



Edexcel/AQA A-Level History

An Overview of Mao's China (1921 – 1976)

About the author:

This Teacher CPD resource was created by Dr Toby Lincoln, Associate Professor in Chinese Urban History in the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. Dr Lincoln researches modern Chinese urban history and governance. Concentrating on the twentieth century, he is particularly concerned with urban morphology, the changing rural-urban relationship and daily life in different environments. Additionally, he works on the relationship between war and the city, the importance of social networks in Chinese history and how ideas about cities have and are being disseminated across East Asia.

*Dr Lincoln's most recent publication is *An Urban History of China* (Cambridge, 2021) He is currently working on a project funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Early Career Research Fellowship. The title is *Post-war Urban Reconstruction in China 1938-1958*. This research explains how urban reconstruction in China during and after World War II (WWII) laid the foundation for the country to become the world's largest urban society.*

Historiographical Summary:

Perhaps the key debate is the extent to which Maoism should be seen as positive or negative in Chinese history. Jung Chang and Frank Dikotter focus on the catastrophic nature of Maoism in their work, but Jung Chang's book in particular has been widely criticised for its poor historical scholarship. Sebastian Veg and Jeremy Brown are among scholars who take a more balanced approach, often by using local examples to correct top-down historical approaches. Timothy Cheek argues that Maoism as an ideology should be taken seriously in its attempt to transform Chinese society as opposed to merely being an excuse for totalitarianism. Elizabeth Perry is among those who have explored the impact of Maoist institutions on contemporary China. She argues that a policy style of experimentation and adaptation that was developed in the 1940s still applies today. The theme of the period's lasting impact on China has recently been explored in the edited volume *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019).

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

The Chinese Communist Revolution

What was the Chinese Communist Revolution?

The Chinese Communist Revolution was a social and political revolution that led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Some of the main events leading up to the revolution are:

- The formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 by urban intellectuals influenced by Marxism-Leninism and the Russian Revolution. The CCP initially cooperated with the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party against the warlords and foreign powers, but their alliance broke down in 1927 when the KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek ordered a massacre of Communists in Shanghai.
- The Long March of 1934-35, when the CCP retreated from KMT attacks and established a base in Yan'an in Shaanxi in north China. During this period, Mao Zedong emerged as the leader of the CCP and developed his theory of "people's war" based on guerrilla warfare and peasant mobilization.
- The Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45, when China was invaded by Japan and suffered atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre. The CCP and the KMT formed a united front against Japan, but also competed for territory and influence. The CCP gained popular support by resisting Japanese occupation and implementing land reform in rural areas.
- The Chinese Civil War of 1946-49, when the CCP and the KMT resumed their conflict after Japan's defeat in World War II. Although the KMT had a larger number of troops, it suffered from corruption, hyperinflation, and US interference. Meanwhile, CCP soldiers were committed and CCP commanders such as Lin Biao were better at making strategic decisions than those under Chiang Kai-shek. The CCP captured Beijing in January 1949 and Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949. The KMT fled to Taiwan and continued to claim sovereignty over China.

The main debates on why the revolution was successful can be summarized as follows:

- The role of foreign intervention: Historiography during the Cold War focused on the intervention of foreign powers, especially the Soviet Union and the United States in the civil war. The Soviet Union supported the CCP with military aid and diplomatic recognition, while the United States backed the KMT with economic and military assistance. More recently, historians have argued that foreign intervention was not decisive and that the CCP won mainly because of its own strengths and strategies.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

- The role of ideology and nationalism: The CCP's ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism appealed to the masses of peasants, workers, and intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the KMT's corruption, oppression, and failure to modernize China. Historians such as Mark Selden, who wrote *The Yan'an Way*, focus on the CCP's programme of social change in the countryside, such as tax and rent reduction in Yan'an, as well as land reform. The CCP also mobilized nationalist sentiments by portraying itself as the defender of China's sovereignty and dignity against foreign aggression and exploitation. Chalmers Johnson argued that the CCP drew on peasant nationalism to gain support during the Second Sino-Japanese War. More recent scholarship focuses on how the CCP's social programme and its ability to tap into nationalism combined in different ways in Communist base areas, the name given to regions under their control in different parts of the country during the Second Sino-Japanese War
- The role of leadership and organization: Historians highlight how the CCP's leadership, especially Mao Zedong, was superior to that of the KMT in terms of vision, charisma, and military skill. Mao developed a revolutionary strategy of protracted people's war that relied on guerrilla tactics, political education, and mass mobilization. He also established a centralized party structure that ensured discipline, loyalty, and efficiency. While the focus here has often been on Mao, other leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, and Lin Biao, also made contributions to the revolution. Beyond this, historians have looked at the role that local party cadres played in mobilizing the people in different regions of China. The focus here is often land reform and the way in which the CCP used propaganda to spread its message in the countryside.
- The role of violence and the emergence of autocracy – After China opened up to the world in the 1980s, the true nature of Maoist autocracy provided a new perspective on the Communist Revolution. Using newly available sources, historians investigated the role of violence during land reform. Historians have also looked at rectification in Yan'an after 1942. Intellectuals were subject to thought reform to ensure that they were ideologically loyal to Maoism. One of these was Ding Ling, the famous feminist leftist writer, who wrote little from 1942 until 1944.

Korean War

What was the Korean War?

The Korean War (1950-1953) was a conflict between the communist North Korea, supported by China and the Soviet Union, and the capitalist South Korea, backed by the United Nations (UN) led by the United States. It was the first major confrontation of the Cold War and a test of Maoist China's revolutionary ambitions.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

- Mao Zedong decided to intervene in Korea in October 1950, after the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel and threatened to overthrow the North Korean regime. Mao saw this as a threat to China's security and sovereignty, as well as an opportunity to support the global struggle against imperialism. He also wanted to consolidate his domestic power and prestige by proving China's military capabilities.
- The Chinese People's Volunteer Force (CPVF) entered Korea in late October and launched a surprise attack on the UN troops, pushing them back across the 38th parallel and recapturing Pyongyang and Seoul by January 1951. However, the UN forces regrouped and counterattacked, stabilizing the front line near the 38th parallel by mid-1951. The war then entered a stalemate, with both sides engaging in fierce battles over strategic hills and outposts, while negotiations for an armistice dragged on for two years.
- The war ended in July 1953 with an armistice that restored the pre-war status quo along the 38th parallel. The war had mixed results for Mao and China. On one hand, Mao claimed a victory for having prevented the collapse of North Korea and resisted the US-led aggression. He also enhanced China's international prestige and influence, especially among other communist and anti-colonial movements. On the other hand, Mao paid a high price for his intervention, both in human and economic terms. The war killed between 150,000 and 400,000 Chinese soldiers (including Mao's own son), wounded many more, and strained China's already impoverished economy

Some of the main debates are:

- Why did China intervene in the war? Some argue that China was motivated by ideological solidarity with North Korea and fear of American encirclement, while others contend that China acted in response to direct threats to its national security and sovereignty. More recent research by Chen Jian in particular also focuses on how Mao used the Korean war to stir up nationalism in China and so increase support for the CCP as it looked to consolidate its power in the months and years after the revolution.
- What were the consequences of China's intervention? Some stress China's diplomatic and military achievements, such as the preservation of North Korea and the enhancement of China's international status, while others underscore China's human and economic costs, such as the number casualties and the impact on the Chinese economy during a period of reconstruction after years of war.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

Land Reform

What was land reform?

Land reform in Communist China aimed to redistribute land from wealthy landlords to poor peasants.

- Land reform began well before the CCP came to power in 1949, but it was rolled out across the country after the passing of the Land Reform Law (1950), which abolished the old system of land ownership and introduced the system of peasant land ownership. The land reform involved a process of *fanshen*, or turning over the body, which meant classifying rural society into five categories: landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants and labourers. The landlords were stripped of their land and property, and often subjected to violent attacks and killings by the peasants and the CCP cadres. The poor peasants and labourers received land titles and became the main beneficiaries of the reform. The middle peasants kept their own land and sometimes received more. The rich peasants were allowed to keep part of their land but had to pay higher taxes and rent.

The main debates can be summarized as follows:

- Land reform aimed to redistribute land from landlords to peasants and eliminate exploitation. Some scholars argue that this movement was a successful and necessary step to empower the rural masses, improve agricultural productivity, and lay the foundation for socialist construction. Others contend that this movement was a violent and destructive campaign that resulted in millions of deaths, social chaos, and economic stagnation. Brian Demare's, *Land Wars* is a recent book that focuses on how the CCP forced land reform on the population. As many as 2 million landlords may have died during land reform and it resulted in social divisions in many villages across China.

Three and Five Anti-Campaigns

What were the Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns?

The Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns were reform movements launched by Mao Zedong in the early 1950s to rid Chinese cities of corruption and enemies of the state. The Three-anti Campaign targeted communist cadres who had become too close to China's capitalists, and the Five-anti Campaign targeted the capitalists themselves on charges of bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property and economic information, and cheating on government contracts. The campaigns resulted in political persecution, economic disruption, and widespread suicides among the urban elite. Many people were also sent to labour camps.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

First Five-Year Plan

What was the first five-year plan?

The first five-year plan (1953-1957) was a key economic policy of the CCP.

- The plan aimed to transform China from an agrarian society into an industrialized one, following the Soviet model of development. It focused on building up heavy industries such as steel, coal, and machinery, as well as infrastructure such as railways, roads, and power plants. The plan was supported by Soviet loans, experts, and technology.
- The plan achieved remarkable results in terms of increasing industrial output and economic growth. According to official statistics, industrial production more than doubled and gross national product increased by 9.6% annually during the plan period.
- The plan increased the state control over the economy and society. Large state-owned industries were created, and many urban workers were organized into *danwei* (work units). In factories, hospitals, universities and other organizations workers lived in micro-districts. Following the Soviet model, these were compounds where workers lived in dormitories or if they had families, small flats close to their workplace. They often ate in communal kitchens and entertainment and other aspects of life were organized by the local CCP committee.

Hundred Flowers and the Anti-Rightist Campaigns

What were the Hundred Flowers and the Anti-Rightist Campaigns?

The Hundred Flowers Campaign was a political movement in China that lasted from 1956 to 1957. Mao invited intellectuals and other citizens to voice their opinions and criticisms of the party and its policies. The slogan of the movement was "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend". The campaign was intended to foster a more open and democratic atmosphere in the socialist society, as well as to identify and rectify the shortcomings and errors of the party.

- The campaign soon backfired, as many people expressed dissenting views and exposed the problems and abuses of the party. Some criticized the party's bureaucracy, corruption, dogmatism, repression, and cult of personality. Others demanded more political rights, such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly. Some even challenged the legitimacy and ideology of the party. Mao and other party leaders were shocked and alarmed by the extent and intensity of the criticism. They accused the critics of being "rightists" who wanted to overthrow the socialist system and restore capitalism. In July 1957, Mao abruptly ended the campaign and launched a counterattack against the rightists. Hundreds of thousands of people who had participated in the campaign were

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

denounced, purged, imprisoned, or sent to labour camps. The Hundred Flowers Campaign was thus a short-lived episode of liberalization that ended in a severe crackdown.

Great Leap Forward (Second Five Year Plan)

What was the Great Leap Forward?

The Great Leap Forward was a massive economic and social campaign launched by Mao in 1958. It aimed to transform China from an agrarian society into a modern communist one by rapidly increasing the production of grain and steel, and by creating large-scale rural communes where people would share everything in common. It involved:

- The collectivization of agriculture: The CCP abolished private ownership of land and forced millions of peasants to join collective farms called people's communes. The communes were supposed to be self-reliant units that would produce not only food but also industrial goods such as steel, cement, and machinery.
- The backyard steel campaign: The CCP encouraged every commune, factory, school, and household to set up small backyard furnaces to produce steel from scrap metal and iron ore. The goal was to surpass the steel output of Britain and other industrialized countries in a short time. However, the quality of the steel was very poor and often unusable. Moreover, many peasants neglected their crops and livestock to collect fuel and materials for the furnaces, resulting in severe food shortages.
- The exaggerated reporting and propaganda: The CCP set unrealistic production targets and quotas for the communes and factories and so many local officials and cadres inflated their numbers or fabricated them entirely to avoid criticism or punishment from the higher authorities. The CCP also used propaganda to praise the success of the Great Leap Forward and to mobilize the masses to work harder and sacrifice more. The propaganda often portrayed the communes as utopian paradises where people enjoyed abundance and happiness.
- The disastrous consequences: The Great Leap Forward was a colossal failure that caused widespread famine, disease, social unrest, and death in China. According to various estimates, between 15 and 55 million people died as a result of the Great Leap Forward, making it one of the deadliest man-made disasters in history. The famine was caused by a combination of factors, such as poor planning, bad weather, pest infestation, mismanagement, waste, corruption, coercion, and violence. The rural communes collapsed under the pressure of starvation and rebellion, and many peasants fled to the cities or other regions in search of food.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

The main historical debates around the Great Leap Forward are:

- The role of Mao Zedong and his leadership style. Mao was certainly the main driving force behind the Great Leap Forward and he ignored or suppressed warnings and criticisms from his colleagues and subordinates. However, he faced some criticism, notably from general Peng Deshuai, who was purged in 1959. Across the country local CCP cadres also often tried to protect people from the worst of GLF policies by providing aid where they could or turning a blind eye to acts such as stealing grain. These acts of resistance call into question the extent of CCP power and the nature of its authoritarianism.
- The GLF is widely viewed as a tragic failure, even within China. It exposed many of the flaws of the Chinese Communist system and led to untold suffering across the country.

Cultural Revolution

What was the Cultural Revolution?

The Cultural Revolution was a socio-political movement in China that began in 1966. Mao aimed to renew the spirit of the communist revolution and purge China of what he considered to be "bourgeois" elements. He mobilized millions of young people, known as the Red Guards, to carry out his new vision of China.

- The movement was launched in May 1966, when Mao issued a document that criticized some of his colleagues for being "revisionists" and called for a mass struggle against them. The Red Guards were formed in June 1966, when Mao encouraged students to rebel against their teachers and other authority figures. The Red Guards attacked and humiliated anyone they deemed to be "counterrevolutionary" or "bourgeois", such as intellectuals, artists, religious leaders, and even some party officials. Mao also urged the Red Guards to destroy anything that represented the old culture, customs, habits, and ideas of China. The Red Guards vandalized historical sites, temples, libraries, museums, and private homes. They also burned books and artworks and forced people to change their names and clothing styles.
- At the same time, there was a power struggle within the party as Mao appointed a group of radical leaders, known as the Gang of Four, to oversee the Cultural Revolution. The Gang of Four included Mao's wife Jiang Qing, who controlled the cultural sphere. They clashed with other party leaders who wanted to restore order and stability in China. In 1967 and 1968. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were accused of being "capitalist roaders" and removed from their positions. Liu was the president of China and Deng was the general secretary of the party. They were both tortured and imprisoned by the Red Guards. Liu died in custody

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

in 1969 and Deng was sent to work in a rural area.

- By late 1967, Red Guard groups were attacking government officials and forming revolutionary committees in cities across the country. Although Mao initially encouraged these attacks against officials and CCP cadres, it soon became clear that governmental authority was breaking down. Mao asked his loyal defence minister Lin Biao to restore order. Lin used the army to suppress the violence and chaos caused by the Red Guards. He also promoted a cult of personality around Mao and made the Little Red Book, a collection of Maoist writings, required reading for many people in China. Lin Biao tried to launch a coup in 1971 and died in a plane crash while fleeing China.
- The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, when Mao died and the Gang of Four were arrested by a coalition of party leaders led by Hua Guofeng, Mao's designated successor. Hua declared the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977 and rehabilitated many of its victims. Deng Xiaoping returned to power in 1978 and initiated a series of economic and political reforms that opened up China to the world.

The main historical debates about the Cultural Revolution include:

- What were Mao's motives for launching the Cultural Revolution? Was he driven by ideological zeal, personal ambition, paranoia, or a combination of these factors? The consensus is that he was initially driven by concern that he had been side-lined after the GLF. However, when it became clear that the CR was getting out of hand, he took steps to secure some stability by rehabilitating Deng Xiaoping and choosing Hua Guofeng as his successor.
- How did the masses respond to the Cultural Revolution? Were they enthusiastic participants, passive bystanders, or reluctant victims of the violence and chaos? Historians here focus on the role of the Red Guards and the divisions in society that the movement exposed. Andrew Walder is among those who has focused on social divisions that were created by the Communist system, with losers in the 1950s and 60s often becoming more radical during the Cultural Revolution as a way of gaining power. Other historians such as Elizabeth Perry, who has written about the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai, have focused on the violence and chaos in the government.
- How did the Cultural Revolution affect China's culture and identity? Did it create a new revolutionary culture and a new sense of national pride, or did it destroy China's cultural heritage and traditional values? The CCP rejected the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution after Mao died in 1976 and it's fair to say that it did not create a revolutionary culture. Indeed, some historians such as Barbara Mittler, have emphasized how young people continued to engage in banned cultural activities such as reading banned books. Denise Ho has also written about how people in Shanghai took antiques that were in danger of being destroyed to the

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

Shanghai Museum, where they were protected by central government officials.

- The memory of the Cultural Revolution remains very sensitive in China, even today. In the early 1980s, Scar Literature emerged describing some of the terrible events that have happened. Perhaps the most famous is Zheng Yi's, *Scarlet Memorial*, which focuses on southern China and includes tales of cannibalism. More recently, people have written about their experiences in online journals and there has been some discussion on TV, with people who were Red Guards expressing regret about their actions. However, now China has become more authoritarian under Xi Jinping, public discussion is very rare.

Further Resources

These resources are all in the public domain and freely usable for teaching.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07psr50>

<https://chinesehistoryforteachers.omeka.net/>

<https://chinese posters.net/>

<https://maoeraobjects.ac.uk/>

<https://digital.library.pitt.edu/collection/chinas-cultural-revolution-memories-the-CR10-project>

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

The School of History, Politics and International Relations
University of Leicester
University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587
E hypir@le.ac.uk