

compromised by their too evident 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notably in France and the USA, had lionised Mao Zedong as a great liberator whose progressive brand of Communism had superseded the atrophied Soviet variety.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.

Cold War divisions created a particular difficulty for Western historians attempting to write accurate accounts of Chinese history. The former USSR is a major repository of sources on China, and Soviet collections of documents are thus essential to a full analysis of the history of the PRC. However, in the Cold War atmosphere the Soviet experts on China were either unwilling or were not permitted to cooperate with their Western counterparts. It was not until after the break-up of the USSR in the early 1990s that Western scholars were granted access to 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. The ways in which these scholarly contacts have altered Western perceptions of such matters as China's involvement in the Korean War, the Sino-Soviet struggle for the leadership of international communism, and the Chinese attempt to head the anti-colonial struggle are detailed in later chapters of this book.

4 Issues in Chinese History Since 1949

A number of critical questions dominate the history of China after 1949. They divide themselves into four main categories: economics, politics, ideology and foreign affairs.

a) Economics

In 1949 the biggest task facing the PRC was simply one of survival. It was by no means certain that the CCP government would be able to surmount the economic difficulties that had weakened China for over a century and had helped to bring down the previous Nationalist government. China was a predominantly rural society, 80 per cent of its people being peasants. It did not have the base for building a modern industrial nation. Some commentators argue that so great were China's economic problems that had the PRC not been led by a government with absolute authority and totally dedicated to survival, the nation would have been overwhelmed. According to this line of argument, the absolutism which the CCP under Mao exercised over China was essential. The institutions and infrastructure simply did not exist to enable China to evolve towards modernity. If there was to be survival, let alone progress, the means had to be imposed and

directed from above. The collectivisation and industrialisation programmes that Mao enforced may not have accorded with civil rights as understood and operated in other nations but China's needs made them unavoidable. According to this interpretation, Mao's harsh and dictatorial ways between 1949 and 1976 saved China from disintegration and laid the basis for the 'revolution' of the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping was able to build the four modernisations upon the hard-won achievements of the Maoist years. Others have taken issue with this form of reasoning and have asserted that, rather than laying a foundation for growth, Mao's economic policies condemned China to continued backwardness; it was not until Deng abandoned those policies that China was able to take the first steps towards becoming a modern industrial nation.

b) Politics

The major question facing the PRC at the time of its creation was how could it establish the stability and permanence that had eluded all the regimes since the fall of the Qings in 1911. The short answer was by a successful return to absolutism. The political character of China after 1949 has occasioned much debate. It is possible to argue that the PRC was no different in essentials from traditional Chinese political systems. 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. However, a counter viewpoint exists: it is that Maoism did indeed alter the fundamentals of Chinese government. Mao introduced into China something it had not known before - the concept of continuing revolution. He may have retained the traditional methods of Chinese political authoritarianism but his purpose was to change the character of China by making it conform to his particular notion of Marxist revolution. It can be further argued that the permanence of what Mao had done was evident in Deng Xiaoping's decision to leave the essentials of Mao's political system unaltered. At every point in Deng's revolution he insisted on the right and necessity of the CCP's continuing to govern China unchallenged. The government's suppression of the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and its subsequent severities were very much in keeping with the Maoist hardline tradition.

c) Ideology

The debate on the political character of China after 1949 raises the

question of the PRC's relationship to the international Communist movement. Some observers accept that Red China genuinely attempted to replace the Soviet Union at the head of international Communism in order to lead the world into revolution. Others reject this and argue that China's aims were national not international. They claim, as Moscow did at the height of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s, that Chinese Communism, far from being a truly international Marxist force, was merely a brand of national self-assertion. This was illustrated by the peremptory way in which the PRC went about its self-proclaimed task of leading the forces of anti-colonialism. Rather than deal with the emergent nations as equal partners, China required them to subordinate themselves to Chinese interests. This lends weight to the notion that Marxism had been embraced by Chinese revolutionaries not because of its appeal to proletarian brotherhood but because it offered a means of restoring China's sense of self-worth and greatness after a century of foreign domination. The attraction of Marxism to the Chinese was not philosophical but practical; it provided a programme for China's regeneration as a nation. It is sometimes suggested that the Chinese belief in 'Marxism-Leninism-Maoism' did not long survive the death of Mao, but that Deng and his successors in government retained it as a formal ideology for the very good reason that it was the only justification for their continuance in power.

d) Foreign Affairs

Initially, Western observers tended to interpret the PRC as a major Communist power, which, in league with the USSR, was aggressively pursuing international Marxist revolution. However, what is now often emphasised is that throughout the period of Mao's leadership of the PRC it was fear that shaped his attitude towards the outside world. Mao's abiding anxiety was that the West, led by the United States, was preparing to attack China. This led him to divert the greater part of China's resources to creating an internal defence system and to developing Chinese atomic weapons. In the eyes of a number of commentators Mao's fears verged on the paranoid and prevented the PRC from following a rational or balanced foreign policy. This was particularly evident at the time of the Cultural Revolution when Maoist fanaticism made it virtually impossible for other nations to conduct diplomatic relations with China. Yet without denying the restrictions that Mao's anxieties placed on China's foreign policy it is possible to suggest that his achievement remains considerable. Mao, after all, made the PRC a superpower. At his death China possessed a weight and influence in international affairs that was unprecedented in its history. Much of that had been due to the statesmanship of Zhou Enlai, who as China's foreign minister had helped to re-establish better relations with the USA and the Western

world. After 1976 Deng Xiaoping built upon the foundations laid by Zhou. By the 1990s Deng's policy of opening China to the world had put the PRC on better terms internationally than at any time since its foundation in 1949.

The key issues in economics, politics, ideology and foreign affairs provide the material and main themes of the following chapters. Of course, it should be stressed that, while it is convenient to deal with them as separate factors, the overlap and interaction between them is constant and considerable.

Working on the 'Introduction'

Your aim in reading this chapter should be to gain a basic grasp of the following:

1. the principal features of Chinese politics and society before 1949;
2. the main developments in the history of the PRC since 1949, arranged in chronological order;
3. the problems confronting Chinese and Western scholars in studying the history of the PRC;
4. the key issues in the history of the PRC.

Try writing brief answers to the following questions. This will reveal whether or not you have grasped the essential points.

1. Why had the Chinese Communists emerged victorious over the Nationalists by 1949?
2. What were the main features of a) the CCP's consolidation of its authority in China between 1949 and 1966, b) the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, c) the Deng Revolution, 1976-89, and d) developments in China between 1989 and 1997?
3. In what ways did the Cold War distort Western understanding of the history of the PRC?
4. Under the headings 'economics', 'politics', 'ideology' and 'foreign affairs' identify the key issues in the history of the PRC.