

**Group of Five** This term refers to the committee established in January 1965 to initiate a revolution in China's culture. It was led by Peng Zhen (the fifth most senior member of the Politburo and mayor of Beijing). However, only one of its five members (Kang Sheng) was a firm supporter of Mao. Their failure to act vigorously enough led to the dismissal of Peng as mayor and the dissolution of the committee in May 1966.

**Fact**

Red Guards broke into Liu Shaoqi's house, physically attacked him and forced him to write his own confession. Liu was removed from all his positions and expelled from the party in October 1968. He died in prison in November 1969 after being refused proper medical treatment for diabetes and pneumonia.

**Fact**

After Liu's death in 1969, power was concentrated in the hands of the CCP chairman (Mao himself) and he assumed the ceremonial duties associated with the head of state. Not until after Mao's death was a new head of state appointed when Soong Ching-ling, the widow of Sun Yat Sen and former vice-chairwoman of the PRC, was made honorary president as confirmed by the constitution of 1982.

**Gang of Four** This term refers to a powerful political group, created in 1974. It consisted of four CCP officials who oversaw the suppression of a wide variety of traditional cultural activities during the Cultural Revolution. Its members were Jiang Qing (Mao's wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen.

### Political control during the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76

The launch of the 'great proletarian Cultural Revolution' brought a dramatic purge of Mao's rivals. Mao mobilised the Red Guards, who were bands of radical students, and ordered them to attack the 'four olds' (thought, culture, practices and customs) and remove 'bad elements' among the party, teachers, intellectuals and former bourgeoisie. Terrifying assaults were permitted and the police were instructed not to intervene. Public denunciations, struggle sessions at which victims were expected to 'confess' to their crimes, and mass mobilisation were practised in their most extreme form. Tens of thousands died in prison (for more information on the Cultural Revolution, see Unit 4).

During this period, Mao removed many of his opponents from the party and retook absolute control of the party hierarchy. His 'cult' rose to new extremes and Mao Zedong Thought was even written into the Chinese constitution in 1969. In May 1966, Mao purged the 'Group of Five'. Originally set up to carry through the Cultural Revolution, the group's members supported Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi. Mao replaced the group with the Central Cultural Revolution Group, which he packed with his own supporters, including his wife Jiang Qing. In July, Liu Shaoqi was dismissed from his post of party deputy chairman and in December Deng Xiaoping was forced to withdraw from public life.

In December 1968, when the Cultural Revolution threatened to get out of hand, Mao ordered the Red Guards to leave the cities and go to the countryside. The struggle continued, but Mao's grip on developments may not have been as firm as he would have liked. Furthermore, Mao was still concerned about rivals in the party. He confirmed Lin Biao as his successor in 1969, but in September 1971 Lin died in an air crash over Mongolia. The story was put about that he had been planning a coup to overthrow Mao. Whether true or not, it showed Mao's fear of challenge. Lin had opposed Mao's decision to seek co-operation with the USA, a move which led to both nations pledging to work towards full diplomatic relations. Deng Xiaoping, on the other hand, had spoken in favour of this new beginning in Chinese-US relations. Consequently, Deng was allowed back as vice-premier in 1973.

However, after Deng's close colleague, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, was diagnosed with cancer and looked close to death, the radicals turned on Deng again. In 1975, he was asked to draw up a series of self-criticisms and, following Zhou's death in January 1976, the **Gang of Four** launched the 'criticise Deng and oppose the rehabilitation of right-leaning elements' campaign. Mao therefore selected the relatively obscure Hua Guofeng, in preference to Deng, as the new prime minister. When mass mourning for Zhou sparked disturbances in Tiananmen Square, Deng was held responsible and demoted from all leadership positions. Deng was saved further disgrace by Mao's death the same year and was to return as the dominant figure in Chinese politics from 1978.

### What parts were played by propaganda and repression in Mao's consolidation of power and was Mao's China a totalitarian state?

#### Propaganda in Mao's China

The propaganda system was central to communist rule in China. Propaganda was controlled by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department, which commanded a network of local branches that were used for mass indoctrination. The aim

was to bring about 'thought reform' so that the population would support mass campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward of 1958 (see Unit 4) and the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution. The PLA, which remained the largest army in the world, also helped indoctrinate and reinforce political messages. Although thought-reform was practised in other totalitarian states, according to William Bradbury (1968), the CCP 'set about it more purposefully, more massively, and more intensively than have other ruling groups'.

Propaganda was used to spread ideology, encourage activism and hold out examples of selfless model workers and soldiers. An example is Lei Feng, a possibly fictitious soldier of the civil war years, whose overwhelming sense of duty embodied the desired image of self-sacrifice. Highlights of the communist past, such as the Long March or the struggles of Mao at Jiangxi and Yan'an, were spread as inspiration. Revolutionaries in the developing world and allies such as Albania and North Korea were praised, while the 'imperialists' of the USA and the 'revisionists' of the Soviet Union, who had betrayed communism, were attacked.

Propaganda was spread through posters, the media, the education system, literature, films, theatre, music, radio and television (although TV ownership was not common). It was also spread through the work of local groups, committees and propaganda teams. There was a particular emphasis on political study groups, led by party cadres, where everyone would be persuaded of the value of particular policies through the study of political articles.

A nationwide system of loudspeakers reached into every village, and reading newspapers was regarded as a 'political obligation'. China Central Television (set up in 1958) offered a diet of televised propaganda, while the *People's Daily* (established in 1948) conveyed propaganda in print. Political campaigns were launched through leading articles in the *People's Daily*, and reports criticised political adversaries, while controversial news stories were censored.

Chairman Mao was made a figure of reverence. His portrait appeared on public hoardings and in the newspapers. Peasants, industrial workers and soldiers were expected to learn Mao's quotations by heart and, during the Cultural Revolution, to study *The Little Red Book* of Mao's speeches and writings. Mao was portrayed as the saviour of the nation, the voice of truth, the source of all wisdom and the benefactor of the people. The Chinese were persuaded that a careful study of 'Mao Zedong Thought' could solve their problems and enable them to carry out their tasks more effectively. Carefully stage-managed rallies and meetings showed Mao addressing the adoring crowds. Events, such as Mao's swim down the Yangtze River in July 1966 (see page 129), symbolising his strength and purpose, occupied the media for weeks.

'Hail the defeat of revisionism in our China', a propaganda poster from 1967

**Fact**

The PLA comprised 5 million soldiers in 1950 and, despite a partial demobilisation to release more men into productive work, still comprised 3.5 million soldiers in 1953. 800,000 conscripts were added each year, with each serving three years. This gave young Chinese men training in warfare and indoctrination in communist ideology. The force itself served a propagandist role – its achievements were celebrated and its heroes held up as role models.

### 毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利万岁!

要使文艺很好地成为整个革命机器的一个组成部分，作为团结人民、教育人民、打击敌人、消灭敌人的有力的武器，帮助人民同心同德地和敌人作斗争

毛泽东







## Theory of knowledge

## History and national characteristics

It has been suggested that 'self-policing' was only possible in China, where the education system had always relied on rote learning rather than critical reasoning skills. Do you think styles of education system affect people's behaviour? Is it possible to generalise about 'national characteristics'?

## Activity

Find out more about a struggle session and present your findings to the class. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991) by Jung Chang has plenty of material on this.

## Repression

Complementing the propaganda drive was a deliberately cultivated atmosphere of vigilance, 'fear' and uncertainty. There was a central investigation department within the CCP from 1949 and a military intelligence wing of the PLA. During the Cultural Revolution, the 'Central Case Examination Group', headed by Kang Sheng, was also set up. From 1951, official residence permits were needed for those over 15 years old and a special government department was created to draw up a *dangan* (dossier) on every suspect Chinese person.

However, the PRC never had a highly centralised security apparatus like the KGB in the Soviet Union. This was partly because of Mao's reliance on mass campaigns, orchestrated through the media, and his expectation that individuals would expose those whose background or behaviour appeared at variance with the expectations of the regime. Mao believed that, given 'correct' guidance, the people could police each other, thus avoiding the need to create an alternative power base within the state.

The term 'rightist' was used to refer to those with bourgeois, intellectual or foreign connections, and these became the victims of the mass campaigns. The notion of 'continuous revolution' meant that some of those who had served the party loyally in its early years eventually became its victims. As Lin Biao's son put it, 'today he [Mao] uses sweet words and honeyed talk to those whom he entices; tomorrow he puts them to death for fabricated crimes'.

The repressive methods used followed those that had been practised at Yan'an. Group criticism sessions, or struggle sessions, where individuals were required to practise self-criticism and invite the criticism of others, were organised daily or weekly by work units, neighbourhood and street committees. There were also larger mass meetings (of which there were no fewer than 3000 in Shanghai in February 1952). Individuals admitted crimes or publicly denounced colleagues and neighbours.

Admissions of guilt led to 'rectification', ranging from ritual humiliation, fines, loss of job, property and housing, a period in the countryside undertaking physically strenuous and menial tasks to reform habits, or a prison sentence in a *laogai* (labour camp). Although executions were not a normal outcome of such activity, many committed suicide rather than face further humiliation.

Chang and Halliday have observed that these public sessions differentiated Mao's China from Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany. While other dictators carried out purges through an élite secret police force, which removed victims silently to prison, camps or death, Mao enforced ritualised public humiliation. Meetings proved a potent force of control, leaving people with little free time for 'private thoughts'. He increased the number of persecutors by having his victims tormented by their own associates and used party members to terrorise their own party.

## The legal system

The state constitution of 1954 provided a framework for the development of a legal system in China, modelled on that of the Soviet Union. A committee of the National People's Congress was given the power to appoint and dismiss judges

and enact legal codes. Each citizen was granted the right to a public trial and defence by a 'people's lawyer' and there was, in theory, equality before the law. However, none of this was practised until after Mao's death.

During the Maoist era, party committees replaced courts and, despite some effort to make the legal system work between 1954 and 1957, the belief that different standards should be applied to class enemies destroyed any real sense of justice. When Mao launched the 100 flowers campaign in 1956, legal specialists were among his most vociferous critics – and consequently found themselves among the first victims of the anti-rightist campaign of 1957. The party leadership declared itself to have absolute power in legal matters and gave an increasing amount of control and judicial authority to the masses. Many judicial functions were passed to local cadres and by the 1960s the court system existed only for public 'show trials' during the Cultural Revolution.

## Labour camps

A network of labour camps, known as *laogai* or 're-education through labour', was created soon after Mao came to power. Initially the CCP used Soviet advisers in establishing the camps and, as in the Gulags (see page 37), prisoners were used as slave labour for back-breaking projects. On average, there were 10 million prisoners per year held in the camps under Mao and, by 1976, there were more than 10,000 labour camps spread across China.

Many of the worst camps were deliberately built in the most inhospitable regions, unbearably cold in winter and correspondingly hot in summer. Food rations were dependent on confessions. Refusal could lead to solitary confinement, beatings and sleep deprivation, when prisoners were interrogated at night. Threats to their families or signed 'confessions' from colleagues or families increased the pressure. Many prisoners died from hunger, ill-treatment or suicide.

The camps helped terrify others into obedience. If a prisoner was executed, the family could be sent the bullet and a bill for the cost. Even released prisoners faced a constant threat of re-arrest and families of those imprisoned were deemed guilty by association and shunned by their neighbours. Ex-prisoners would have difficulty finding housing and jobs, as well as shops that would sell to them and schools to which they could take their children.

## What kind of ruler was Mao?

Some early authors, particularly those on the left, suggested that Mao was a visionary reformer whose mistakes were outweighed by his positive achievements. Jean-Paul Sartre referred to Mao as 'profoundly moral', Simone de Beauvoir claimed he was 'no more dictatorial than, for example, Roosevelt was', whilst Edgar Snow portrayed Mao as a hero who liberated the Chinese peasants from feudalism and Japanese invasion. The US historian Stuart Schram also praised Mao's 'unique vision' and 'strong continuous nationalism' and suggested that many of his apparently unreasonable decisions were logical responses in the circumstances of the time.

These authors were writing before the Cultural Revolution and, since then, authors have been more critical. However, until recently, most felt Mao should not be regarded as harshly as Hitler or Stalin.

## Question

How did the Communist Party ensure continuing loyalty from the Chinese people?



Philip Short, author of *Mao: A Life* (1999), for example, excused some of Mao's excesses because 'one has to understand the context, which is of an autocratic tradition'. Short wrote of Mao as a 'visionary, statesman, political and military strategist of genius who combined a subtle, dogged mind, awe-inspiring charisma and fiendish cleverness' to produce remarkable achievements for China. Jonathan Spence, in *Mao* (1999), claimed that 'despite the agony he caused, Mao was both a visionary and a realist'. Lee Feigon, in *Mao: A Reinterpretation* (2002), claimed that Mao grew 'increasingly original and creative in the late 1950s and the 1960s, when he set China on the road to fundamental change'.

**Fact**

According to Chang and Halliday's figures, 38 million died in the famine of 1958–61 (see page 151); 27 million died in labour camps between 1950 and 1976, about 3 million were killed by execution, mob violence and suicide between 1950 and 1951 and a further 3 million during the Cultural Revolution. These figures may be exaggerated, but several Chinese estimates, and even that of the official investigator in 1979, have put the figure at more than 40 million. (Chinese authorities to this day are reluctant to release 'classified material'; problems also stem from the size of the country and lack of well-kept records.)

**Discussion point**

Do you agree with Chang that Mao should be regarded as a greater mass murderer than either Hitler or Stalin?

**Theory of knowledge****History and autobiography**

How should a historian use autobiographies such as that of Chang? Can an autobiography (or even a biography) ever be truly impartial?

However, Chang, who wrote *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991) and, with her husband Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), as well as Jasper Becker, author of *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* (1995), have countered these views. Becker accused Mao of starving 30–40 million people to death during the Great Leap Forward of 1958–61, whilst Chang has called him the greatest mass murderer in human history, responsible for the deaths of over 70 million people – more than Hitler and Stalin combined. Given the huge size of the Chinese population (around 600 million in 1960), Mao clearly had more potential victims than either Hitler or Stalin but, according to Chang, Mao persecuted individuals simply because of their thoughts, thus making him more tyrannical.

The recent reinterpretations of Mao's rule, including that of Chang (although coloured by her family's own sufferings during Maoist China), would suggest that, with the benefit of hindsight, Mao's rule contained much to condemn. Mao implemented a doctrine that aimed not only to transform China, but also to create the 'new socialist man'. Mao achieved authoritarian power in order to impose this 'vision' on the people, but it came at the cost of millions of lives. Mao's attempt to stir the masses by ideological commitment actually made his aim of a prosperous, stable and successful China more difficult to achieve.

**SOURCE A**

Backed by the immense cult of his personality, Mao, who thought himself capable of changing human nature through his mass campaigns, could demand complete loyalty to the cause of revolution as he chose to define it. Nobody and nothing could be excused from utter dedication and readiness to contribute whatever was demanded. Private life meant nothing. People were a blank sheet of paper, mere numbers to be used as the leader saw fit. Marxist autocracy reached heights of totalitarianism unparalleled by Hitler or Stalin.

Fenby, J. 2008. *The Penguin History of Modern China 1850–2008*. London, UK. Allen Lane/Penguin Books. p. 526.

**End of unit activities**

- 1 Make a two-column chart to show the ways in which the 'new democracy' of the PRC differed from democracy in Western-style republics.
- 2 Draw a chart illustrating the main challenges faced by Mao in the 1950s and how he dealt with these. A third section could offer some comment on his success/failure.
- 3 Undertake some research into the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Create a poster showing how the PLA was used as a role model for civilians in communist China.
- 4 Make a chart of the mass campaigns through which Mao attempted to consolidate his rule – record their aims, developments and outcomes.
- 5 Research the life of any one of Mao's victims and write an obituary for that person.
- 6 Recreate a struggle session. Think carefully about who the victim might be and the accusations that might be made.

**Theory of knowledge****Politics and behaviour**

Is it realistic to think that human behaviour can be modified?

**Discussion point**

To what extent was China under Mao a totalitarian regime?