

How did Mao Zedong's revolutionary war experience contribute to his failure to modernize and socialize China after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China?

Few figures have carved the course of a century as Mao Zedong did on 20th-century China. Few destinies carry such ambiguity.¹ To begin the study of his figure, care must be taken to place him in his time. The context that precedes him is a century of humiliation: defeats, foreign domination, and internal upheaval, heralding the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the rise of the Republic of China.

The political and military landscape that follows, shapes his revolutionary figure, from the founding of the Chinese Communist Party to the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949), marked by the endurance of the Long March (1934-1935), and the interruption by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).² The proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 seems to be the established threshold for how his place in history would come to be largely determined by his performance as ruler.³

This applies specifically to his failure to modernise and socialise China. The core hypothesis of this project establishes that his governance was the direct outcome of his experience of revolutionary war, and ultimately hindered it by his inability to abandon it for a new and different kind of thought relevant to the problems he faced after the proclamation of the PRC.

The aim of this research is to ground in a case study the cautionary tale that often escapes revolutionary leaders. They tend to create explosive upheavals in society in order to conquer power, and in doing so, shape the formation of the power structure that forms around them. The attraction of this structure is magnetic: the iron filings, the corruptible, the cult of personality...⁴ and corrosive to the governance that follows. The subsequent sections will provide a review of existing literature to analyze the military aspect of Mao Zedong's revolutionary frameworks, detail the methodology employed to examine how that experience pervaded his governance, present the findings and results to evaluate whether this influence proved beneficial or detrimental, and conclude with a discussion of their significance and overall impact.

While discussion about his political figure tends to polarise to either side of the spectrum: he's either a liberator or a harsher tyrant than Chiang Kai-shek had ever been,⁵ and debate is often tied to political divisiveness, most evidently in China, where re-examination of his legacy can lead to accusations of being anti-Chinese or anti-reform,⁶ it would be disingenuous to deny or diminish his place in the history of war and revolution.

His reformulation of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary war theory developed progressively and boldly over time. His confidence did not stem from radical ideology but was rather forged

¹ Stuart R. Schram, 'Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On: The Legacy of a Ruler', *The China Quarterly*, 137 (1994), (125-43), p. 125.

² Rebecca E. Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), ebook.

³ Ibid., p. 137.

⁴ 'The Lost Interview: Futuristic Meditations on the Messianic Leader', *Futures Past Editions*, 28 November 2013 <http://futurespast-editions.blogspot.com/2013/11/lost-interview-futuristic-meditations.html> [accessed 6 January 2025].

⁵ Schram, 'Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On', p. 125.

⁶ Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World*, ebook, p. ix.

through his revolutionary experience.⁷ Mao Zedong's revolutionary schemata stemmed from the belief, as he would later in his life concede, that revolutionary theory could have only one coherent framework: Marxist and Western, and the understanding that the practical reality would need to be specific to each nation's revolution: 'Marxism is a fundamental theory which was produced in the West. How then can we make a distinction between what is Chinese and what is Western in this respect?'⁸

From this framework, it not only follows the use of Clausewitz's theory for the conduct of war, specifically the role of geography in strategy: 'the influence of the mountains on the conduct of war is very great; the subject, therefore, is very important for theory',⁹ but also the concept of the people's war that took root in the Jinggang mountains. He believed that concern and respect for the peasantry was for the benefit of the revolution, and saw its rebellious potential as the driving force.¹⁰

Overall, his reformulation of revolutionary war theory had a coherent framework that was Western and Marxist in nature that manifested formally and specifically to the practical reality of China, developing a hybrid strategy that combined subversion, enemy depletion, and destruction into a single strategy of protracted people's war to be used in conjunction with the actions of the regular army. The stress was on political persuasion and irregular warfare.¹¹

He emphasized that their policy should rest on their own strength, meaning regeneration through one's own efforts: 'relying on the forces we ourselves organize, we can defeat all Chinese and foreign reactionaries'.¹² While also weakening and destroying the Nationalists' military strength, through mobile warfare and agitprop. Key tactics included psychological warfare, interrupting enemy communications, and capturing equipment, which was essential and the most effective way to acquire arms, ammunition, and manpower while demoralizing the enemy, disheartening their supporters, and boosting the morale of the Communists and their own base of support.¹³

The world he created after overthrowing the old order can't be evaluated without understanding his success at conquering it.¹⁴ His experience of revolutionary war caused his revolutionary schemata to bleed into his political one when the shift to governance happened. A structured analysis of his policies will provide further clarity on this.

The methodology employed in this research is a qualitative analytical approach, applied through a chronological lens to clearly distinguish the ideological shift in Mao's policies from early practical and reformist ones to more radical and disruptive campaigns.

His early policies, such as land redistribution and literacy campaigns had initial success in consolidating power and addressing inequalities that aligned with his revolutionary beliefs, but

⁷ Benjamin Elman, 'Can the Weak Defeat the Strong? Mao's Evolving Approach to Asymmetric Warfare in Yan'an', *The China Quarterly*, 240 (2019), (873-900) p. 899.

⁸ Schram, 'Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On', pp. 130-131.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ebook, p. 352.

¹⁰ Benjamin R. Young, 'Mountain Warriors: The Importance of Mountains in Mao's People's War Strategy', *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 29.2 (October 2022), (131-149) p. 131.

¹¹ John Smith, *The Military Strategies of Mao Zedong* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), p. 101.

¹² Mao, Tse-tung. *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung. Volume 4*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), ebook, p.20.

¹³ Smith, *The Military Strategies of Mao Zedong*, p. 101.

¹⁴ Schram, 'Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On', p. 137.

none of the policies developed continuously in one direction during his period.¹⁵ This is observable in the significant changes in the enrollment numbers from 1949 to 1978, as shown below.¹⁶

Table 1 <i>Student enrollment in formal education in the PRC, 1949-1978</i>			
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
1949			
# enrolled	24.4 million	1.04 million	117, 000
% of population	4.54 %	0.19 %	0.02 %
1953			
# enrolled	51.66 million	2.93 million	212, 000
% of population	8.77 %	0.51 %	0.04 %
1957			
# enrolled	64.28 million	6.28 million	441, 000
% of population	9.93 %	0.97 %	0.07 %

1960			
# enrolled	100 million	—	955, 000
% of population	14.58 %	—	0.14 %
1965			
# enrolled	116 million	14.4 million	674, 000
% of population	15.32 %	1.9 %	0.09 %
1972			
# enrolled	127 million	36 million	200, 000
% of population	14.45 %	4.1 %	0.02 %
1978			
# enrolled	146 million	65 million	850, 000
% of population	15.27 %	6.78 %	0.09 %

A universal coverage system started to develop in 1949 and created a low-cost, wide-coverage primary healthcare model, despite China's low income per capita at the time.¹⁷

The transformation and modernisation in a framework of economic, social, and political pluralism he envisioned for a new stage in China's development was soon repudiated for a Soviet-style industrialisation that would also be rejected. Too transitional, he considered them, not offering sufficient scope for the rapid and radical transformation to which he aspired. As he grew older, his self-image became more imperial, and he revelled in the privileges and the aura that surrounded him. He was and remained a Marxist.¹⁸

The problem during his last years was not that he abandoned Marxism as his guiding principle but that systematic thought was progressively superseded by feeling and impulse as the ground of his actions and policies.¹⁹

The impulse and the need for an 'eternal' revolution grounded his utopian vision of the 'leap into the future' of 1958. Thus, the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution occurred. The aims behind them were the acceleration of economic development in an unprecedented manner, and the destruction of bureaucracy and construction of collectivist communes, respectively. The death and suffering that resulted from these policies tore the fabric of Chinese society. The scale of loss was monumental, the estimates being some 30 million deaths.^{20 21}

¹⁵ Frank Crooks, *Mass Education in China under Mao* (MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 2010), p. 90.

¹⁶ Jan-Ingvar, Löfstedt. *Chinese Educational Policy: Changes and Contradictions, 1949–79*. London: Croom Helm; 1980. 215p. Table 1, Student Enrollment in Informal Education in the PRC, 1949-1978; p. 192-193.

¹⁷ Li, L., 'The Challenges of Healthcare Reforms in China', *Public Health*, 125.1 (2011), (6-8) p. 6.

¹⁸ Schram, 'Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On', pp. 130-132.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 134-137.

²¹ R.J. Rummel, *Power Kills: Democracy as a Solution to Violence* (University of Hawaii, 1997) <https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTE2.HTM> [accessed 6 January 2025].

In the end, his experience of revolutionary war became, in the words of Hu Qiaomu, ‘part of his heart, his spirit, his flesh and blood’, and he could not bring himself to abandon it. He was incapable of having a new and different kind of thought relevant to the problems he faced after the proclamation of the PRC, and consequently failed in his attempt to modernize and socialize China.

He did shake the core of the ancient, patriarchal, stratified order of China, jolting the Chinese out of their fatalistic acceptance of that order. His assertion: ‘Bu po, bu li!’ (there is no construction without destruction!) can help in the nuanced understanding of his figure: despite the monstrous cost of his reign, he might’ve moved the country forward into the emergence of new ideas and institutions.²² But the legacy is more akin to that of a modernising despot than that of an architect of progress.

As shown in this research, Mao Zedong’s experience in revolutionary war was both his greatest strength and his ultimate limitation. He brought forth change, but the methods in which he did so hindered his governance. His assertion: ‘there is no construction without destruction’ ultimately embodies his legacy of transformation and destruction.

²² Schram, ‘Mao Zedong a Hundred Years On’, p. 143.

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