

## Part 2 China under the Communists 1949–65

### Rebuilding China

For more than 30 years China had been at war. Millions had died. For 20 of those years Mao himself had been at war or on the run. In the conflict he had lost his first wife, his children and many of his comrades. In October 1949 he announced his vision for a new peaceful China.

In theory, the new republic was governed by a coalition of the Communists with a number of smaller parties. In practice power lay with Chairman Mao and the Communist Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Mao put his plans into operation through Party workers in each local area.

Rebuilding China after foreign occupation and civil war was a huge challenge. China was backward and its system of government was in chaos. There was little industry. Most of it was in Manchuria and had been destroyed by the Russians when they 'liberated' the region from the Japanese. They had simply dismantled factories and machines and transported them back to Russia. Unemployment was high and there were food shortages. In some country areas life expectancy was only about 40 years. There was also raging inflation.

From the 30 years he had spent trying to spread Communist ideas among the peasants, Mao was keenly aware that Chinese people disliked change. Nevertheless, he had already worked wonders with the peasants during the Civil War. He knew that they were willing and hard-working and if he could keep their loyalty then he felt he could achieve anything.

#### SOURCE 1

*We announce the setting up of the People's Republic of China. Our nation will from now on enter the large family of peace-loving and freedom-loving nations of the world. It will work bravely to create its own civilisation and happiness and will at the same time promote world peace and freedom. Our nation will never again be insulted. We have stood up.*

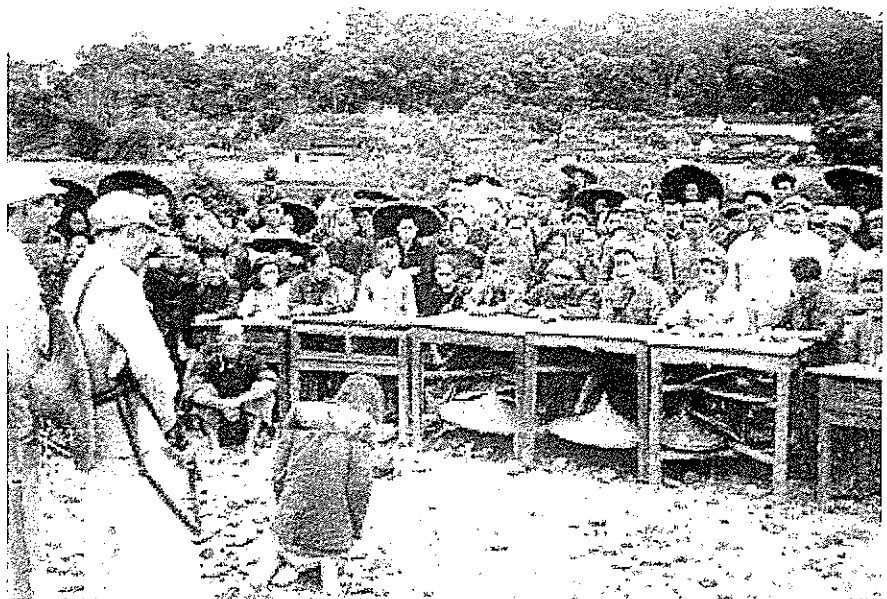
Mao speaking in 1949.

### The Agrarian Reform Law

In 1950 Mao introduced the Agrarian Reform Law. He sent his Communist Party workers into each village to enforce it. They shared out village land between the peasants. They also encouraged peasants to put landlords on trial in so-called 'People's Courts' (see Sources 2 and 3).

At these trials landlords were accused of such things as charging high rents or mistreating their tenants. Though many of them were let off, others were imprisoned or executed. Party workers helped set up the courts but it was the peasants who ran them and made the decisions. This further increased support for Mao.

#### SOURCE 2



Huang Chin-chi was found guilty at this 'people's tribunal' of being a despotic landlord. He was shot on 17 January 1953.

- 1 Study Source 3. What does it reveal about how landlords had treated the peasants?
- 2 What role did the Communist Party activists play?
- 3 How would an event like this affect peasants' views of the Communists?

**SOURCE 3**

*One feeling animated them all – vengeance! They wanted vengeance! They wanted to give vent to their hatred, the suffering of the oppressed since their ancestor's times, the hatred of thousands of years; all this resentment they directed against him. They would have liked to tear him with their teeth.*

*The cadres could not stop everyone jumping onto the stage. With blows and curses the crowd succeeded in dragging him down from the stage and then more people swarmed towards him. Some crawled over the heads and shoulders of those in front.*

*Schemer Qian's silk gown was torn. His shoes had fallen off, the white paper hat had been trampled underfoot. All semblance of order was gone and it looked as though he was going to be beaten to death, when Yumin remembered Comrade Pin's last instructions and pushed his way into the crowd. Having no other way of stopping them, he shielded Qian with his body, and shouted 'Don't be in such a hurry to beat him to death! We've got to ask the county authorities!' Then the militiamen started checking the people.*

*The crowd was furious at seeing Yumin shelter Schemer Qian. They pressed forward together. Yumin was considerably knocked about but still he said to them: 'I swear, there was a time I was afraid we couldn't get the better of him! Now you want to beat him to death, of course I'm pleased. I've long wanted to beat him to death to clean up our district! Only, there's been no order from our superiors and I don't dare. I daren't take the responsibility. A man can only be executed with the county court's approval. I'm asking you to delay it for a few days. Do it as a favour for me! Don't kill him yet; we'll punish him suitably later.'*

*[The court then discussed the case. They decided not to execute him.]*

*'Thanks to the mercy of the liberated gentlemen, my unworthy life has been spared ...'*

*'What? I don't understand.' Another voice from the crowd interrupted Qian. 'We liberated gentlemen aren't going to pass all this literary stuff. Just put it briefly: say your dog's life has been spared.'*

*'Yes, spare your dog's life!' the rest agreed.*

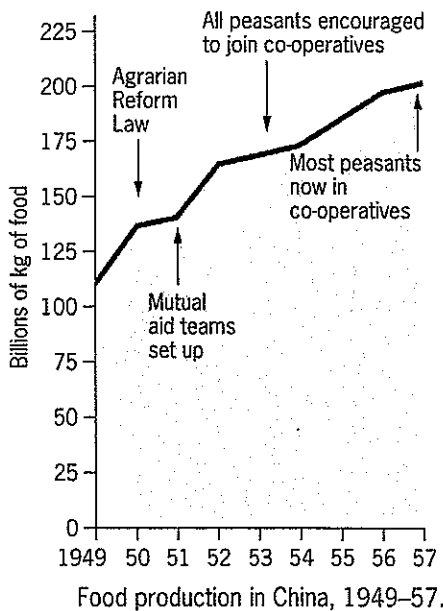
*Qian had to go on: 'Spare my dog's life. In future I must change my former evil ways completely. If I transgress in the slightest or oppose the masses, I shall be put to death. This statement is made by the local despot, Qian, and signed in the presence of the masses. August 3.'*

*The presidium asked the crowd to discuss it, but very few further amendments were proposed, although a few people still felt he was getting off too lightly and they ought to beat him some more.*

*Schemer Qian was allowed to go back. He was only permitted to live in Yi's house for the time being. All his property apart from his land was to be sealed up immediately by the peasants' association. As to the question of how much should be left to him, that was left to the land assessment committee to decide.*

An extract from *The Sun Shines over the Sangkan River*, a novel by Ding Ling, published in 1948 and based on scenes the author witnessed while travelling with her husband.

**SOURCE 4**



**SOURCE 5**

*In 1951 we set up a mutual aid team. The work went well, but there were lots of quarrels about whose land should be worked on first. It was difficult to solve all these problems. Some said 'Why should his field be taken first? I've got a bigger crop. It ought to be my turn now.' Whatever we did this went on. So we then began to talk about forming a peasant's co-operative.*

A Chinese peasant talking in 1953.

**The Co-operatives**

Land reform made Mao popular but it did not solve his biggest problem. China's population was rising quickly but food production was not. Food production had to rise to avoid famine. Mao's first step was for peasants to form mutual aid teams. Peasants worked on each other's land, fertilising, killing pests or harvesting so that each family's plot would become more productive.

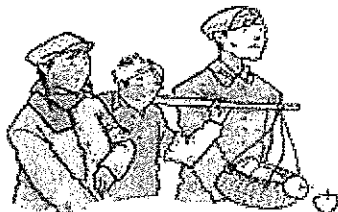
As you can see from Source 4 the mutual aid teams did help increase production – but this did not happen quickly enough.

From 1953 Mao encouraged peasants to form co-operatives. Under this system land was jointly owned so one large crop could be grown efficiently. The co-operative's resources could be pooled to buy equipment, fertilisers and seeds. There was opposition from many peasants who did not want to give up the private land they had fought for, but local Communist workers pressurised them to join co-operatives. By 1957 well over 90 per cent of China's peasants belonged to co-operatives.

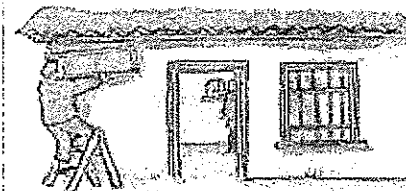
## Changing industry

When the Communists took over China they were faced by economic and industrial chaos. The first task was to tackle this chaos.

### SOURCE 6



Mao ordered prices and wages to be fixed at a low rate. He punished black marketers severely. Within a year inflation had ended.



He took over the banks. Very soon the Chinese currency had been stabilized.



He increased the taxes paid by businesses.



Railway links had been destroyed in the war. Mao made a priority of rebuilding them so that coal could be brought to Chinese industries from the northern coalfields. Within months the Communists had restored the railway links to Shanghai – the largest city in China.

Mao's economic and industrial reforms.

### SOURCE 7

*It will take many years to raise China from her low economic position. China must use elements of urban and rural capitalism which help the national economy. Our present policy is to control not eliminate capitalism.*

Mao speaking in the early 1950s.

## The Five-Year Plan 1953–57

Solving the existing problems was not enough. Mao wanted China to become an industrial superpower. At first he moved slowly. Then in 1953 all businesses were taken over by the government. It planned and organised what should be produced although the owners remained as managers.

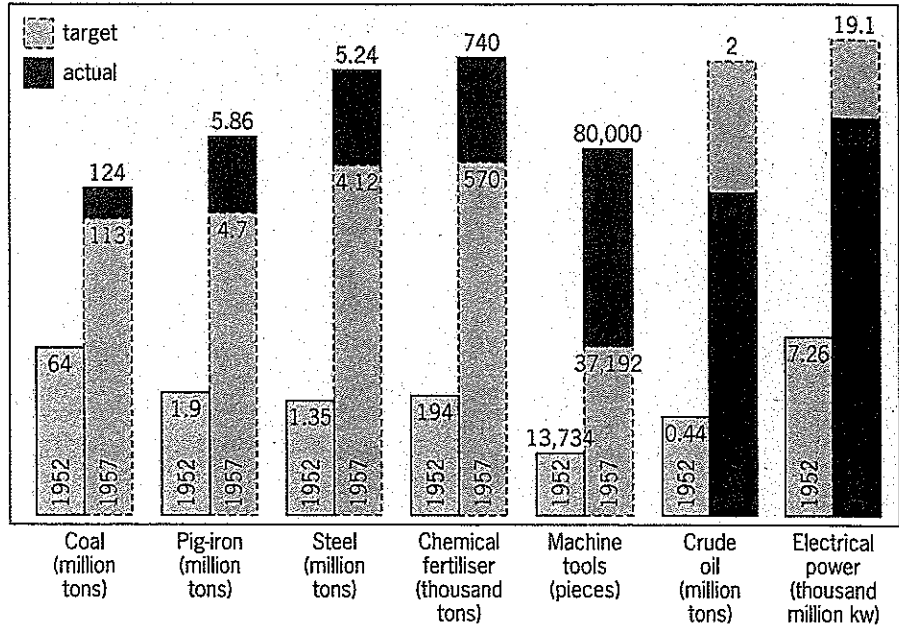
In 1953 Mao also began the first Five-Year Plan. With the help of the USSR he began an ambitious programme to build new industries. Thousands of Russian scientists and engineers supervised millions of Chinese on almost 700 major projects. At the same time thousands of Chinese students were sent for training in Soviet universities and colleges.

The focus was on heavy industries – steel, coal, chemicals. The plan was that these would provide the raw materials to build planes, trains and engines which would improve transport throughout China. Mao put the new factories in small towns rather than in the old industrial cities. This was partly so they would be near newly discovered raw materials but also so that new industries could start 'from scratch' without 'old ways' interfering with Mao's new ideas.

The Five-Year Plan achieved astounding results. The highly motivated Chinese workers actually surpassed all of the targets for the Five-Year Plan. In five years China was criss-crossed with railways which moved vital goods and raw materials over vast distances. The population of China's towns and cities soared as peasants moved to the jobs created in the new industries.

Why was the emphasis of the Five-Year Plan on heavy industry?

Why do you think Mao used help from the USSR?



Industrial production in 1952 and 1957. Although historians now question the accuracy of these figures, contemporary observers agree that the achievements were still impressive.

**Activity**

Source 8 is to be used to promote the successes of Mao's reforms. Write a caption to go with it, or use it to design a propaganda poster.

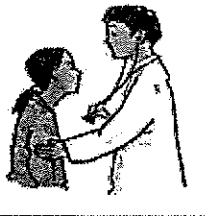
3 What do you think was the purpose of the reforms shown in Source 9?

**Social reforms**

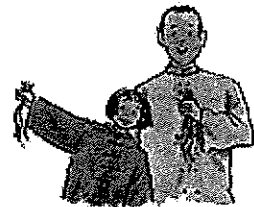
During the 1950s Mao attempted to modernise and reform many other aspects of life in China.

SOURCE 9

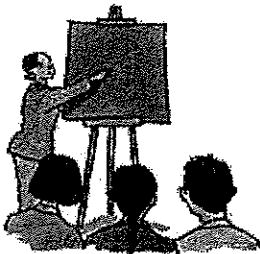
Health care became free. Medicine was not very advanced but the emphasis was on prevention.



Cities were cleaned up. Residents had to form committees to tidy up the streets. In Shanghai there was a campaign against rats. Each family member had to produce one rat's tail a week as evidence of his or her contribution.



There was a literacy drive. Party workers taught villagers to read and write and at the same time taught them Maoist Communism. As peasants came to markets they had to pass 'literacy checkpoints' manned by Communist officials. The result was that by the mid-1960s over 90 per cent of China's population had a basic grasp of reading and writing.



For centuries women had virtually no rights in China. Female babies might be drowned. Girls could be sold as servants and prostitutes. Marriages were arranged for them. Mao banned marriages and said 'the old system which made women the servants of their men is now abolished'.

Mao made divorce easier. Women could divorce men, not just the other way around.

He also planned nurseries so mothers could more easily join the great work which needed to be done in China.

Education was improved. China's growing industries needed a better-educated workforce. However, Mao was only interested in basic education. He was suspicious of universities and colleges and regarded people with a university education as enemies of Communism.



Many businesses and all the banks came under state control.



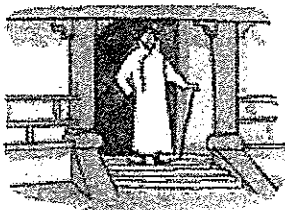
## Focus Task

**What was the impact of the communist reforms?**

Choose one of the following characters and explain one thing which changed for each of them under Mao's reforms.



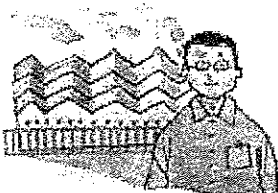
Peasant



Landlord



Woman

**Control**

Chinese society was closely controlled. Mao did not want people to think independently. He used his loyal Party workers and 'propagandists' to spread Communist ideas. In 1951 Mao had 1.5 million propagandists. In workplaces such as factories up to 10 per cent of the workforce were propagandists. They flooded China with propaganda. They put up wall posters and ran discussion groups, accusation groups (when people got together to talk about their own and others' failures to be good Communists), story-telling groups and memory meetings (when people recalled the sufferings of the old days before the Communists took over).

**SOURCE 10**

*My mother's two comrades insisted that she had behaved in a 'bourgeois' [anti-revolutionary] manner. They said she had not wanted to go to the country to help collect food. When she pointed out that she had gone, in line with the Party's wishes, they retorted: 'Ah but you didn't really want to go!' Then they accused her of enjoying privileged food – cooked moreover by her mother at home – and of becoming ill more than most pregnant women. Mrs Mi also criticised her because her mother had made clothes for the baby. 'Such a bourgeois waste,' she said. 'Why can't she just wrap her up in old clothes like everyone else?' The fact she had shown her sadness that my grandmother had to leave was singled out as definitive proof that she put family first. A serious offence ... At the end of all this my mother's two comrades voted against full Party membership for her.*

From *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang. The writer is describing the experiences of her mother in 1950 in the early days after the Communist revolution.

Ordinary people would have to attend three or four such meetings every fortnight. People who were thought to need more 're-education' had meetings even more often.

Each propagandist had targets to meet and they competed with each other to spread more propaganda. They got everyone around them involved in producing propaganda. The most common form of propaganda was the wall poster. In 1957 and 1958 students at the University of Beijing produced half a million wall posters attacking waste and intolerance in Chinese society. They produced so many that they ran out of wall! So posters were hung from strings across the ceilings of corridors and rooms around the entire university.

**SOURCE 11**

*It is good to use wall posters in our campaign in factories. The more we use, the better. If you have 10,000 sheets in your plant that is first class. If you have 5,000 sheets that is second class. 2,000 sheets means third class. If you have only a few scattered sheets here and there, then you don't count at all.*

Instructions to propagandists in 1958.

Propaganda was at every corner. Roadside loudspeakers broadcast radio programmes reporting the latest successes of the Communist reform programmes as well as advice on how to be neat, how to cook sweet potatoes, where not to spit and how to defeat American imperialists. All newspapers were controlled by the Communist Party. The government made propaganda films. During the Korean War, propagandists competed with each other to get the most people to see the government's anti-American film *Resist-America, Aid-Korea*.

One aim of propaganda was to expose anyone who might oppose Communist rule. Foreigners, missionaries or businessmen who might spread anti-Communist ideas were forced to leave the country. If Chinese people showed resistance to the deluge of propaganda, they were seen as opponents and the pressure on them was increased. They would be denounced at accusation meetings. Party workers might set up loudspeakers outside their homes and yell out their alleged crimes all night. Most gave in under pressure. Those who did not were sent to labour camps to be re-educated, or were sent to live with the peasants to learn from their ways. Thousands were killed.

People learned to hide their true feelings. They learned to say and do what the Party wanted them to say and do. It was partly out of loyalty to Mao — who genuinely inspired ordinary Chinese people — yet partly out of fear of being singled out as anti-Communist. If Mao wanted them to work harder they worked harder. If he wanted them to accuse each other of crimes they did so. If Mao took a dislike to sparrows — which he did — the loyal Chinese people followed suit and waged a long battle against the sparrow.

SOURCE 12



A Beijing (Peking) students putting up revolutionary posters.



B A poster from the 1950s.

SOURCE 13



Workers entering a factory under a Maoist banner.

## The Great Leap Forward, 1958

In 1956 Mao announced a period of debate and reflection on how China was being run. He suggested that open debate would lead to better ways of running government. He said 'let a hundred flowers bloom', but he was then deeply upset when his government was bombarded with posters, speeches and books which criticised it. In June 1957 the Hundred Flowers period ended abruptly. Soon large numbers of critics were arrested, re-educated or lost their jobs.

Mao believed that China had become backward-looking again and needed a new revolution to inspire the people. In his words, China needed to make a Great Leap Forward. Instead of the vast industrial projects of the Five-Year Plan, he wanted ordinary people in the towns and villages to get involved in small-scale industry. The farmer's co-operatives were to be joined together as communes and each commune would have industrial as well as farming targets. The ordinary people would create a powerful industrial nation. In 15 years Chinese steel production would be equal to that of the UK.

The communes abolished private land and property altogether. Family life was replaced by shared canteens, barracks and dormitories. Within each commune were brigades of 600–1,000 people. Brigades were divided into teams of 50–200 who would plan and carry out the work which needed to be done.

Some members continued to work in the fields. Others mined coal or iron ore. Others smelted it in crude backyard furnaces. In the meantime their colleagues were building schools, hospitals and roads while others improved the land with irrigation or terracing projects. As with the co-operatives there was opposition and resistance but the process continued all the same. By the end of 1958 most Chinese citizens belonged to one of China's 40,000 communes.

Historians cannot agree whether the Hundred Flowers was:

- a genuine attempt to find out what people thought; or
- a devious way of flushing out the opposition.

What do you think?

### SOURCE 14

*Why can't 600 million poor people by their own efforts create a socialist country which is rich and strong? The wealth of society is created by the workers and the peasants, the working intellectuals. If they take their destiny in their own hands and energetically tackle their problems instead of evading them, there is no difficulty in the world they cannot overcome.*

Mao, speaking about the Great Leap Forward.

Explain in your own words what Mao is saying in Source 14.

### SOURCE 16



A peasant working a home-made grain thresher.

### SOURCE 15

A



B



Blast furnaces in a Chinese village built under the Great Leap Forward. A shows the furnaces being built. B shows them being used.



Chinese peasants digging terraces and terraced fields in China.

## SOURCE 18

*Dazhai is famous because of the way its 365 people have set an example by carving out terraced fields from steep, stony hillsides. They have done this through sheer hard work using only simple tools. Dazhai is very poor in many ways, but there is no doubt that it is progressing very fast. It has a special feeling about it.*

A report on the Dazhai Commune by Colin Mackerras who lived in China in the 1960s.

3. What impression do you get of the Great Leap Forward from Sources 14–17?
4. Draw up two lists showing the reasons for and the results of the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

## Focus Task

## Did Chinese people benefit from Communist rule?

Work in pairs.

One of you draw up a list of ways in which you think Chinese people benefited from Communist rule; the other list ways in which you think they did not benefit.

Compare the two lists, then write a balanced answer to the question above. You should include evidence from the sources of pages 10–17.

At first it appeared that the Great Leap Forward was another triumph for Mao. Steel production doubled in a year. But the Great Leap Forward was actually a disastrous failure. In 1960 Mao quarrelled with the new Soviet leader, Khrushchev, who then withdrew his advisers from China. The Chinese people were willing but they did not have the technical expertise to make the plan work. The massive amount of iron produced from the backyard furnaces turned out to be brittle, impure and almost unusable.

In farming the story was not much better. Peasants were forced to use methods tried elsewhere in the country, even though these methods did not suit their land. The commune system meant they no longer received more food or pay for working hard, so many people simply did less work and in the 1960s two years of serious drought set farming production in the communes back. Because of the Great Leap Forward there was a serious famine which, at the time, was covered up by the Chinese leadership but, according to recent calculations, caused at least 30 million Chinese people to starve to death between 1958 and 1962.

In later years even some of the apparent successes of the Great Leap Forward, such as the terracing at Dazhai (Source 18), were found to be a fraud. It was not actually the people of Dazhai who had terraced the rocky hills and dug the irrigation ditches. Dazhai had in fact been given millions of dollars in government aid and the help of thousands of soldiers. Dazhai's ever-increasing production figures were faked too. In fact production had gone down year by year.

This failure damaged and humiliated Mao. Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shao-qi edged him out of control of China. Mao remained Chairman of the Party but Deng and Liu were now in control. They reorganised the communes. They made them smaller. They handed land back to peasant ownership.