

Discussion point

Was Maoist ideology constructive or destructive?

Questions

- 1 To what extent did Mao attempt to instigate the main principles of communism during his rule in China? (You may wish to return to this question after studying units 3 and 4.)
- 2 How successful was Mao in fulfilling his ideological aims in the years 1949–76?



Theory of knowledge

History and ideology

Does knowledge of Maoist ideology help the historian to justify and excuse Mao's actions?

However, the Cultural Revolution (see page 138) highlighted an essential paradox. It proved impossible to reconcile voluntarism – whereby men and women were re-educated to participate willingly in the ‘mass struggle’ – with Mao's determination to stamp out ‘bourgeois thinking’. To achieve this, Mao was forced to resort to extensive repression, brain-washing and an unparalleled level of violence. Early revolutionaries became the regime's victims and, in an attempt to prove their socialist credentials, the persecutors became ever more extreme (see page 140).

Mao's ideological beliefs thus brought turmoil and destruction to his people. It would probably be fair to say that the social and economic improvements that occurred between 1949 and 1976 took place largely despite, rather than because of, Mao's strong ideological principles. His view that unless the Communist Party was regularly purified it would cease to be a revolutionary force, and China would cease to be truly socialist, threatened to defeat his own objective of making China strong and prosperous.

End of unit activities

- 1 Draw up a summary chart with the main characteristics of Mao's ideology on the left-hand side and a brief explanation of each on the right.
- 2 Draw a diagram to show the differences between the communisms of Mao, Stalin and Marx.
- 3 Design a poster that conveys an aspect of Maoist ideology and tries to persuade its audience of its value.

3 Establishment and consolidation of Mao's rule

Key questions

- By what means did Mao establish communist control in China in the years 1949–54?
- What part did mass mobilisation campaigns and purges play in ensuring Mao's authority in the years 1949–54?
- How did Mao maintain political control between 1954 and 1976?
- What parts were played by propaganda and repression in Mao's consolidation of power, and was Mao's China a totalitarian state?

Overview

- The CCP set up a new structure of government that paid lip service to ‘democratic principles’ but in which the party was dominant and shared many of the personnel of the state government.
- Mass movements, local committees and rectification campaigns ensured surveillance and control over the population.
- The army was used to secure dominance over outlying areas, such as Tibet.
- Attempts were made to improve living standards in towns and the countryside.
- In the period of consolidation and recovery between 1949 and 1952, the CCP made compromises allowing the continuance of some private ownership. However, the land reform programme of 1950 saw the destruction of the power and wealth of the landlords, even if ownership of the land still remained private.
- The four mass campaigns of 1950–52 and the purge of Rao Shushi and Gao Gang in 1954 showed the ruthlessness of Mao and the party in removing their perceived enemies.
- Between 1954 and 1976, pressure on ‘rightists’ was maintained in the anti-rightist campaign of 1957, the Socialist Education Movement of 1962 and the Cultural Revolution from 1966.
- Even Mao's former colleagues and loyal supporters could be purged, as was the case with Peng Dehuai in 1959. Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi were ousted in 1966 and Lin Biao died in mysterious circumstances in 1971. Deng was rehabilitated in 1973, but purged a second time in 1976.
- Constant propaganda, fear and the use of rectification campaigns ensured the communist hold over the Chinese people. The police, courts and legal system were entirely in the party's hands and the prison camps removed opponents and kept others in check.
- Mao's system of rule, which even included trying to change the way people thought, contained all the key elements of a totalitarian state.

Timeline

- 1949 Oct:** The People's Republic of China (PRC) is established with Mao as chairman
- 1950 Mar:** suppression of counter-revolutionaries campaign is launched
- Jun:** land reform programme is launched – up to 2 million landlords are killed
- Oct:** the PLA invades Tibet
- Nov:** resist America and aid Korea campaign is launched
- 1951 Dec:** the three antis campaign is launched
- 1952 Jan:** the five antis campaign is launched; all political parties except CCP are banned
- 1954 Feb:** purge of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi
- Sep:** formal constitution is introduced
- 1956 May:** the 100 flowers campaign is launched
- 1957 Jul:** the anti-rightist campaign is launched
- 1958 Jul:** Great Leap Forward is launched
- 1959 Apr:** Mao steps down as chairman of the People's Republic of China
- Sep:** Peng Dehuai is purged
- 1962 Sep:** Socialist Education Movement is announced
- 1966 May:** Cultural Revolution begins
- 1966 Jul:** Liu Shaoqi is dismissed from the post of party deputy chairman
- Dec:** Deng Xiaoping is forced to withdraw from public life
- 1971 Sep:** Lin Biao dies in mysterious circumstances
- 1973 Apr:** Deng Xiaoping is rehabilitated
- 1976 Jan:** Zhou Enlai dies
- Jul:** Deng Xiaoping is removed again
- Sep:** Mao Zedong dies



Chinese athletes carrying a huge portrait of Mao Zedong at a parade in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1 October 1955

By what means did Mao establish communist control in China in the years 1949–54?

After 1949, Mao had to act with speed and efficiency to maintain his hard-won position. He needed to establish stable and effective government, restore unified control over the former Chinese Empire and fulfil promises of social reform and economic recovery after the war with Japan and the civil war. Such policies were essential if he was to maintain political control.

Government

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference met in September 1949, bringing together non-communist parties and other groups that had opposed the GMD under communist leadership. This produced a temporary constitution that allowed the participation of other parties in a multi-party 'people's democratic dictatorship'. However, the dominance of the communists was without question.

Some elements of the population, mainly country landlords, big businessmen and prominent ex-GMD supporters, were not given the right to vote. These 'black' categories were described as:

- reactionary elements
- feudal elements
- lackeys of imperialism
- bureaucratic capitalists
- enemies of the people.

Fact

The constitution of 1949 was not democratic, in the Western sense of the word. Although non-reactionaries were granted a vote to an elected National People's Congress, there was seldom a choice of candidates, although voters were able to discuss beforehand, at public meetings, who should appear on the ballot paper.



Theory of knowledge

The meaning of democracy

What is the difference between 'democracy' in China and democracy in Western states? Is one better than the other? Why?

Fact

In the Korean War (1950–53) the North Koreans tried to extend their communist regime to South Korea. The southerners, aided by the USA, drove them back and invaded their territory. Mao chose to help North Korea, possibly to provide further reasons to demand solidarity and loyalty from his people.

However, the 'national bourgeoisie' and 'petty bourgeoisie' were given civil rights, alongside the peasants and workers, in an attempt to harness their expertise. The country was divided into six regions, each under the control of a bureau dominated by the military. Most of the 2 million officials who had served the GMD government were retained, as at first there were only 750,000 party cadres available to take on essential administrative responsibilities. As CCP membership and administrative competence increased, the non-communists were gradually removed. (The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 encouraged this process, as fears about the reliability of non-communists were heightened.)

In 1954, a formal constitution established China as a single-party state. The chairman of the National People's Congress, Mao, became the head of government. Beneath him were two vice chairmen and a council of ministers headed by the prime minister. Zhou Enlai was prime minister from 1949 until his death in 1976. The provincial administration, which had local powers, supported the Congress.



A retouched picture released in 1953 by the Chinese official news agency showing Zhou Enlai (right) and Mao Zedong (left); notice the favoured 'communist' style of dress

The main business of government centred on the Communist Party, which made policy decisions. The party administration, under Mao, paralleled the administrative structure of the state. Ministers and provincial officials were usually members of the CCP. When they were not, they were assisted by a communist adviser. Gao Gang, for example, was a Politburo member and party chairman of the Manchuria branch of the CCP. He was also the state provincial governor and the commander of the Manchurian army. Most army officials (assisted by political commissars), heads of factories and heads of villages were communist, as were many heads of schools and universities.

An important feature of the new state was the organisation of the population into groups. Everyone in a village, street, office, factory or school was required to meet regularly to hear about and comment on policies. The local party cadres were expected to 'educate' their groups and to pass views to branch secretaries and up through an ascending pyramid to the central committee – the Politburo – in Beijing. Consequently, in accordance with Maoist ideology, peasants in the villages and soldiers and workers on the factory floor could influence official decisions.

Unified control

In 1949, the GMD still controlled much of south-west China. Fighting continued in 1950, by which time only British Hong Kong, Portuguese Macao, Outer Mongolia, Taiwan and a few small GMD-controlled islands lay outside communist control. Mao's plan to invade Taiwan at the end of 1950 had to be called off when the Korean War broke out, although success in that war enhanced Mao's reputation further.

To establish internal control, in 1950 Mao's government called on ethnic minorities to identify themselves and promised them a degree of autonomy. Four hundred ethnic groups did so. From these, officials created 50 groups, which were subsequently placed under military supervision and forced to accept communist rule.

Strong resistance in Tibet (see page 157) took six months to crush. The nation was renamed Xizang and its peoples subjected to severe repression in an attempt to eradicate all traces of the Tibetan language and culture. Tibetans were also moved to other parts of China and **Han Chinese** were brought in.

Living standards

The years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) saw impressive improvements in standards of living in China. Inflation was curbed and crime and corruption were checked as drug dealers, prostitutes and criminal gangs were outlawed. Citizens themselves were involved in building the 'new society', although under the direction of the local party cadres.

Most Chinese people gained job security and a stable income. Each employed citizen in an urban area was required to belong to a Danwei (work unit); those who were not employed came under the supervision of a residents' committee. These units controlled food supplies, the allocation of housing and permits for travel, marriage, jobs, military service and university. Their work was complemented by the establishment of a variety of mass organisations such as the National Women's Association, the New Democratic Youth League and the Children's Pioneer Corps.

Residents' committees dealt with public health, policing and the resolution of disputes. Water supplies and sanitation were improved in cities and the countryside and mass 'patriotic health campaigns' were used to focus attention on improving hygiene and reducing cholera, typhoid and scarlet fever. Teams went into rural areas to educate people about healthy living, and death rates fell steadily (see page 154).

More doctors and nurses were trained, although there was some conflict with Maoist ideology, which regarded doctors as 'bourgeois intellectuals' in the 1960s

Han Chinese The Han were the dominant Chinese race (and the largest ethnic group in the world) comprising 92% of the population of mainland China.

Fact

Party cadres were important at all levels of government and administration, in the legal system, in education and in the PLA. They organised the mass organisations and local committees and meetings, providing a means of surveillance and control. In return they received a privileged lifestyle with an 'iron rice bowl' – guaranteed employment and income for life in return for their absolute loyalty.

and expected them to subordinate medical duties to factory work. However, they were replaced by the 'barefoot doctors', who underwent short practical training sessions of six months and worked among the peasants, giving inoculations and basic treatments.

What part did mass mobilisation campaigns and purges play in ensuring Mao's authority in the years 1949–54?

Mao feared the challenge posed by the 'counter-revolutionary elements'. He allowed a degree of co-operation in the early years, retaining the 'national' and 'petty bourgeoisie'. Their businesses and skills were needed, but taxes were used to limit private profit.

In addition, propaganda, self-criticism and rectification campaigns were used to stamp out 'bourgeois individualism'. Citizens were encouraged to inform on others and, in the autumn of 1951, 6500 intellectuals and university professors were obliged to undertake courses in communist thinking, while artists and writers who refused to support the CCP were imprisoned.

In the countryside, following the introduction of the land reform programme in 1950 (see page 146), party cadres roused peasants to denounce local landlords and remove them after **struggle sessions**. As part of the effort to arouse class consciousness and attach the masses to the regime, around 2 million landlords lost their lives, often beaten to death by peasants.

Between 1950 and 1952 there were four mass mobilisation campaigns:

- **The resist America and aid Korea campaign, 1950**
Rallies were held to increase Chinese suspicion of foreigners, particularly those from the West. People from the USA were singled out because of their involvement in Korea. Many foreigners, including missionaries, were arrested. Christian churches were closed and priests and nuns expelled. By the end of 1950, the country was closed to all foreigners, except Russians, and institutions with links to the West were watched or closed down.
- **The suppression of counter-revolutionaries campaign, 1950–51**
This focused on those with links to the GMD, criminal gangs and religious sects. There were numbers of denunciations and public executions.
- **The three antis campaign, 1951**
This was a campaign against corruption, waste and obstruction, and was directed against communists and non-communists. Managers, state officials, police and cadres were obliged to take part in struggle sessions. Humiliation and group pressure were employed to bring them into line.
- **The five antis campaign, 1952**
This was a campaign against bribery, tax-evasion, theft of state property, cheating in government contracts and economic espionage. Workers' organisations were invited to investigate employers' business affairs, forcing employers to provide self-criticisms and undergo 'thought reform'. The accused faced fines, property confiscations and periods in labour camps. If they confessed and paid their dues, they were (unlike the landlords) usually allowed to return to their work. Few were executed although around 2–3 million committed suicide because of the shame and humiliation.

struggle session This term refers to a session in which 'accused' individuals were taken before a panel, usually in public, to listen to a catalogue of their alleged crimes and moral failings. They were deliberately humiliated and required to look down. Sometimes guards held the victims in the 'jet-plane' position, with the head down and arms thrust back. They had placards placed around their necks or wore a necklace of ping-pong balls to symbolise their bourgeois love of jewellery, and were beaten with bamboo sticks. They were expected to make full confessions and agree with their accusers.

Fact

The fines imposed on businessmen during the mass campaigns were often used to push them into going 'state-private'. Private owners sold part of their business to the state and a state manager was appointed to work alongside the private businessman.



A poster depicting Mao as the peasants' hero, 1951

Gao Gang (1905–54) Gao Gang joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1926. In the mid 1930s, he controlled an independent communist area in Shaanxi, where the Long March ended in 1935. Gao turned Shaanxi into a war-time power base and joined the Politburo in 1943. He became state governor and party chairman in Manchuria and commander of the Manchurian army. In 1952, he was put in charge of the Central Planning Commission. However, his ambition led to his purge and suicide.

Rao Shushi (1903–75) Rao joined the CCP in 1925 and studied in the Soviet Union and the West. He was a political commissar during the civil war and, in 1949, was made chairman of the Military and Political Committee of East China, general secretary of the East China Bureau of the CCP and governor of East China. In 1953, he became minister in charge of party organisation. However, his association with Gao Gang led to his downfall and he spent the last 21 years of his life under arrest – in prison and on a working farm.

The purges of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, 1954

In early 1954, Mao began his first major purge of leading members of the CCP, following debate around the launch of his five-year plan for industry (see Unit 4). **Gao Gang**, who already held several senior government and party posts, had backed Mao against Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi. Subsequently, with the support of **Rao Shushi**, Gao Gang put himself forward to replace Zhou as vice chairman of the CCP. In December 1953, both were accused of 'underground activities'. Gao Gang committed suicide rather than face disgrace in 1954, while Rao Shushi was arrested and imprisoned until his death in 1974.

How did Mao maintain political control between 1954 and 1976?

By 1953, industrial and agricultural production were showing signs of strong growth and the budget was balanced. The CCP had built up its membership to 6.1 million and there was no longer a shortage of ideologically trustworthy officials. In 1954, the one-party state was established in the new constitution and Mao felt the time was ripe to push the revolution into its second stage with the full implementation of communism in both the economic and social spheres (see Unit 4).

However, the changes did not take place without some criticism and Mao never allowed himself to feel that his position was secure. He was continuously concerned that officials were backsliding or plotting against him. Consequently, Mao continued to look for ways to consolidate his power further and ensure the 'revolution' was never forgotten.

The 100 flowers campaign, 1956–57

In 1956, Mao lifted censorship restrictions and encouraged open criticism of the way the party had been working. In February 1957, he announced: 'Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land.'

Participation was slow at first and, in February 1957, Mao told the people that they could vent their criticisms as long as they were 'constructive' ('among the people') rather than 'hateful and destructive' ('between the enemy and ourselves').

In May and June 1957, the central government received a deluge of letters. Magazine articles and posters appeared and there were rallies in the streets. Students at Beijing University created a 'Democratic Wall' and complained of political corruption, Russian influence, low living standards, censorship of foreign literature, economic corruption and the privileged lifestyle of party cadres and the leadership of the CCP itself.

Mao claimed such activity went beyond 'healthy criticism'. In early July 1957, he called the campaign off and reimposed censorship and orthodoxy. He had either achieved his aim of entrapment or severely misjudged the scale of criticism that the campaign would unleash.

The anti-rightist campaign, July 1957

The crackdown that followed the 100 flowers campaign ended any criticism by the intellectuals, who never again trusted Mao. Around half a million were branded as 'rightists' and subjected to persecution, ranging from imprisonment, time in labour camps and spells in the countryside for 're-education', to public shootings as a warning to others. Many committed suicide.

Mao's disappearance from public life

In 1959, once it was clear the Great Leap Forward had failed (see Unit 4), Mao gave up his position as PRC chairman and the mass mobilisation campaigns ceased for a while. Mao claimed this time away from public life gave him the opportunity to think and plan, rather than worry about daily administration. However, Philip Short has suggested that he still remained a powerful influence, and the purge of **Peng Dehuai** in 1959 would seem to support this.

In July 1959, Peng had told Mao at the Lushan Conference (see page 151) that the Great Leap Forward was a grave mistake (see Unit 4) and had hinted that he did not approve of Mao's decision to break with the Soviet Union (see page 151). He may also have been blamed for an unsuccessful confrontation over Taiwan in 1958. His removal from the Politburo and his position as minister of defence set an example to others of the dangers of independent thought.

From 1962, Mao again became obsessed by a fear that the party was turning to the 'capitalist road' – a euphemism for the more moderate policies being pursued by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. He tried to mobilise the masses in the Socialist Education Movement of 1962 (see page 128). However, it was not until 1966 that he had the power base from which to launch the Cultural Revolution.

Historical debate

With the 100 flowers campaign, Mao may have wanted to experiment by allowing some 'democratic check' on the party, spurring it to still greater endeavours (the view of Philip Short) or he may have simply felt it necessary to provide an outlet for critics to 'let off steam'. Jung Chang, however, believes that he intentionally set a trap to flush out intellectuals and opponents.

Peng Dehuai (1898–1974)

Peng joined the CCP in 1927 and participated in the Long March. He served in the civil war and was a member of the Politburo, China's defence minister from 1954 to 1959, and marshal of the PLA from 1955. He was removed from all posts in 1959 and placed under house arrest. He was brutally treated during the Cultural Revolution – beaten in public spectacles 130 times.

Fact

Mao commanded the loyalty of Lin Biao, who had replaced Peng Dehuai as minister of defence in 1959 and led the PLA. He also had powerful support from his wife, Jiang Qing, and a group of radicals in Shanghai who were determined to rid China of bourgeois and Western influences and create a proletarian society.