

Mao Zedong (1893-1976):
Major Events in the Life of a Revolutionary Leader

All terms appearing in **bold** are included in the glossary.

1893 MAO Zedong was born on December 26 in the small village of Shaoshan in the province of Hunan (Southeast China). While Mao spent much of his childhood working on the family farm, he developed a passion for learning during his brief primary education. At the age of sixteen, Mao left Shaoshan and traveled to the city of Changsha, the provincial capital, where he enrolled in middle school.

Mao was born at a time of great social, political, and cultural change. China was feeling the pressure of **imperialism** and many scholars, government officials, and others were pushing for modernizing reforms.

1911 Mao, now seventeen, watched as the Revolution of 1911 erupted in China. As Euro-American **imperialism** debilitated an already weak Qing government, widespread discontent with the **dynastic system** spread. Those frustrated with the Qing government joined under the leadership of the anti-Qing activist SUN Yat-sen to stage a revolution. The revolution began with a military revolt in Wuhan against the Qing and quickly spread throughout China, forcing the Qing to formally abdicate in 1912. While Mao did not participate in the fighting, he was an avid supporter of the revolution and its aims of social and political reform.

1912 After the Qing formally abdicated, Mao served briefly in the Republican army and then quit to resume his studies. He re-enrolled in middle school in Changsha, where he studied world history, literature, and Chinese and European philosophy.

Meanwhile, the Republic established by the revolutionary government was already crumbling. SUN Yat-sen and his party, the **Guomindang**, were driven underground by political opponents. The Republican government, disorganized and rife with corrupt officials, failed to establish central authority in China, allowing local military strongmen to seize power in the provinces.

1918 Mao graduated from middle school and traveled to Beijing. There he became actively involved in the **May Fourth Movement** and began publishing articles in local journals promoting cultural reform. By 1920, Mao had once again settled in Changsha where he opened a small radical bookstore and continued to write for local journals about the “new culture” arising in China.

1921 Mao became one of the first members of the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP.) He began working in his home province of Hunan to organize labor unions and activist groups and became an important figure in local politics.

1923 Under encouragement from the **Comintern** and the CCP, Mao became a member of the **Guomindang (GMD)**, or Nationalist Party. In an alliance known as the First

United Front, members of the CCP were instructed by the Comintern to work with the GMD to bring China under a single nationalist government. With organizational aid and funding from the Comintern, the GMD grew in size and military power. Mao became an influential member of both the GMD and CCP and worked to solidify the alliance between the two parties.

1926 Mao became involved in peasant mobilization in his work as a propagandist for the United Front and as an instructor for the United Front's Peasant Training Institute. When the United Front was preparing to undertake a large military campaign to retake the provinces from local military leaders, Mao was charged with preparing peasant forces. Under the leadership of GMD general CHIANG Kai-shek, United Front forces, in a campaign known as the Northern Expedition, overthrew many of the provincial warlords. By the end of the campaign, the United Front had succeeded in uniting more than half of China under a Nationalist government.

1927 Fearful of the growing influence of the CCP, right-wing elements of the GMD led by CHIANG Kai-shek conspired with their provincial warlord allies to carry out a crackdown on Communists, organized labor, and peasant associations. Beginning in Shanghai and spreading to other regions under GMD control, the GMD and its allies had hundreds of left-wing leaders imprisoned or executed. This purge marked the end of the First United Front and the beginning of a bitter rivalry between the CCP and the GMD.

When Chiang assumed official leadership of the GMD, succeeding SUN Yat-sen who had died two years earlier, he established Nanjing as the new national capital. Mao received **Comintern** instructions to organize peasant uprisings in areas under GMD control. Mao's forces were too small in number and too poorly trained to challenge the GMD's seasoned army, and the uprisings were easily crushed. Mao fled with his remaining forces to Jiangxi province (Southeast China, bordering Hunan to the east) where he established a stronghold in the mountains.

1928 Hedged in by enemy forces in the mountains, Mao was largely cut off from CCP and **Comintern** contact for nearly a year. In the mountains, Mao experimented with collective agriculture and built a peasant army trained in guerrilla tactics.

1929 Mao descended from the mountains and joined other CCP leaders to establish a major Communist base in Jiangxi province, known as the Jiangxi Soviet.

1931 The GMD initiated a major campaign to completely stamp out Communist influence in China. The Jiangxi Soviet where Mao was stationed became one of the major targets of this campaign and sustained repeated attacks over the next three years.

In the same year, radical junior officers in the Japanese military planted a bomb on a railway in Manchuria. The incident was engineered to appear as an attack by Chinese forces and was used to justify a full-scale invasion of Manchuria, which was quickly transformed into a Japanese colony.

- 1934** Worn down by four years of relentless GMD assault, the CCP leadership agreed to abandon its base in Jiangxi and to establish a new stronghold in a less vulnerable location. With no clear destination, an army of 80,000 CCP loyalists marched from the Jiangxi Soviet in search of a new home. Although Mao was not one of the initial organizers of the march, he took command of the Communist forces after the first three months of the journey and set the army's destination for a distant communist base in Shaanxi province (North-Central China). Sustaining heavy losses from disease, famine, and enemy attack, Mao led his Red Army through some six thousand miles of rivers, swamps, forests, and mountains to reach its new base in the city of Yan'an in Shaanxi province. It was this journey, known as the "Long March," that elevated Mao to the upper ranks of the CCP.
- 1936** Throughout the early 1930s, popular opinion shifted from fighting the Chinese Communists to fighting Japanese aggression. By 1936, this feeling was shared by the CCP and even some within the GMD. Very late in the year, CHIANG Kai-shek was kidnapped by one of his own generals (in what became known as the "Xi'an Incident"). Chiang was released after two weeks when he agreed to ally with the Communists against the Japanese. This alliance became known as the Second United Front.
- 1937** Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China, which marked the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The Japanese were initially successful in the North, and within months had captured the GMD capital city of Nanjing. Here, in an episode known as the "Rape of Nanjing," the Japanese army turned on the civilian population committing countless acts of rape and torture in an apparent effort to force the Chinese into submission. Meanwhile, Japanese forces were also pushing into the provinces surrounding Mao's Shaanxi base, where they were met with effective resistance by CCP forces.
- 1943** Mao received the title of "Chairman" of the Communist Central Committee — a title that heretofore had not existed — and Chairman of the **Politburo**, making him the unchallenged leader of the CCP.
- 1945** The final surrender of Japan after the American bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the Sino-Japanese War to a close. As the Japanese evacuated China, the conflict between the CCP under Mao and the GMD under Chiang reemerged. Within a year, full-scale war had erupted between the two parties.
- 1947** The GMD was initially successful in the north, surrounding and capturing the Yan'an base Mao had established after the Long March. However, the CCP had already established a foothold in Manchuria, which their Russian allies had allowed them to occupy after the Sino-Japanese War. The CCP used this base to begin an aggressive military campaign that started to drive the GMD armies south.

- 1949** With the GMD on the eve of its defeat, Mao announced the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1. CCP forces had completely overwhelmed GMD armies by December. CHIANG Kai-shek fled with his remaining forces to Taiwan, where he installed the remnants of his GMD administration, claiming to be the legitimate government of China. (To this day, the GMD remains active, and the official name of the government on Taiwan is the "Republic of China." The PRC government on the mainland does not recognize this government and continues to claim Taiwan as its territory.)
- 1950** North Korean forces launched an offensive on South Korea, marking the beginning of the **Korean War** (1950-53). By the fall of 1950, the South Koreans, backed by American-led UN forces, had driven the invading North Korean army from South Korea. UN forces then launched an invasion of North Korea, taking North Korea's capital city of Pyongyang and pushing farther north. Alarmed by the UN victories and fearful of the US securing a foothold in North Korea, Mao ordered PRC troops to reinforce the North Koreans. The united communist forces executed a successful counterattack, forcing UN troops to retreat. The war came to an end in 1953 with the Treaty of Panmunjom, which split the peninsula into the communist north and the capitalist south.
- 1956** Mao delivered his famous "hundred flowers" speech, in which he encouraged Chinese to express their opinions about the government openly. Many intellectuals and writers responded with critiques of party policy. In a massive crackdown in 1957, those who had followed Mao's encouragement to "let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend" were arrested and either imprisoned or sent to labor camps.
- 1958** In an attempt to revitalize the Chinese economy and break from the Soviet model of Communism that Mao believed was not suited to China's predominantly agricultural economy, Mao launched a new economic program he called "The Great Leap Forward." In industry, Mao's program promoted labor-intensive production that was less reliant on technology and expensive machinery in order to capitalize on China's huge labor supply. In agriculture, Mao's program promoted collective farming organized in peasant communes. The goal was to increase output at all levels through a program suited to China's unique economic and social structure. Poor organization, unrealistic planning, poor harvests, and a lack of communication between rural areas and urban centers led to widespread famine and a drastic drop in production. The abysmal failure of Mao's program further strained relations between China and the Soviet Union and resulted in a permanent break between the two powers. Mao ceded party leadership to other prominent members of the CCP, most notably LIU Shaoqi, who took up Mao's position as chairman of the governing council, and DENG Xiaoping. Mao remained a prominent member of the CCP but withdrew from immediate participation in policy making.
- 1966** In part an effort to regain power and in part as a way to renew the revolutionary spirit of the people, Mao launched the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Mao mobilized students and young adults from throughout China to serve as “Red Guards,” or agents of the Revolution. The Red Guards sought to extinguish old traditions and root out “counterrevolutionaries.” The movement resulted in political disorder, terror, and violence, as the country was thrown into chaos. (See also the ExEAS unit “China’s Cultural Revolution,” especially the “Instructor’s Introduction” section: <http://www.exeas.org/resources/china-cultural-revolution.html>.)

1972 Mao made one of his last and boldest political moves — he invited President Richard NIXON of the United States to visit China. After decades of poor Sino-American relations, it was a shocking gesture on the part of Mao.

1973 Mao allowed DENG Xiaoping, one of the reformers removed from party leadership during the first years of the Cultural Revolution, to reenter politics, incurring the criticism of the revolutionary purists within the party.

1976 On September 9, MAO Zedong died at the age of 81.

China after Mao

After a brief power struggle, the reformers who had survived the Cultural Revolution, led by Deng Xiaoping, regained control of the government. The reformers spent the next years working to undo many of the policies instituted under Mao. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the PRC began to decollectivize agriculture and open its markets to international trade. In the 1990s, the government began to remodel China’s economy, incorporating elements of a free market system.

The CCP continues to maintain tight controls over China’s citizens. The press and media are strictly censored, party dissenters continue to be imprisoned and held without trial, and human rights violations regularly raise concerns abroad.

Today, Mao is remembered both for his positive and negative contributions to China’s development as a nation. On the one hand, Mao is remembered as the great revolutionary hero whose conviction and tenacity inspired millions to rebuild the Chinese nation. On the other hand, Mao is also remembered for his costly policy blunders — most infamously the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution — which resulted in the death and suffering of tens of millions of Chinese.

“Maoism” after Mao

Although Maoist thought or “Maoism” had a large impact on third world resistance movements in the early to mid twentieth century, today there are only a handful of groups that follow Mao’s principles. Many revolutionary groups after Mao, for example, the well-known Viet Minh of Vietnam, were influenced by Mao’s model of revolution, which emphasized that revolution could be achieved through mass mobilization of the rural peasantry — rather than the urban proletariat as argued by

Marx. Although the influence of Maoism is fading, Mao is still remembered as one of the most important revolutionary leaders in history.

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