

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO
MAO

Mao Zedong's political career spanned more than half a century. The ideas he championed transformed one of the largest nations on earth and inspired revolutionary movements across the world. Even today, Mao lives on in China, where he is regarded by many as a near-mythical figure, and in the West, where a burgeoning literature continues to debate his memory. In this book, leading scholars from different generations and around the world offer a critical evaluation of the life and legacy of China's most famous – some would say infamous – son. In the first part, chapters explore the historical and political context of Mao's emergence as a young man and revolutionary in the early twentieth century. Through this period it is possible to examine the nature of Mao's ideology in its purest form and to see why it was attractive to so many. This part also chronicles the main events of his life and individual aspects of that life: his key relationships with allies and foes, his followers, and his public persona; his philosophy; and his relationship with women. In Part II, chapters debate the positive and negative aspects of his legacy. In China, Mao has become a metaphor for the promises and betrayals of the twentieth century; in developing countries, he remains a beacon of revolutionary hope for some; and in the West, Mao continues to be the mirror of our hopes and fears. This book brings the scholarship on Mao up to date, and its alternative perspectives equip readers to assess for themselves the nature of this mercurial figure and his significance in modern Chinese history.

Timothy Cheek is Professor and Louis Cha Chair in Chinese Research at the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia. His research, teaching, and translating focus on the recent history of China, especially the role of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century and the history of the Chinese Communist Party. He has written numerous papers and six books, including *Living with Reform: China Since 1989* (2006) and *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (2002).

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Edited by
Timothy Cheek
University of British Columbia, Vancouver



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About the Contributors

Geremie R. Barmé is Professor of History at The Australian National University, Canberra. His most recent book is *The Forbidden City* (2008). He codirected the documentary *Morning Sun* (Boston: Long Bow Group, 2003; www.morningsun.org) with Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon. He also edits the e-journal *China Heritage Quarterly* (www.chinaheritagequarterly.org).

Timothy Cheek is Professor and Louis Cha Chair in Chinese Research at the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia. His books include *Living with Reform: China Since 1989* (2006), *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions* (2002), *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China* (1997), and (with Roderick MacFarquhar and Eugene Wu) *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* (1989).

Alexander C. Cook is Assistant Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. His contribution to this book was written with the support of the Stanford Humanities Fellows. He is completing a book on justice in the post-Mao transition, *The Cultural Revolution on Trial*.

Delia Davin is currently Acting Director of the National Institute of Chinese Studies at White Rose East Asia Centre of the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield. She lived in China for three years in the 1960s and 1970s. She is the author of *Womanwork: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (1978), *Internal Migration in Contemporary China* (1999), and *Mao Zedong* (Essential biographies, History Press, 1997 and 2009).

Joseph W. Esherick is Professor of History and Hsiu Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and author of *Reform and Revolution in China: The 1911 Revolution in Hunan and Hubei* (1976), *Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (1986), and *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History* (2010).

Charles W. Hayford teaches history at Northwestern University. His first book, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (1990), investigated trans-Pacific liberalism. His current book project, *America's China: From the Opium War to Tiananmen*, traces the history of American images of China.

Hung-yok Ip is Associate Professor of East Asian History in the Department of History at Oregon State University. She is the author of *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China 1921–1959* (2005; paperback, 2009). In addition to examining

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Chinese communism, she also studies Maoism, nonviolence, and modern Chinese Buddhism.

Jiang Yihua is Professor of History at Fudan University, Shanghai, China, where he has served as Dean of the School of Humanities and leader of several research groups on historical studies. His several books include studies on historiography and history of thought, including studies on Kang Youwei, Zhang Binlin, and Hu Shi. His scholarly edition of readings from Mao Zedong (1998) was copublished in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Daniel Leese is Assistant Professor of Sinology at Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, Germany. In his Ph.D. dissertation, *Performative Politics and Petrified Image* (2006), he traced the evolution of the Cultural Revolutionary Mao cult. He is the editor of Brill's *Encyclopedia of China* (2009).

Roderick MacFarquhar is the Leroy B. Williams Professor of History and Political Science at Harvard University, where he has directed the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research and chaired the Government Department. He was the founding editor of the *China Quarterly* and is the author of the trilogy *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (1974, 1983, 1997) and, more recently, of *Mao's Last Revolution* with Michael Schoenhals (2006). In previous personae he was a print journalist, TV reporter, and member of Parliament in Britain.

Michael Schoenhals is Professor of Chinese in the Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Sweden. His publications include *Saltationist Socialism: Mao Zedong and the Great Leap Forward 1958* (1987) and, together with Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution* (2006).

Frederick C. Teiwes is Emeritus Professor of Chinese Politics at the University of Sydney. His works include *Politics and Purges in China* (1979, 1993), *Politics at Mao's Court* (1990), and, with Warren Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao* (1996), *China's Road to Disaster* (1999), and *The End of the Maoist Era* (2007). He wishes to thank the Australian Research Council for its generous support over many years.

Hans J. van de Ven is Professor of Modern Chinese History at Cambridge University. He has published *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party* (1992) and *War and Nationalism in China* (2003). His current research interest is the history of globalization in China in the 1850–1950 period.

Brantly Womack is the Cumming Memorial Professor of Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917–1935* (1982), *Politics in China* (with James Townsend) (1986), *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (2006), and *China Among Unequals: Asymmetric International Relationships in Asia* (forthcoming). Among his edited books are *Contemporary Chinese Politics in Historical Perspective* (1991) and *China's Rise in Historical Perspective* (2010).

Xiao Yanzhong is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science, School of International Relations, People's University, Beijing, China. His research focuses on political thought and the history of the Chinese Communist Party. He is editor, with Shi Zhongquan, of the book series *Guowai Mao Zedong yanjiu congshu* (Foreign Studies of Mao Zedong), from the People's University Press.

Preface

This is a critical introduction to Mao Zedong, China's most famous (or infamous) leader of the twentieth century and still a force to contend with today. Mao warrants such a guide not only because he was such a significant historical figure – the recognized leader of China's Socialist Revolution and architect of the disastrous Cultural Revolution – but also because the ideas associated with him transformed a huge nation and still form the grounds of political argument in China today, as well as inspiring revolutionary movements across the world, from Naxalites in South Asia to the Shining Path in South America (and the gruesome example of Pol Pot in Cambodia in the 1970s). The controversies surrounding recent biographies of Mao in the West highlight the continuing significance of Mao even in the distinctly nonrevolutionary societies of “the West.”

What this book offers is the benefit of the historian's perspective as addressed to the educated, nonspecialist reading public. How does one get beyond the partisan uses of Mao, whether by the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in the People's Republic of China (PRC) or by sensationalist journalists of varying stripes inside and outside China? A powerful way to understand the contingent and variable nature of the meanings attributed to Mao, Mao Zedong thought, and the Chinese Revolution is to see the living Mao in his historical context. To do this, we avail ourselves of the skills of historiography to filter out (to the degree possible) our later concerns and to recover something of the concerns of Mao's times. Thus this book begins with context, then turns to Mao's actions in context, and finally turns to an analysis of the meanings attributed to Mao out of those contexts. The book thus seeks to present the historical Mao and explicitly juxtapose that Mao with the very significant but importantly ahistorical Maos that so deeply concern millions of people across the globe today.

The two parts of the book are organized accordingly: Part I, Mao's World, and Part II, Mao's Legacy. The first chapter gives a broad outline of Mao's life and historical significance. It signals the major points of

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controversy concerning Mao. It considers how we know what we know about Mao (the problem of sources) and provides a brief tour of scholarship on Mao. It ends with some notes on strategies for reading Mao as an independent thinker – the first strategy being to get a sense of the context by reading the chapters that follow.

Part I, *Mao's World*, offers the contexts in which Mao emerged and then operated, focusing on Mao's political lifetime, from the 1920s to his death in 1976. Chapter 2 looks at the politics and historical pressures to which Mao's generation was a part. The next three chapters tell the story of his revolutionary career in both organizational activities and writings. The next four chapters of this part look at key relationships in the political praxis that defined Mao's career (and legacy): Mao and his followers, Mao Zedong thought and his propagandists, Mao and women, and finally, Mao the man and the icon. These four dynamics include the three key social groups raised in Chapter 2 (political/military leaders, intellectuals, and peasants) and set the stage for the continuing "uses of Mao" among China's leaders, China's opinion makers, and China's dispossessed classes (e.g., workers, women, and migrants, as well as poor farmers). Part II, *Mao's Legacy*, turns to the meanings assigned to Mao over the past three decades since his death. This section includes chapters dealing with China's Maos, third world Maos, Western Maos, and finally, the reflections of a senior scholar from China and from Western academia, respectively, on "the significance of Mao." We provide maps, a timeline, and a selective, annotated list of further reading.

The contributors are mostly senior academic specialists on Mao and modern China studies, although I have sought to include some junior colleagues reflecting newer perspectives. Although composed predominantly of historians, this list includes both other social science and humanities disciplines and some comparative perspectives to put Mao and the Chinese case into global perspective (especially Chapter 12). Additionally, we have included varying voices (or different viewpoints): by generation of scholars, by cultural location (Europe, the United States, China), and by gender. Although this does not cover the whole range of views and perspectives on Mao, it provides an indication of the diversity of such views.

The general reader will be offered in this book an engaging introduction to this mercurial and mythic figure, as well as a surer footing and useful information for understanding what Mao did and did not do during his life and the tools by which to improve her or his own reading of Mao's writing and actions. Readers thus may become their own public intellectuals when it comes to Mao and Maoism, able to assess the "authoritative" interpretations offered by scholars, journalists, and governments today.

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Stuart R. Schram, the doyen of Mao studies in the West. His work since the 1960s has shaped all our work on Mao, and whether or not we have agreed with this or that interpretation put forward by him, we have benefited from his writings and his example of careful scholarship. This book came about because Diana Lary at the University of British Columbia and Marigold Acland at Cambridge University Press conspired to hold me to my pronouncement that academics should take more effort to provide readable and reliable books on Mao and Chinese history. I thank them for doing that. The Cambridge University Press peer reviewers were helpful and demanding and improved the plan for this volume and sharpened the draft chapters. The contributors to this volume have been active participants in refining that plan and bringing you this final product. I benefited from criticism and feedback from the UBC China Studies Group, the New England China Seminar at the Fairbank Center, Harvard, the Visiting Scholars Seminar at the School of Social Work, City University of Hong Kong, and commentators at several talks that I gave elsewhere. Although several colleagues graciously reviewed parts of this book, on behalf of all the contributors, I particularly want to thank Joe Esherick for critical engagement above and beyond the call of duty and Delia Davin for irrepressible (and very helpful) editorial acumen. As ever, I am indebted to Nancy Hearst at the Fairbank Center Library, Harvard; because of her eagle eye the text is nearly error free. At UBC, the Centre for Chinese Research at the Institute of Asian Research and the College for Interdisciplinary Studies provided both a congenial home and research support, not least in the form of the services of my editorial RA, Ms. Heidi Kong, who helped with the pictures.

T.C., Vancouver, BC, July 2009

Timeline of Twentieth-Century China

- 1893** Mao born to a farming family in Hunan Province.
- 1895** China defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War.
- 1900** Boxer Rebellion and counterattack by foreign powers.
- 1905** Qing Dynasty ends the civil service exams.
- 1911** Republican revolution; fall of the Qing Dynasty.
- 1912** General Yuan Shikai replaces Sun Yat-sen as president of the republic.
- 1913** Sun Yat-sen founds the Guomindang (GMD), or Nationalist Party.
- 1915–25** New Culture Movement.
- 1919** May Fourth Movement in Beijing opposes the Versailles Treaty.
- 1921** Official founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Shanghai; Mao Zedong is one of the founding members.
- 1923** CCP and GMD cooperate in the first United Front; Mao then works in the GMD Propaganda Department and its Peasant Training Institute.
- 1925** Sun Yat-sen dies; Chiang Kai-shek eventually takes over the GMD.
- 1926** Northern Expedition under GMD leadership starts out from Guangzhou in southern China to reunify the country. Mao returns to Hunan to work in the countryside.
- 1927** Mao writes his “Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan.” Chiang Kai-shek turns against the CCP and in April massacres CCP activists. GMD forms a new national government and moves the capital of the Republic of China to Nanjing.
- 1930** Changsha uprising, led by Mao, fails; Mao moves to develop rural soviets.
- 1931** Japanese begin to occupy northeast China and will declare Manchukuo a separate country the next year. Formal establishment of the Jiangxi Soviet; Mao elected chairman of the soviet but is soon removed from top leadership.

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- 1931–34** Nationalist government launches five “encirclement campaigns” to destroy the CCP and Jiangxi Soviet; CCP survives the first four.
- 1934** Communists flee the Jiangxi Soviet; the retreat becomes the Long March.
- 1935** Mao regains a top leadership position in the CCP at the Zunyi conference during the Long March.
- 1936** Communists make their new capital at Yan’an, in the northwest province of Shaanxi.
- 1936–47** Yan’an period, during which Mao consolidates his supreme position and develops policies that lead to CCP victory in 1949.
- 1937** Japan invades China, beginning World War II in Asia.
- 1942–44** Yan’an Rectification Movement promotes Mao’s ideas and leadership.
- 1945** Japan formally surrenders to the Allies on September 9, ending World War II.
- 1945–49** Chinese Civil War between the CCP and GMD.
- 1949** CCP declares a new national government, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with Mao as its head.
- 1950** **February:** China and the Soviet Union sign the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance.
October: Chinese forces enter Korea, joining the Korean War.
- 1952** Land reform completed in most areas of China; national campaigns against corruption and bureaucratism (Three and Five Antis).
- 1955** First Five-Year Plan (1953–57) formally adopted to organize China’s planned economy. Nationwide mass campaign to criticize two intellectuals, Hu Shi and Hu Feng.
- 1956** Khrushchev denounces Stalin in the USSR. Mao calls for public criticism of the CCP in the Hundred Flowers Campaign, but the response is muted. CCP holds its Eighth Party Congress in Beijing; celebrates successes of the PRC.
- 1957** **February:** Mao delivers his speech “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” to boost the Hundred Flowers Campaign.
May: Hundred Flowers Campaign blooms, but with biting criticism of the CCP.
June: Anti-Rightist Movement attacks those who spoke up in the Hundred Flowers Campaign; Mao’s “Contradictions” speech is published in a highly edited form.
- 1958** CCP adopts Mao’s Great Leap Forward plan.

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- August:** Mao's talks at Beidaihe popularize collectivization of agriculture in the people's communes.
- 1959** **March:** Uprising in Tibet against Chinese rule is suppressed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).
April: Liu Shaoqi succeeds Mao as state president (Mao remains as party chairman).
August: Peng Dehuai criticizes the Great Leap Forward and is purged, showing that Mao can no longer be criticized, even by his senior colleagues.
- 1960** Soviet Union withdraws all experts from China. Famine deepens in China.
- 1961** CCP begins economic and political reforms to undo the damage of the Great Leap Forward.
- 1964** China explodes its atomic bomb.
- 1966** Cultural Revolution begins as an attack on Beijing party intellectuals but quickly spreads to the purge of senior party leaders, including, by 1967, Liu Shaoqi. Mao writes a big-character poster, "Bombard the Headquarters," to encourage Red Guard youths to attack "the four olds" and "to rebel is justified"; Red Guard terror begins.
- 1969** Mao declares the "victory" (that is, end) of the Cultural Revolution and supports Marshal Lin Biao as his new successor; radical policies – and urges – continue.
- 1971** **July:** U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger secretly visits Beijing.
September: Lin Biao dies in a plane crash while trying to escape Mao's secret police; he is formally denounced.
October: China joins the United Nations, leading to expulsion of Taiwan.
- 1972** U.S. president Richard Nixon visits China.
- 1976** **January:** Zhou Enlai, the highest ranking moderate in the CCP, dies.
September: Mao Zedong dies.



Map 1. China today.

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Map 2. Key locations in Mao's life.

Notes on Map 2

1. Shaoshan: Mao's Birthplace.
2. Changsha: Where Mao went to school and later worked in the Hunan Normal School. Also the site of Mao's abortive Autumn Harvest uprising.
3. Jinggangshan: The original safe haven in Jiangxi Province that Mao and others fled to after the failed uprising of 1927.
4. Ruijin: The capital of the Jiangxi Soviet.
5. Zunyi: The site of the conference in 1935 where Mao began his rise to supreme power in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
6. Yan'an: The communist headquarters after the Long March and throughout the war against Japan.
7. Xi'an: The site of Chiang Kai-shek's kidnapping by the northern warlords, which led to creation of the second United Front.
8. Beijing: China's capital before the collapse of the empire in 1911 and once again after the Revolution.
9. Wuhan: Birthplace of the 1911 Revolution and site of intramilitary conflict at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Also briefly twice China's capital under the Guomintang, first as they moved north before taking Nanjing and later as they fled Nanjing after the Japanese invasion.
10. Nanchang: Site of a doomed communist uprising in 1927.
11. Guangzhou (Canton): The Guomintang's headquarters after Yuan Shikai ignored the national election result in 1912. The scene of many bitter battles during the 1920s. Also the site of a short-lived commune after the communist uprising in December 1927.
12. Nanjing: Capital of China after the 1911 Revolution and again after the Guomintang established a new national government after the Northern Expedition in 1927. Site of the Rape of Nanjing after the Japanese invasion and of the puppet regime of Wang Jingwei under Japanese control.
13. Chongqing: Became the Guomintang's base during the war against Japan.
14. Taipei: The capital of the Guomintang's Republic of China from 1949 to the present day.
15. Shanghai: China's major commercial center and one of the centers of radicalism during the Cultural Revolution. The base of the radical Maoists in power in the Cultural Revolution.
16. Hangzhou: Another site of radical leftism. Site of a number of important conferences and meetings at the outset of the Cultural Revolution.