

INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 1949, standing before the crowds on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Mao Zedong declared the founding of a state, the People's Republic of China (PRC). As he did so, the armed forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were pressing home the advantage in the civil war against the Nationalist Guomindang (GMD). As the official version of Chinese history would have it, all the struggles of the Chinese people for liberation from feudalism and imperialism culminated in this moment in a final victory led by the glorious Communist Party.

The Mao era began with the founding of the PRC and ended with death of the chairman in 1976. During these twenty-seven years, society was “turned upside down.” Millions of people experienced social upward mobility, while others were marginalized or lost their lives. Efforts to build a communist society created hopes, dreams, fear, enthusiasm, disillusion, painful disappointments and nostalgia. The Chinese people made great strides, but they also experienced traumatic setbacks.

When the CCP came into power, China was in a desperate position. The war with Japan (1937–1945) and the subsequent civil war between the Communists and Nationalists had had a devastating impact on economy and society.¹ The GMD government had been too weak to re-establish effective control over national territory, due to the influence of foreign powers. At its height in the eighteenth century, the Qing Empire (1644–1911) had been a global economic power, but in the aftermath of the Opium War of 1840, it had proved unable to prevent a semi-colonization of the country by Western powers and Japan. With the revolution of 1911 and the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, China became a republic. However, prior to the founding of the PRC, central governments were able to exercise control only over parts of the Han Chinese heartland, ceding control of peripheral regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

¹ For detail see: Diana Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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The CCP promised to reunify the nation and to alleviate a deepening social crisis. In 1949, China was one of the poorest countries in the world.² The national census of 1953 recorded an average life expectancy of forty years.³ China was still an agrarian society, with the vast majority of the population both rural and illiterate. The urbanization rate in 1949 was as low as 10.6 percent.⁴ The CCP saw industrialization as the key task in the struggle to overcome poverty and backwardness. A strong new China was to be built, one that would be able to survive in a hostile international environment.

In the first half of the 1950s, the communist government launched a transformation of land ownership structures. Landlords and capitalists were expropriated. By 1956, China had established a Soviet-style planned economy based on state industries in the cities and agricultural cooperatives in the countryside. The party promised to “serve the people” and to improve the lives of workers and peasants – the new “masters of the country.” In 1958, the CCP launched the Great Leap Forward, promising industrialization in double quick time. Instead, over-ambitious plans resulted in a great famine that killed millions of peasants between 1959 and 1961. By 1963, the country had recovered, but the party was divided as to which road of development should be taken. What followed, the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, remains to this day the most controversial period of the Mao era. In autumn 1966, Mao called on the masses to rebel against so-called “capitalist roaders inside the party.” Millions of students and workers founded independent rebel organizations to attack the local government bureaucracies accused of acting against the interests of the masses. Cadres were paraded through the streets and criticized at sometimes deadly “struggle meetings.” By 1967, fighting between different rebel factions had left several provinces in a state of virtual civil war, and Mao was forced to send in the army to restore stability.

For some in China today, the Cultural Revolution was a justified attempt to discipline bureaucrats and to find new forms of mass democracy. Others see in it little besides the brutal destruction of China’s traditional culture and civilization. By the time of Mao’s death in 1976, the country had partly industrialized and an impressive railway network had been built. Basic education, public health care, average life expectancy and women’s rights had all seen significant improvements. The United States and other Western capitalist countries had recognized

2 Cormac O’Grada, “Great Leap into Famine: A Review Essay,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2011), pp. 192–193.

3 Andrew Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 320–321.

4 Lu Yu, *Xin Zhongguo renkou wushi nian* (Beijing: Zhongguo renkou chubanshe, 2004), Vol. 1, p. 633.

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the PRC as a state. But it remains a matter of debate whether the human cost of development in Maoist China, such as the Great Famine, can be said to have outweighed the achievements over which the regime presided.

Between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, as the decolonization of the Global South continued apace, Maoist China emerged as a powerful inspiration for national and social liberation movements. China played an important role in the so-called “Non-Aligned Movement,” composed mainly of former colonies such as India, Indonesia and Egypt. The Cultural Revolution also served as an imaginary space for various movements of the New Left in the United States, Western Europe and Japan, both before and after the explosion of social and political activism that rocked cities across the world in 1968. The Cultural Revolution in China was seen as a revolt of the youth against Establishment forces opposed to revolutionary change. For millions of people around the globe, Maoist China represented the promise of a better and truly socialist society, as well as an alternative to the bipolar Cold War order represented by the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵ More brutal elements of the Chinese reality – the Great Famine, the mass killings of “class enemies,” mostly members of the former elites – were either little heard of or simply ignored.

By the late 1970s, the liberation movements of the postcolonial world had fallen into abeyance. In place of “Arab Socialism” or “African Socialism,” the neoliberal economic policies advanced by the World Bank under the aegis of the US and Western Europe became *de rigueur*. Under their influence, governments began programs of privatization in welfare and industry and deregulation in the financial sector. China itself became a global trend-setter in turning away from its revolutionary past. In the early 1980s, a new leadership under Deng Xiaoping condemned the Cultural Revolution and many other policies of the Mao era. The Chinese regime now launched a policy of Reform and Opening (*gaige kai-fang*), promoting market reforms including privatization. The state still retained control over sectors of strategic importance such as finance, raw materials, national defense industries and land ownership. But the period of “permanent revolution” and mass mobilization came to an end in the Deng era. China reintegrated itself into the global capitalist economy, becoming “the workshop of the world” in the 1990s. For the Chinese party-state, calls for world revolution gave way to the rules of free trade, global capitalism and the institutions that went with it.

Today, China’s economic power is challenging Western dominance. The CCP has not entirely abandoned the Chinese revolution and the Mao era: Chinese

⁵ For case studies see: Alexander C. Cook (ed.), *Mao’s Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Figure 0.1: A demonstration during the Cultural Revolution celebrates the overthrow of Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Tao Zhu, circa 1967.
 Source: Collection Jean Moser, Gymnasium Leonhard, Basel.

President Xi Jinping has argued that people should not use the Mao era to discredit the Reform era or vice versa.⁶ Dissidents and the Western media often warn that China under Xi could return to Maoism.⁷ At the other end of the political spectrum in China, Neo-Maoists hope for a new Cultural Revolution in which the masses will be mobilized to overthrow “corrupt bureaucrats” and “capitalist roaders.” China is still far from a consensus on evaluating the Mao era.

This book approaches the Mao period from a new angle, focusing on three key elements: social change, classification and conflict. Before turning to these issues, we will first consider recent developments in the field of PRC history, particularly changes around access to archives in China. I will also reflect briefly on the methodological challenges, different approaches and controversies that face historians of Maoist China.

⁶ Wei Riping, “Zhidaosixiang shangde ‘liangjian’: Shibada yilai Xi Jinping guanyu Mao Zedong sixiang zhidao diwei de zhongyao sixiang shulun,” <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2014/0814/c85037-25467371-2.html>, (accessed June 26, 2017).

⁷ For example see, “The Return of Mao: A New Threat to China’s Politics,” *Financial Times*, September 29, 2016.

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The Mao Era as History

Countless popular and academic books on Mao Zedong have appeared in the last four decades. Within this vast body of material, a number of important new histories of elite politics stand out.⁸ The most innovative academic research on Maoist China in recent years, however, has focused not on the “Great Helmsman” himself, but on particular aspects of Chinese society and on individual case studies. The current generation of scholars has benefited from better access to archives and the ability to record oral testimony from living witnesses. Some scholars have begun to make use of so-called “garbage materials” (*laji ziliao*). These documents, bought in old paper or second hand book markets, include a wealth of material for the creation of micro-histories, such as petition letters, personal files, diaries or outsourced archival files, all of which were considered “waste” by archivists or private owners. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars have been able to publish important books from within the PRC or, for more sensitive topics, in Hong Kong. The new sources at their disposal have enabled these authors to ask important new questions.

In the West, too, the Mao era has become something of a hot topic in China studies. In both the United States and Germany, the number of PhD candidates working on this era continues to increase. 2013 saw the foundation of the PRC History Group and a website devoted to the topic (www.prchistory.org), drawing on an international network of scholars. Thus the study of the Mao era, long dominated by political scientists and focused on the central leadership, has opened up more and more to the work of historians. That new research, by both Western and Chinese colleagues, informs much of the discussion in this book.

A New Approach to Social History: Change, Classification and Conflicts

This book presents a social history of Maoist China, focusing on class, gender, ethnicity and the urban–rural divide. I analyze the experiences of a range of social groups under CCP rule – workers, peasants, local cadres, intellectuals, “ethnic minorities,” members of the old elites, men and women – across three key areas.

8 For example: Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Fredrick Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics during the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972–1976* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007); Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

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The first key dimension I identify is **social change**, by which I mean the transformation of economic and ownership structures, urbanization, social mobility, state-directed and self-organized migration, rationing systems, expansion and downsizing of the socialist welfare state and changes in family and gender relations.

A second important dimension in this context is **classification**. How did the party-state structure society by assigning official labels of urban or rural under the household registration (*hukou*) system? What was the impact of other labels – of class status, gender and ethnicity – applied by the state to almost every Chinese citizen? These complex intersecting systems of official classification determined social hierarchies, distribution of jobs and food, access to higher education and party or army membership.

The final dimension on which my analysis rests is **conflict**. Under Mao, conflicts (both within the party and in society at large) emerged partly in response to fundamental social changes, but also in relation to official systems of classification and distribution. Whether at the central or local level, the party-state played a crucial role in assigning labels and served as a “gatekeeper” regulating social mobility. In this context, how the various levels of the CCP understood the state of Chinese society and interpreted its developments and conflicts becomes an essential question.

Mao’s own decisions and judgments had an undeniable impact across all three of these areas, and no social history can be complete without some reference to his ideas and writings. Nevertheless, Mao himself, either as a charismatic leader or an innovative Marxist-Leninist theorist, is not the focus of this book. Important sources beyond the Chairman’s writings include decisions of central government and party organs, internal reports, statistics, official newspapers and numerous databases and files from county archives. Moving beyond official circles, I also make extensive use of a series of interviews conducted in China between 2001 and 2016 with intellectuals in Beijing, peasants in Henan province and Cultural Revolution-era rebels in Shandong and Shanxi. Published and unpublished memoirs, if used with caution, can further enrich our picture of the experiences of ordinary men, women and children.

The past few decades have seen a shift in approaches to the role of the Chinese people in their own recent history. Against the backdrop of the emerging Cold War in the 1950s, Western scholars tended to see China as a totalitarian society in which the CCP exercised total control over its people. Observers described a Chinese society populated by “blue ants,” a homogeneous, Mao-suit-wearing mass blindly following orders from above.⁹ Official propaganda promoted a similar picture of natural unity between the ruling party and the laboring masses.

⁹ George Paloczi-Horvath, *Mao Tse-tung: Emperor of the Blue Ants* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1962).

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Figure 0.2: Larger than life: Heroes of the People's Liberation Army around 1966/1967.
 Source: Collection Jean Moser, Gymnasium Leonhard, Basel.

Access to more varied sources has brought a different picture to light, unearthing practices of “everyday resistance” such as under-reporting, fraud, theft, black markets and illegal migration.¹⁰ Over-emphasis on these practices, however, can result in a narrative that portrays ordinary people mainly as resistance fighters against the party-state. In fact, in many cases people willingly adopted state policies or the language of class, either to promote their own interests in negotiations with agents of the state or simply to protect their position.¹¹ Cooperation with the party stemmed from a range of motives, varying from enthusiastic support to opportunism to fear. Ordinary Chinese people in the 1950s and the younger generation involved in the early Cultural Revolution related to the socialist project in widely varying ways, from optimistic hopes and dreams to disillusion and perhaps even apathy. “Everyday resistance” was not the only game in town.

The Limits of Written and Oral Sources

Research on the Mao era still presents considerable challenges, and it is essential to retain an awareness of the limitations we face. Students of the Mao era must

¹⁰ The most detailed study is: Gao Wangling, *Zhongguo nongmin fan xingwei yanjiu, 1950–1980* (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2013).

¹¹ Zhang Xiaojun, “Land Reform in Yang Village – Symbolic Capital and the Determination of Class Status,” *Modern China*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2004), pp. 41–42.

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keep in mind that we are working on an authoritarian state that has persisted without regime change right through to the present day. In this regard, the conditions under which research is conducted differ from those prevailing in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe. In China, official collections of party documents and speeches by central leaders are still carefully selected and edited. Biographies of party leaders have been published based on files from the State Archives Administration (the Central Archive in Beijing), but no academic outside the central government has ever seen the original documents.¹² The Central Archive is not open to Chinese scholars, let alone Western academic researchers. Furthermore, all public archives in China are part of the state bureaucracy. According to the national Archives Law, documents are theoretically open to the public after thirty years, but files can be reclassified at any time if authorities consider a topic sensitive. In general, local archives at the city or county level are much easier to access than those at the provincial level, and one scholar has argued that the archival landscape in China is in fact quite diverse, with county archives sometimes failing to handle files according to strict legal procedure.¹³ Nevertheless, access to documents at the local level depends on timing, personal connections and occasionally coincidence. Who is in the office on a given day can often be decisive.

This issue of archival accessibility has a considerable influence over the local case studies that eventually make their way into the academic literature. Western and Chinese research on the history of the PRC, at least that based on written sources, has tended to focus most strongly on the early 1950s and on Shanghai. The preponderance of studies in these areas is a more or less direct result of two phenomena. First, archivists overwhelmingly see the early 1950s as the “golden years” of the PRC, treating them far less sensitively than later periods such as the famine or the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, in Shanghai, the local Municipal Archives gained a well-earned reputation for being the most professional and most open institution in China to foreign researchers. This ready access to materials went hand in hand with the development of the so-called “Shanghai school,” consisting mainly of scholars from Fudan University and East China Normal University, who focused primarily on local social history.¹⁴ Historians in Beijing, by contrast, have generally been more involved with national and official party history.

¹² For example: Jin Chongji (ed.), *Mao Zedong zhuan (1949–1976)* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003), two volumes.

¹³ The most detailed study is: Vivian Wagner, *Erinnerungsverwaltung in China: Staatsarchive und Politik in der Volksrepublik* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2006).

¹⁴ See a book series with over two dozen volumes: *Shanghai chengshi shehui shenghuoshi congshu* (Shanghai Cishu chubanshe).

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Figure 0.3: Shanghai, 1974.
Source: Photograph by Olli Salmi.

The uneven availability of archival documents has produced a local history of the PRC dominated by Shanghai, which for all its interest is hardly a representative sample. In 1949 Shanghai was China's most important industrial city, with a degree of Western influence on its culture and commerce that was unique across the country. Only limited academic research has been conducted on the history of the Mao era for those living away from the coastal urban centers in provinces such as Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Guizhou, Guangxi or Tibet. The state has published a range of official provincial and county chronicles, but these documents give us only the official narrative of the CCP, and the information they provide on events such as the famine or the Cultural Revolution is unsurprisingly limited. Local academic institutions, meanwhile, generally lack the resources and standing to produce their own research on the more sensitive topics of the Mao era.

My own experience suggests that the years between the mid-1990s and 2012 were somewhat easier for research on the early PRC. Access to local archives was relatively open in this period, while in its early years an abundant supply of supposedly worthless "garbage materials" was available on the open market. In recent years, prices for "garbage materials" or Red Guard magazines have increased markedly as traders have become aware of their growing value. Meanwhile, the ascent of Xi Jinping since 2013 has coincided with increasing restrictions on access to local archives. Many files that were previously open to

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the public are now no longer available. (In this book, I do not give archival numbers for files in footnotes where it cannot be tracked down which employee of an archive provided the document.) Historians of the Mao era based in the PRC are under renewed political pressure to steer clear of sensitive topics, and only a few PhD candidates in China now dare to work on the period. The unintended result of tighter controls in China is that collections outside the PRC – the Chinese Service Center of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for instance, or the research libraries of Harvard, Stanford and Berkeley – are becoming more valuable. It is now increasingly common to encounter Chinese scholars who have to travel to these institutions to access material from their homeland.

On the other hand, the past twenty years have seen Western and Chinese scholars of the Mao period gain access to rich new sources of history, including oral history, memoirs and published and unpublished diaries. Until the early 1990s, Western scholars seeking insight into mainland society would travel frequently to Hong Kong to interview refugees and migrants from neighboring Guangdong province.¹⁵ Since the 2000s, however, it has become much easier to conduct interviews in Chinese villages or cities without state supervision. Eyewitnesses have also found new ways to circulate their views on history online, and many who cannot find an official publisher in the PRC will copy and distribute their memoirs as self-printed books or publish them in Hong Kong if they have the money. These written memoirs tend to be the product of retired cadres and intellectuals working in urban settings, but they remain valuable nevertheless.

For the large, mainly rural parts of the Chinese population that were illiterate in the 1950s and 1960s, oral history is often the only means by which people's sense of their own lives can be recovered. Needless to say, memories recounted in interviews decades after the event are subject to influence by later personal experiences and change of narratives or political trends. The impact of the present on the narration of the past always has to be part of the analysis: it is not possible to isolate an event from the history and social identity of the eyewitness, and official narratives also have an impact on people's sense of their personal encounters with historical events. During the campaigns of the Mao era, elderly people were called on to "speak bitterness" (*suku*), recalling the indignities of the past in order to praise the socialist present. Several scholars have noted that the techniques of "speaking bitterness" tend to seep into the ways ordinary people today describe other incidents in their lifetime.¹⁶ The selective

15 For example: Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

16 Charlene Makley, "Speaking Bitterness": Autobiography, History, and Mnemonic Politics on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 47 (2005), pp. 40–78; Guo Yuhua, *Shoukuren de jiangshu: Jicun lishi yu yizhong wenming de luoji* (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2013).