method of leadership. Since 1949, the Chinese revolutionary movement entered a new phase of social reconstruction while Mao struggled to build socialism in China. His declaration of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949, raised his reputation to the utmost. The People’s Republic is a translated Western concept of “republic,” which literally means “people’s country” (*renmin gonghe guo*) in the Chinese language, and which was a very revolutionary idea at the time.

Mao took the radical transformation of Chinese society to liberate the energies of its citizens, and he was guided by ideas of Western origin. The first was the 19th-century liberalism, second Marxist dialectical materialism, and third Leninist collectivism. The Confucian view of politics was hierarchical and undemocratic. China’s encounter with the West was, therefore, fated to shake its tradition to the foundations,^[11] as according to

traditional Confucian outlook, the sole political function of the people was to obey their legitimate ruler. Only in the past decade of the 19th century had voices been raised to affirm that the conscious participation of every citizen in the life of society could release the synergies necessary to make China rich and powerful again.

During his regime of 1949–1956, Mao was a highly respected political leader in China. He warned his government officials not to follow in the footsteps of Li Zicheng (1605–1645), whose internal corruptions cost their “Peasant Uprising” victory short-lived, and within 1 year they were driven out of Beijing. Mao disciplined his officials not to take “a needle or a thread” from the masses, which was very well received by the common people at the time. He strove to eliminate the social classes and formulated the line of continuing revolutionary struggle throughout the period of socialism that stressed mass enthusiasm and mobilization as the basis of socialist construction.

Mao’s emphasis on the “masses” in his leadership method echoed the Western writer James M. Burns’ idea of “transforming leadership.”^[12] In his book *Leadership*, Burns defines two basic types of leadership: Transactional and transforming. Transactional leadership is that leaders approach followers for the exchange of one thing for another, such as jobs for votes, or subsidies for campaign contributions. Most political leaderships are transactional. Transforming leadership is more complex and potent in that the leader recognizes and exploits an existing need of a potential follower and looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy their higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.

Mao’s method of leadership was incongruent with Burns’^[12] transforming leadership in that leaders must be linked to the wants, needs, and wishes of the masses, and that the effectiveness of leadership must be judged by the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the people. Mao’s establishment of equality between the genders in job opportunities and wages was one of the major contributions to China. Closely linked to it was the liberation of Chinese women from their traditional triple roles of daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. Men and women could equally receive higher education and become professionals. Mao’s famous saying: “Women could hold up half the sky” (*funü neng ding ban bian tian*) was very effective in motivating women’s work power. Although material goods were still scarce in 1950s’ China, the nation seemed to have a strong sense of coherence and

direction. The people then believed that their collective efforts could lead them to a better and brighter future, as Mao’s 1957–1958 well-known slogan calls: “Surpass the British and catch up with the Americans” (*chao ying gan mei*). It was the period that people in my parents’ generation recalled as “The Age of Innocence” (to borrow the title of Edith Wharton’s 1920 novel).

During this period, Mao practiced “moral leadership,” as Burns^[12] explains:

Moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of the followers.... the kind of leadership that can produce social change that will satisfy followers’ authentic needs... great leaders... exercise large influences on the course of history.... Most leaders combine both ideological and charismatic qualities, and great leaders combine them creatively. Such a leader was Mao Zedong. (pp. 4-5, 251)

The above passage suggests that James M. Burns held a positive view of Mao’s political leadership from 1949 to the early 1950s.

3 The Fall: From the Late 1950s to the Mid-1970s

Like many of the political leaders in world history, Mao was very ambitious in gaining absolute power and supremacy. As he feared that capitalism might be restored in China and that his power was to be challenged by some of his colleagues, he became very subjective and eccentric from 1956 onwards.^[13] Mao did not listen to anyone in his advisory committee and initiated two disastrous political movements: The Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), right after the Anti-Rightist Struggle (the counterattack in 1957 against the bourgeois Rightists); and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Each movement cost China a few decades of regression, and China was on the edge of financial and social bankruptcy.^[14,15]

The Great Leap Forward was a failure partly because it was unrealistically planned agriculture, resulted in a 3-year famine in 1959–1961 and an estimated 15 million (or more) excess deaths.^[3] During this time, peasants were obliged to tend transplanted crops along miles of tracks, creating the impression of a bumper harvest when the harvest was a disaster.

The Great Leap Forward was Mao’s effort in creating a model of socialism better than that of his northern

neighbor - the Russians, and the Cultural Revolution was his attempt to sustain the experiment in the face of its failure.^[14,16] Mao's misguided reforms in the Great Leap Forward made him lost his credibility, and the political factions within the Communist Party threatened his leadership. To regain his political reputation, Mao thought to undermine the important party leaders, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, through the Cultural Revolution.^[15,17]

A mass mobilization begun in 1966, which included urban youth - the Red Guards, later also workers and peasants, led by Mao and his wife Jiang Qing. Mao alerted people to grasp revolution and promote production. He closed schools and encouraged students to join the Red Guards, which persecuted Chinese intellectuals and enforced Mao's personality cult.^[18,19]

The motives of the urban workers and the rebellious students were similar: Fighting against inequality, authoritarianism, and capitalist tendencies that they believed to be embodied in factory managers. The movement for criticism of party officials, intellectuals, and bourgeois values turned violent, and the Red Guards split into factions. Many people died in the ensuing purges. When the military itself threatened to factionalize, Mao dispersed the red guards and began to rebuild the party. The long-established Confucian humanism and social stability, as well as Daoist harmony and tranquility, were entirely replaced by Marxist class struggle theory, acts of violence, and complete social chaos. The communist revolutionaries rejected anything traditional, including Confucian philosophy and various religions. They launched an Anti-Confucius campaign in 1973–1974.

The outcomes of the Cultural Revolution for social change were rather mixed. Admission of workers and peasants to universities was immensely broadened; it had brought some decentralization of authority. Some substantial but minor move toward eliminating inequalities and material incentives in industry and agriculture was also reported.^[15] Nevertheless, the erosion of personal liberty and privacy was enormous, as Burns^[12] has observed:

The change brought about by the *Cultural Revolution* was motivational and spiritual rather than material or structural.... a radical transformation in the attitudes and behavior of the Chinese people. This revolution in consciousness was most pronounced in promoting egalitarian and fraternal aspirations and values. Collectivism and concern for the common welfare had been



Figure 1: Chairman Mao's portrait hanging at the Tiananmen Gate - the Gate of Heavenly Peace, where he declared on October 1, 1949: "Chinese People Have Stood Up." Photo by the author 2017

elevated over individualism and elitism. The "three great distinctions" and the four "olds" - old ideas, customs, manners, and habits had been curbed to some degree. Mass participation and criticism - within limits - had been encouraged (p. 403).

To Chinese people, however, the price they paid for the Cultural Revolution was the deaths of millions.^[3,20] Mao imposed misery on the faceless "masses" in pursuit of his economic and political ambitions. His indifferent attitude toward revolutionary victims may be caused by his own family history: His first wife and a younger sister were executed by the Nationalist during the Civil War in 1930; his eldest son was killed during the Korean War (1950–1953); countless friends and comrades were executed by his foes; he would execute or cause to execute countless landlords and counterrevolutionaries.^[3]

The Cultural Revolution could happen in China partly due to the naivety of the Chinese people in the 1960s who trusted Mao's credibility and adored him for his personal charisma, and who blindly followed whatever instructions he delivered at the time. However, for the thoughtful who disagreed with Mao's ideologies, political pressure was laid on. They were obliged to say what they did not mean. If they insisted on their ideas, the penalty was to be persecuted and sent to countryside for "re-education" by the peasants, or to be imprisoned for "self-reflection."

Mao was the initiator of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, as well as the innovator who insisted on constant and violent turbulence, which was exhausting and frightening to many people, especially to

Chinese artists and intellectuals. Mao's dream of rapid social reform had failed, but his power was absolute in the country. The more complete Mao's control, the greater his fear of other's attempts to control him. Much of his energy was spent on unnecessary battles with comrades whose basic ideas he shared. At the end, the most loved man in China was disliked.^[14,21]

4 Conclusion and Implications

To many Chinese people, Mao was the man who liberated China from imperialist, federalist, and bureaucrat capitalism, and finally reconstructed the Chinese society into a socialist system. He adopted and adjusted Marxist-Leninist theory to the Chinese context, mixing it with a little native Chinese philosophy. Mao was a hero who stood up for China against foreign pressures, particularly from Russia and the West. However, for some Western people, Mao might have been one of the world's biggest dictators who abused and exploited Chinese people for his political stability. Nevertheless, Mao did appeal to some European Communists. A German philosopher from former East Germany declared in the 1950s that "Mao is a thinker," while another declared: "We need ideas, and the only place you can get them is from Mao." In the less Westernized parts of the world, Mao was more generally regarded as a hero. President Bhutto of Pakistan said on Mao's death: "Men like Mao Zedong come once in a century, perhaps once in a millennium. They capture the stage and write the pages of history with divine inspiration. Mao was the supreme architect of a brilliant new order which had shaken the world." Even the conservative English man Lord Montgomery judged Mao "a very great man, a most uncommon man in an age of common men."^[21] A special interview with Mao's daughter Li Na may also shed light on his personal life.^[22] Mao was one of the greatest political leaders in human history. His method of leadership, "from the masses, to the masses" worked very effectively in the early 1950s' China and gained him much reputation and respect. Mao's creative contributions lay in his theorization of the practices as well as philosophical lessons of the movement from time to time. Mao raised to leadership at a time when the change was necessary, and conditions authorizing such change were available. He armed himself with Marxism-Leninism and experimented it in direct social engineering to achieve his political goals. James M. Burns^[3] claimed Mao's leadership as transforming and moral leadership.

Mao was also an oppressor, who, for his political ambition, led two catastrophic movements: The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which destructed traditional Chinese culture and society, with devastating effects that cannot even be measured today. Mao's tragedy was that he was too politically ambitious and underestimated the resistance to change among Chinese people. In the end, he could not bring about all the reforms he wanted. Just as Mao himself wrote: "If we insisted on leading the masses to do anything against their will, we would certainly fail" (p. 126).^[23] The success and failures of Mao Zedong's political leadership offer valuable lessons for current Chinese leaders, as we have observed China's democratic social development falls backward when China seeks tighter ideological control of its top universities,^[24] and the State Council tightens its policy on social media platforms, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, which are officially blocked in China, following the July 2009 Ürümqi riots. This situation has made it hard for many overseas Chinese who wish to return to China to work as they find it extremely inconvenient to conduct research there without these services. This condition has also made it difficult for foreign scholars and students in China to carry out social networking as they are so accustomed to these services in the West. This online control backfires China's attempt to catch up with the West in intellectual and social development.

With the 2018 revisions to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China by removing term limits for President Xi Jinping, this reflective analysis offers an essential caution for China not to repeat its past mistakes made by Chairman Mao.

5 Acknowledgments

This essay is fully revised and updated^[25] from the author's Master of Education course paper for "Educational Administration: The Theoretical Context" (2003–2004) at Brock University, Canada. Thanks are due to Professor/Dr. Coral Mitchell for reviewing the paper at the time. The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Rkaina S, McCrum K. Giant Gold Chairman Mao Statue Knocked Down Weeks After Completion "Because it Didn't Have Permission; 2016. Available from: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/giant-gold-chairman-mao->

- statue-7138537. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [2] Asia for Educators. Mao Zedong: Biographical and Political Profile. Focus on Asian Studies. Vol. 4. New York: The Asia Society, Columbia University; 1984.
- [3] Ball J. Did Mao Really Kill Millions in the Great Leap Forward? Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine; 2006. Available from: <http://www.monthlyreview.org/commentary/did-mao-really-kill-millions-in-the-great-leap-forward>. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [4] CNN. In-Depth Specials - Visions of China - Profiles: Mao Tse-Tung; 2001. Available from: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/inside.china/profiles/mao>. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [5] Economist. China and the Mirror of History: Let's Not Forget; 2013. Available from: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2013/03/china-and-mirror-history>. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [6] Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Mao Zedong; 2016. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mao-Zedong>. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [7] Encyclopedia.com. Mao Zedong. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences; 2008. Available from: http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Mao_Zedong.aspx. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [8] Tatlow DK. Mao's Legacy Still Divides China. New York Times; 2011. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/06/world/asia/06iht-letter06.html?_r=0. [Last accessed on 2016 Apr 03].
- [9] Cain S. China Rewrites History Books to Extend Sino-Japanese War by Six Years. The Guardian; 2017. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/13/china-rewrites-history-books-to-extend-sino-japanese-war-by-six-years>. [Last accessed on 2017 Mar 13].
- [10] Phillips T. Great Helmsman or Ruinous Dictator? China Remembers Mao, 40 years After Death. The Guardian; 2016. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/08/great-helmsman-dictator-china-anniversary-mao-40-years-after-death>. [Last accessed on 2016 Sep 08].
- [11] Schram SR. Mao Tse-Tung. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books; 1967.
- [12] Burns JM. Leadership. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics; 1978, 2010.
- [13] Terrill R. Mao: A Biography. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 2000.
- [14] Li Z. The Private Life of Chairman Mao. New York: Random House; 1996.
- [15] Schrif M. Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Mass Consumption of a Personality Cult. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; 2001.
- [16] Yang G. The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China. New York: Columbia University Press; 2016.
- [17] Dikötter F. The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976. London: Bloomsbury; 2016.
- [18] Johnson I. China: The Virtues of the Awful Convulsion. New York Review of Books; 2016. Available from: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/10/27/china-the-virtues-of-the-awful-convulsion>. [Last accessed on 2016 Nov 13].
- [19] Johnson I. China's Hidden Massacres: An Interview with Tan Hecheng. New York Review of Books; 2017. Available from: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/01/13/china-hidden-massacres-tan-hecheng>. [Last accessed on 2017 Jan 21].
- [20] Brown J, Johnson MD. Maoism at The Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2015.
- [21] Wilson D. The People's Emperor, Mao: A Biography of Mao Tse-Tung. New York: Doubleday; 1980.
- [22] Li N. Mao Zedong in My Eyes: A Special Interview with Mao Zedong's Daughter Li Na; 2013. Available from: <https://www.v.qq.com/x/page/10153o4jole.html?start=300>. [Last accessed on 2016 Jul 13].
- [23] Mao Z. Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press; 1976.
- [24] Sharma Y. China Seeks Tighter Ideological Control of its Top Universities. University World News; 2017. Available from: http://www.chronicle.com/article/China-Seeks-Tighter/239364?cid=gn&utm_source=gn&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=9111f58af077443eb55b694fead66f93&elq=6c4ae11153074cf48eb50ad105b89f5d&elqaid=12786&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5253. [Last accessed on 2017 Mar 27].