

# The consolidation of the Communist State, 1949–55

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## The People's Republic of China (1949–2005)

## Introduction

The Civil War between the nationalist Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had resumed in 1945, shortly after the defeat of Japan. By the end of 1948, it was clear that the GMD were losing that civil war. In January 1949, the GMD suffered a massive defeat that allowed the CCP's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to take Beijing in April. Further Communist successes led Jiang Jieshi to flee – with China's entire gold reserves – to the Chinese island of Taiwan (known as Formosa at the time).

On 1 October 1949, Mao and the Communists held a massive rally in Beijing, at which a crowd of 300 000 heard them announce the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, Jiang – who still claimed to be the true leader of China – called Taiwan the 'Republic of China', and threatened to overthrow the recently proclaimed PRC in the very near future. Thus, despite having won the Civil War, the CCP's most immediate challenge was how to consolidate their new state. To do this, they quickly launched a series of political measures, along with several economic and social reforms.

## TIMELINE

**1949 Sep:** CPPCC meets and agrees Common Programme

**Oct:** The People's Republic of China (PRC) is established with Mao as its chairman

**1950 Jan:** Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance with USSR

**Apr:** Marriage Law

**Jun:** Start of Korean War; Agricultural Reform Law

**Jul:** Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign is launched

**1951 Aug:** The Three-Anti campaign is launched

**1952 Jan:** The Five-Anti campaign is launched; all political parties except CCP are banned

**Nov:** State Planning Commission established to draw up First Five-Year Plan

**1953 Mar:** Election Law

**1954 Feb:** Purge of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi

**Sep:** New constitution is adopted

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**1955 Mar:** Start of Sufan Movement

**May:** Start of new campaign against intellectuals

**Jul:** Mao's 'High tide of socialism' announcement

**Oct:** Move to APCs rapidly stepped up

### KEY QUESTIONS

- How did the Communists establish their political rule in the years 1949–55?
- What were the main economic policies during the period 1949–55?
- What social reforms did the Communists implement during the years 1949–55?

## Overview

- The CCP's sudden victory in 1949 meant it had no firm proposals for a new constitution. At first, it established a United Front approach, based on cooperation with elements who had not been strong GMD supporters and had not collaborated with the Japanese.
- A Consultative Committee, with representatives from several smaller parties, drew up a Common Programme and appointed a coalition government. But the CCP dominated, and their PLA was used to help re-establish central control.
- A series of 'rectification campaigns' against 'counter-revolutionary' elements – including some members of the CCP – was used to establish the CCP's political control so that it could create a 'New' China.
- Early measures included land reform that ended the domination of traditional rural élites and distributed land to the peasants. Many landlords were executed following 'speak bitterness' meetings.
- In industry, the largest firms were nationalised but, until 1952, the government cooperated with smaller owners to help build a 'national capitalism'.

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- In 1953, the CCP launched moves towards socialism. With help from the USSR, a Five-Year Plan was launched – this resulted in joint private-state ownership of industries, and the creation of cooperatives in rural areas. From 1955, these developments were extended.
- Social reforms included laws to give women equal rights; improve working conditions and employment benefits for industrial workers; and develop education and health provision – especially in rural areas.



**Figure 2.1:** Mao Zedong announces the creation of the People's Republic of China in Beijing on 1 October 1949. The man to his left is Liu Shaoqi, one of the Deputy Chairmen of the CCP.

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## 2.1 How did the Communists establish their political rule in the years 1949–55?

In many respects, the CCP enjoyed more favourable conditions in 1949 than those Lenin and the Bolsheviks had faced in Russia in 1917 for consolidating their revolutionary victory, and for establishing the necessary preconditions for the eventual transition to socialism. In particular, as most of China's old state bureaucracy had been destroyed by war and civil war before 1949, the CCP had the opportunity to create new political institutions to secure the future of their revolution.

### SOURCE 2.1

Whereas the Bolsheviks were forced to wage a materially and spiritually debilitating civil war after the October Revolution, in China the civil war had been fought and won during the revolutionary years; when the Communists established state power in 1949, they faced only scattered counter-revolutionary resistance. Moreover, decades of revolutionary struggle had permitted the Communists to develop their own organizational forms and administrative structures and had provided them with considerable governmental experience and many experienced administrators; they were thus much less dependent on the bureaucratic apparatus left over from the old regime than the Bolsheviks had been. And perhaps most significantly, the Chinese Communists came to power with far greater popular support than had their Russian predecessors, especially, of course, in the countryside where 80 per cent of the Chinese people lived; unlike Lenin, Mao was not confronted with the problem of a hostile peasantry in a largely agrarian society.

*Meisner, M. 1999. Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic. New York, The Free Press, pp.57–8*

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**The People's Republic of China (1949–2005)****QUESTION**

What, according to Source 2.1, were the advantages the Chinese Communists enjoyed in 1949, when they began constructing their new China?

**The New Democracy**

The sudden collapse of the GMD regime in 1949 had taken the CCP by surprise. This is one of the reasons why it had no formal document to propose as a new constitution – in the end, the new constitution did not appear until 1954. At first, the CCP announced its intention – in the spirit of the ‘United Front’ approach – to form a coalition government with several smaller parties.

**The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference**

In September 1949, before the formal proclamation of the PRC, the CCP called a Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing. The 662 delegates included delegates of the Left GMD (a more radical section that had broken away from Jiang's GMD in 1927), along with some representatives of small democratic political groups. However, as Source 2.2 shows, GMD members who had supported Jiang, and those who had collaborated with the Japanese invaders, were excluded. Significantly, though, the proceedings of the CPPCC were clearly dominated by the Communists.

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### SOURCE 2.2

Although its military units were taking control of the key towns and cities, the senior leadership of the Chinese Communist Party was working to establish its political authority and attempting to make common cause with political, religious and intellectual leaders who were not committed to supporting the Guomindang Nationalists. This reflected the United Front policy which characterised the early years of the People's Republic but which began to disintegrate in 1956 when Mao became aware of the depths of distrust that many educated Chinese felt for his government. The first instrument of the United Front policy was the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference..., usually referred to by its initials, CPPCC. The conference opened on 21 September 1949 in one of the halls of the Forbidden City in Beijing and closed on 30 September... The United Front Bureau of the CCP had contacted potential sympathisers and had organised a Preparatory Committee for the CPPCC. This committee... was given the responsibility of setting the date and time for the meeting, drawing up an agenda and drafting a Common Programme..., the first statement of national policy under the new Communist government.

*Dillon, M. 2012. China: A Modern History. London. I. B. Tauris. pp.261–2*

The CPPCC passed the Organic Law of the People's Central Government of the People's Republic of China (see Source 2.3). Mao was elected as Chairman of the Republic (head of state), and a coalition Government Administrative Council (GAC) was elected to rule China until a new constitution had been drafted and adopted. Mao then appointed **Zhou Enlai** as the new China's first premier (prime minister).

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**SOURCE 2.3**

## CHAPTER 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS

ARTICLE 1. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference... is the organization of the democratic United Front of the entire Chinese people. Its aim is to unite all democratic classes and all nationalities throughout China by establishing the unity of all democratic parties and groups and people's organizations. This will enable them to put forward their combined efforts in carrying out New Democracy, opposing imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, overthrowing the reactionary rule of the Guomindang, eliminating open and secret remnant counter-revolutionary forces. It will also enable them to heal the wounds of war, rehabilitate and develop the people's economic, cultural and educational work, consolidate national defence, and unite with all nations and countries which treat us on a footing of equality. All this is for the express purpose of establishing and consolidating an independent, democratic, peaceful, unified, prosperous and strong People's Republic of China of the People's Democratic Dictatorship, led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.

*Extract from 'The Organic Law of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference', Beijing, 29 September 1949. Quoted in: Mimmack, B., Senés, D. and Price, E. 2010. Authoritarian and Single-Party States. Harlow. Pearson. p. 157*

**Zhou Enlai (1898–1976):**

Zhou Enlai worked closely with Mao, and was premier (prime minister) from 1949 to 1976. Zhou played important roles in the economy (where he mainly supported Deng Xiaoping's ideas) and in foreign policy (until 1958, he was also foreign minister, favouring 'peaceful coexistence' with the West). During the Cultural Revolution, his attempts to moderate the more violent activities of the Red Guards (see Chapter 4) made him a popular and much-respected leader – his death in 1976 led to thousands of ordinary Chinese showing their respect in huge demonstrations.



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### QUESTION

In the context of China in 1949, what was meant by the term 'Democratic Dictatorship', mentioned in Source 2.3?

### The Common Programme

The CPPCC also passed the Common Programme – parts of which can be seen in Source 2.4. This announced that the new government of China would be a 'People's Democratic Dictatorship': a democracy for the majority of the population, but a dictatorship for 'reactionaries' who had exploited the people before 1949 and who remained opposed to the new China.

#### SOURCE 2.4

The People's Republic of China strives for independence, democracy, peace unity... prosperity, and the strength of China... It must systematically transform ... the land ownership system into a system of peasant land ownership... It must steadily transform the country from an agricultural into an industrial one... The people shall have freedom of thought, speech, publication, assembly, religious belief and the freedom of holding processions and demonstrations. The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men.... All nationalities in the People's Republic shall have equal rights and duties...

The People's Republic of China shall suppress all counter-revolutionary activities, severely punish all Guomindang counter-revolutionary war criminals and other leading counter-revolutionary elements... Feudal landlords, capitalists and reactionary elements in general shall be deprived of their political rights.

*Extracts from the Common Programme, quoted in Brooman, J., 1988. China Since 1900. Harlow, Longman. p.28*

### Theory of Knowledge

#### History, language and bias:

According to the Marxist political sociologist Ralph Miliband (1924–94), 'The term 'democracy', which is

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*always used to describe Western-style regimes, carries a strong ideological and propagandist charge...* So is it possible for historians to arrive at a common definition of 'democracy' that is not influenced by cultural values? Does 'democracy' refer only to political aspects such as multi-party parliamentary systems, with regular elections? Or – as Sources 2.3 and 2.4 seem to suggest – does democracy also depend on other additional factors, such as a general equality of social conditions (including income, wealth, and education and health opportunities) between citizens?

## Government, the CCP and the PLA

The new Government Administrative Council (GAC) (known as the State Council after 1954) had a Central Military Commission, answerable to the National People's Congress, to oversee the military. However, as with other civil government structures and posts, the CCP also had its own Military Affairs Commission, which was accountable to the Party's Central Committee.

Given the Party's predominating influence, this dual government and Party oversight over the PLA gave the CCP, in practice, overall control. This Party control was further increased by the fact that, in 1949, the PLA was led by **Zhu De**, who was one of Mao's firmest supporters.

**Zhu De (1886–1976):**

He joined the CCP while in Germany in the early 1920s, and was a close supporter of Mao from 1928. As chairman of the Central Revolutionary Military Commission, he was largely responsible for the Red Army's military organisation during the Civil War, eventually becoming its Commander-in-Chief. He retained this position in the re-named People's Liberation Army from 1949 until 1954; in 1955, he became one of the PLA's ten Marshals. Although he remained loyal to Mao, his refusal to strongly condemn Peng Dehuai at the Lushan Conference in 1959 (see Chapter 3) led to the loss of several of his positions. In 1969, during the Cultural Revolution, he was temporarily purged but Zhou's support meant he was not imprisoned. In 1973, he was rehabilitated.