

Text A

"Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

Few people in history deserve sole credit for changing the fate of an entire nation. One of them is Mao Tse-tung, the man who rose from the peasantry to become the pre-eminent revolutionary theorist, political leader and statesman of Communist China.

Mao's influence endured more than 40 years from the Long March of the 1930s, through the Red Army's victory in 1949, until his death in 1976 at age 83. He remained chairman of the party to the end.

Since Mao's death, however, history has not been kind to his memory. The grip that **Maoism**¹ – Mao's philosophy of **socialism**² – had on decision-making and opinion-moulding loosened after 1976. The official version of Mao's career, released in 1981, says his leadership was essentially right until 1957 but from that point forward it was uneven and often off the mark.

China in the 1920s suffered from the same things it had for decades: intractable poverty, widespread government corruption and meddling international influences. It was as a student in Changsha and Beijing that Mao became intrigued by the philosophies of Marx and Lenin and made friends of budding revolutionaries like himself who saw socialism as an answer to China's problems.

Throughout Mao's life the Chinese government promoted his image and that of his comrades at Yan'an as warm-hearted revolutionaries. Historians now believe Mao conducted brutal power struggles against his rivals during this period. Mao also had the time to write poetry, collect his thoughts and mould **Marxist-Leninist**³ theories to fit China's peasant masses -- a brand of socialism that would become known as Maoism. This "Thought of Mao Tse-tung" became required Communist reading. Any deviation from Mao's line was branded as a personal defect, due to that individual's petty **bourgeois**⁴ background. Public confessions followed and potential party leaders were disgraced.

By October 1949 the Communists had chased the **Nationalists**⁵ off the mainland to the island of Taiwan. Mao became chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, chief of state of new People's Republic of China, and chairman of the military commission that controlled the People's Liberation Army.

Mao and his inner circle of politburo members set out to remake the world's most populous nation socially and economically as quickly as possible. The initial approach was modelled on the Soviet Union's five-year plans for industrial development.

¹ Maoism: the communist (a plan about how countries should work) idea created by Mao Zedong. Mao believed that peasants, not factory workers, should lead the communist revolution (change in government)

² Socialism: the belief that the means of making, moving, and trading wealth should be owned or controlled by the community as a whole

³ Marxist-Leninism: the belief that social hierarchy should be dismantled, and the government overthrown, aiming towards the eventual rule of the working class

⁴ Bourgeois: belonging to or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes

⁵ Nationalists: China's Nationalist Party, also known as the Kuomintang, the main opposition of the Communist Party

Plans and policies were announced, only to be reversed in mid-stream and replaced with new policies and plans. A case in point was Mao's policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom" in 1956 to enlist support among China's intellectual elite by promoting a free exchange of views. But the exchanges in some cases led to criticism of the Communist Party, and Mao sent the intellectuals to the countryside for "re-education."

Then in 1958 Mao launched his "Great Leap Forward", which was intended to modernize China's industrial capacity and increase agricultural production. One problem was that decisions were made for purely political, rather than pragmatic, reasons. Coincidental natural disasters and the end of economic aid from the Soviet Union exacerbated the situation.

"Mao's faulty economics ended up creating a famine of massive proportions," writes historian Patricia Buckley Ebrey. She concludes from census reports that 30 million people probably died during the famine of 1959-62.

Mao lost some influence after the failure of the Great Leap Forward. In 1966, however, with his ally Lin Biao controlling the army, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. He set the People's Liberation Army and students -- the Red Guards -- on witch hunts against his opponents. Millions of Chinese suffered or perished, particularly teachers, writers, artists, party leaders, anyone determined to be "reactionary" in some way.

Meanwhile, China's propaganda machine attempted to glorify Mao and by ensuring that every citizen had a copy of the Little Red Book, "Quotations from Chairman Mao," whether they could read it or not. Mao died in 1976 and a strong backlash ensued against the "cult of personality"⁶.

In June 1981 China issued its official judgment of Mao Tse-tung. The statement applauded his leadership and theories through 1957 and then largely blamed him for everything that went wrong during the next two decades.

<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/inside.china/profiles/mao.tsetung/>

⁶ Cult of personality: the use of mass media, propaganda, or other methods to create an idealized, heroic, and at times worshipful image of an individual, often through unquestioning flattery and praise.