

## Mao Zedong (1893-1976)

Person: Mao Zedong (1893-1976)

Author: Timothy Brook , University of Toronto

Date Entered: 2005-04-13

Description Mao Zedong was the founder of the People's Republic of China and its leader from 1949 until his death in 1976. Born to a peasant family, Mao underwent political radicalization at teacher's college and had already embraced Communism before the formal founding of the party in 1921. As its chairman from 1935 until his death, he was able to assert his political and intellectual dominance over the Chinese revolution.

Mao came under the intellectual sway of Marxism while working as a library assistant at Peking University in 1919. In nineteenth century Europe, Marxism was embraced as a doctrine that explained exploitation in terms of class struggle. In Asia, it gained its appeal by explaining colonial exploitation in terms of imperialism as the final stage of capitalism. China was not colonized as other regions of Asia were, but it came under Western hegemony through gunboat diplomacy and the "unequal treaties," producing a condition that Mao and others called "semi-feudalism, semi-colonialism." In his early writings, Mao featured class as the key analytical category for understanding China's "feudal" condition, but he later shifted his attention to colonialism as the key inhibitor of China's autonomy and economic development.

Mao gained popular support for the Communist Party by resisting Japan's wartime occupation (1937-45). Japan's goal was to incorporate China into a Japan-centred East Asian world economy. Mao thus rose to power by fighting for China's autonomy, and he continued that posture after 1949 by pursuing an autarkic program of economic growth that resisted the postwar tide of globalization. His decision to resist the American presence in Korea in 1950 resulted in an American-led trade and diplomatic embargo that isolated China, forcing Mao to rely on the Soviet Union for trade and technical assistance. Rejecting Soviet influence in 1960, Mao elevated self-reliance as the core value of China's social and economic development. The mass movement known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) wove xenophobia and class struggle together in an ideology of permanent revolution under Mao's leadership and absolute autonomy for China.

The Chinese Communist Party began revising Mao's isolationism shortly before his death. Since the 1980s, China has moved cautiously toward integration with the global economy. Despite the success of this strategy, autonomy remains a highly prized ideological value, and Mao's fierce anti-imperialism is remembered with nostalgia.

---

This is a pre-print version of **Mao Zedong (1893-1976)** by **Timothy Brook** generated from the *Globalization and Autonomy Online Compendium*. The electronic original is available at [http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/glossary\\_entry.jsp?id=PR.0007](http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/glossary_entry.jsp?id=PR.0007).