

What impact did mao have on the lives of the chinese people essay



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On October 1st 1949, the Communists proclaimed the existence of a new kind of China - The People's Republic of China. The only remaining part of China under Communist control was the island of Taiwan. The chairman of the Communist Party was Mao Zedong. Two days before the People's Republic of China was announced, Communist Party leaders drew up a common programme that outlined the Party's aims and intentions such as independence, democracy, peace, unity and prosperity. All sorts of problems got in the way of reaching these targets. Previously, there had been three years of civil war, which had left China in a mess.

There were millions of peasants with not enough food and the population was rising by 15 million a year. Cities were in chaos and inflation had made the currency worthless. There was also a high level of unemployment. To add to this, there was also the threat of being attacked by the Guomindang in Taiwan. The major problem, however, was how to hold China together as a single, united country. I am going to research the effect Mao had on the Chinese people's lives.

Economic Changes

Agriculture

The first three years of the people's republic were a time of great change for almost all Chinese people. Firstly I am going to investigate how economic changes changed people's lives. I shall start by writing about Agricultural changes and then Industrial changes.

On 30th June 1950 the Agrarian Reform Law was introduced to tackle the problem of land ownership. Previously, the Communists had started dividing land among peasants so by 1949 the process was already underway in many parts of the country. From 1950 Communist Party members travelled around the countryside teaching poor peasants how to work out the social class of the people in their community. They were divided into categories: landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants and poor peasants.

Poor peasants were encouraged to hold mass meetings where they could speak out about their poverty and about landlords who had treated them badly. Once a villager's social class had been decided, land was taken from those who had more than they needed and given to those who had none. Over 300 million peasants benefited. However, life was not so good for the landlords. Over 40 per cent of their land had been taken. The poor peasants held 'speak bitterness' meetings which started getting violent and often led to the execution of landlords who had been particularly cruel to their tenants. Between two and four million landlords were killed.

Although poor peasants had been given land, many found they had no equipment to cultivate it. Therefore mutual aid teams of around ten households, which owned land, would share equipment and animals. This improved peasant's lives greatly.

In the mid 50's, there were serious food shortages and farmers had to sell 15 - 20 % of their land to the government at a fixed low price. They also had to pay an Agricultural tax on their produce. The Party leaders who toured the

villages helping the poor peasants put the Agrarian Reform Law into action and collected the Agricultural tax.

The consequences of these changes meant that life was made better for poor peasants who gained land but had to work in groups as they had no equipment. Rich peasants lives, however, were made a lot worse as they had a lot of land taken from them and many were killed.

In 1953, as part of the first five year plan, the lower-stage co-operative was introduced. This was where 30-50 families put their land together to make one bigger, more efficient farm. Although the families still legally owned their plots of land, the land was on loan to the co-operative who paid rent for using it.

Higher stage co-operatives were later introduced and by the end of 1956, 95% of peasant families had joined them. They consisted of 200-300 families. The main difference was that they were not paid rent for the use of the land, therefore most of the 300 million peasants who had been given land and initially benefited from Mao's changes, were in effect landless again. They were only allowed a few square metres for growing vegetables or keeping chickens. Peasants only received wages for their labour and had to surrender title deeds to their land, equipment and animals. This meant they owned nothing, and every peasant was equal. However, in the end this did not work out because the co-operatives were too large to manage and the land peasants had been given was taken away from them.

In the summer of 1958, Mao introduced a 2nd Five -Year Plan, running from 1958 to 1963. He wanted to make China into one of the worlds leading <https://assignbuster.com/what-impact-did-mao-have-on-the-lives-of-the-chinese-people-essay/>

industrial nations, at the same time improving agriculture. His targets were to overtake the British economy in 15 years and the America economy in 20-30 years. This was known as the ' Great Leap Forward'.

Part of the Great Leap Forward was to organise the Chinese people into Communes. The speed at which they did this was astounding. By the end of 1958, 700 million people had been placed into 26, 578 communes, which held about 5000 families each. All these families gave up their land, animals and equipment to be used by all members of the communes.

All sorts of things were organised so that as many people as possible worked. Four million communal dining halls were established so that people did not waste time cooking meals and worked instead. Several million children were sent to schools and nurseries so that parents were able to work full time. Old people and the infirm were moved into ' Houses of Happiness' so their families did not have to look after them. These methods seemed to work well and there were record harvests of cotton and grain, however, it also meant people spent more time working and less time with their families, often resulting in breakdowns and illness.

As part of the Great leap forward peasants had been forced to use methods that did not suit their land. The commune system meant that they no longer received more food or pay for working hard, so many simply did less work. This resulted in two years of serious droughts in the 1960's, which set back farming production in the communes. There was a farming crisis in China between 1959 and 1961, which resulted in a serious famine.

Party leaders covered this up, but an estimated 30 million people died of starvation. So, in 1960 when Mao had been removed as head of state, communes were reduced in size, which made them easier to manage. Peasants went back to working in fields and were allowed to own land individually, selling off surplus produce for profit. Overall, the communes failed as it did not increase agriculture production as many people soon realised that they were not being paid for the extra work they were doing, so they simply started doing less work. The communes did not produce enough food to prevent the farming crisis which resulted in millions dying.

Industrial Changes

When Mao came to power he tried to solve China's disastrous economic problems. This was a big job and he started by making major banks, the railway network and a third of heavy industry, state property. The profit from these was given to the state Treasury, giving the government about 66% of its annual income. The next stage was the closing of private banks and opening The Peoples Bank. This gave the government control over all financial transactions as well as the issue of money. This was successful and by the mid-1950's it had got rid of inflation.

Mao Zedong appealed for financial help from the USSR and as a result of this Mao and Stalin (the Soviet leader) developed a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance which gave China financial aid and technical advice and most valuably, 10, 000 engineers and planning experts to help develop China's economy. They developed a Five-Year Plan running from 1953- 1957. The aim was to develop their economy, giving priority to heavy industry such

as steel, coal and machinery. 700 production plants were set up in central China and Manchuria. However, the light industry such as cotton and food processing was put aside and people found there was only a slow growth in living standards and ability to produce consumer goods.

The outcome of the First Five-Year Plan was relatively successful. By 1957, coal, pig iron, steel, cotton and chemical fertilisers had exceeded their set targets. But with this expanding industry, more people were moving out of the country and into towns and cities to find work. This meant there were more people to feed and fewer farmers, so the Five-Year Plan also had to increase food production.

Communes also played their part in industrial changes. Small commune factories were set to produce cement, ball bearings and chemical fertiliser. As well as the production in the communes the government was particularly keen on the making of steel, so 600,000 'backyard steel furnaces' were set up in towns and villages across China. The furnaces were all capable of producing a few tonnes of steel. Before long, 11 million tonnes of steel had been produced. This was 65 per cent more than had been produced in 1957. As 1958 progressed, steel, coal, timber, cement, fertiliser and over a hundred other industrial products showed a spectacular rise. It seemed that things were going well for Mao Zedong.

However, only months after the Great Leap forward had been introduced, things started to go dreadfully wrong. Party workers were urging people to work faster and produce more. This resulted in overworked machines falling apart and many people suffered exhaustion and had accidents.

The ' backyard steel' campaign was a failure. Three out of the eleven tonnes of steel produced were of very poor quality and had to be thrown away. By this stage, there were so many furnaces, that 10% of the Chinese population were involved in steel making. This took people away from agriculture and significantly reduced food production. This was disastrous because at the same time, the Chinese population was increasing. The furnaces, used for producing steel also used too much of China's coal supplies. Railway locomotives had no fuel to work on and there was so much steel that there were not enough trains to take it to where it was needed. Obviously this had an awful impact on industry and it wasted a lot of time and money.

In 1959, Mao Zedong admitted that the Great Leap Forward had been a disastrous failure. Although Mao was still leader of the Communist Party and enormously popular with the people, other leaders were running the country. They reorganised communes, making them smaller and handed back peasant ownership. Although Mao may have tried his hardest, the effects his changes had were mostly for the worst, which left China worse off than before he came to power.

Social Changes

Mao Zedong also made some important social changes. These greatly benefited women's rights. In April 1950, a Marriage Law was introduced. Arranged marriages, the marriage of children, the killing of unwanted girl babies and bigamy were all made illegal. A minimum age for marriage was laid down: 18 for women, 20 for men. Husbands and wives equally owned family property, whereas before it had only been the husband. Divorce by

mutual consent was introduced and in February 1951, a further law was fixed where expectant mothers were given maternity benefit with full wages for two months after the child was born. All these changes were for the better and improved life for women greatly. China was now a fairer country to live in.

In 1951, the Party started a 'thought reform'. It was called the 'Movement for the study of Mao Zedong's Thoughts'. It involved studying Mao Zedong's writings and self-criticism at Party meetings. This also applies to political changes.

As well as 'Thought Reform', the Party organised mass campaigns and in 1951, the 'Three Antis Campaign' was launched against corruption, waste and too much 'red tape'. In 1952 the 'Five Antis Campaign' was launched against bribery, tax evasion, fraud, theft of government property and spying. People who were caught committing these offences were sent to labour camps to be 're-educated' in reform. This was also included in the political changes.

To strengthen the Party and China's social and political status further, the whole population was encouraged to join Party-run interest groups. Groups such as the Women's League for Democracy, the Young Pioneers and the China-Russia Friendship were set up all over China. Because the Communist Party ran these groups, it was easy for them to use the people for its own purposes such as mass rallies. An incredible example of this was when every Chinese citizen was asked to kill 10 flies a day throughout the 1960's. With a population of 600 million, flies became virtually extinct. In some areas.

Another example of this was when cities were being cleaned up. In Shanghai, there was a campaign against rats and each week, every family had to produce one rat's tail.

Another change that affected the Chinese people was the introduction of communes. This reorganised their lives. Families were split up into work teams where they shared everything. Children were sent to schools and nurseries, old people and the infirm were moved into 'houses of happiness' so that their families did not have to look after them and could work.

Communal eating halls were also set up so that people did not waste time cooking. Communes were units of local government, with a committee made up of peasants. Party members and soldiers ran schools, clinics, nurseries, eating halls, entertainment and other public services. These changes meant that the Party controlled people's lives and they spent less time with their families and more time working, resulting in exhaustion and illness.

From 1962 to 1966, the Communist Party argued as to which road to take. The moderates wanted peasants working harder, to have bigger plots of land and to get paid according to how much work they did.

Mao Zedong was opposed to these policies. He thought that they were too 'capitalist'. In 1962, the Socialist Education Movement was launched, aiming to get people back into Communism. The 'four clean-ups campaign' to get rid of corruption and bad Party leadership was also introduced, to discourage people who showed signs of 'capitalist' behaviour. These were also important political changes.

At first all of Mao Zedong's advice on capitalism fell on deaf ears. Then, in 1965 he gained powerful support from the Minister of Defence, Lin Biao. He abolished all ranks in the Peoples Liberation Army so all soldiers were equal. Each soldier was given a copy of 'Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong' which was known as 'The Little Red Book.' Although Mao Zedong did not have the support of the government, he now had the support of the four million soldiers in the Peoples Liberation Army. With this support Mao was strong enough to launch a massive campaign against 'capitalists' and 'reactionaries.' It began in 1966, and was known as 'The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.'

This began among school students in Beijing. In the summer of 1966, schools were shut down for six months to rewrite the curriculum, so that young people were aware of communism. At the same time students in Beijing were put into military groups called Red Guards, who had plenty of time for political activities. Their first aim was to get rid of 'capitalist' ideas in schools.

They started by introducing a 'Four Olds' campaign against old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. They expressed criticism through hundreds of thousands of wall posters. They marched through Beijing, sometimes attacking anything that seemed 'capitalist.'

Before long, Red Guards were using violence to achieve their aims. They would shave the hair of girls with Western hairstyles, and tear up any Western clothes. They smashed up the windows of shops selling unnecessary luxuries such as cosmetics, pets and chess sets. Temples, churches, theatres

and museums were closed down and bookshops and libraries were burnt.

Couples were forbidden to hold hands in public and places, which had 'reactionary' names, were renamed. For example, Beijing became 'The East is Red.'

Mao Zedong encouraged these activities saying 'To rebel is justified'. The Red Guards were given support for their campaign and police were told not to oppose them and the PLA gave them enthusiastic support. They were given free rail travel so they could get to Beijing to take part in major rallies.

As a result of this the Red Guards ran wild and by 1967 law and order had been broken down in many parts of China. For most of 1967, there was a virtual civil war in China, with Red Guards fighting 'reactionaries' and also among themselves. An estimated 400,000 were killed and countless more beaten up, humiliated, tortured and imprisoned. Yet again Mao Zedong had let down the Chinese people.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards had followed every word of Mao Zedong. They spent their time reading and memorising the Little Red Book. Between 1966 and 1969, 740 million copies of it had been printed. Pictures and statues of Mao were put up in the street and people bowed before his picture. The Chinese worshipped him like a god.

In 1967, Mao attempted to restore order in China. Schools and colleges were reopened and young people returned to studies. The PLA disarmed Red Guards who were using violence and to get rid of the millions of Red Guards, Mao encouraged them to go to the country and learn from the peasants. 18

million young people went to the country. Finally, to restore order where the
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government had broken down, the PLA set up Revolutionary Committees consisting of peasants, soldiers and Red Guards.

By 1969, peace and order had been restored in most parts of China and the Cultural Revolution had finished and there was a great deal of damage to China. Possibly one million people had been killed and a whole generation had missed out on their education. In 1981, the government estimated that 120 million people under the age of 45 could not read or write. Industrial output had fallen drastically, with some factories been shut for three years. Farming had been severely disrupted. For the second time in ten years, China had suffered 'chaos on a grand scale'. Perhaps the most damaging thing was that the absolute faith of many Chinese people in the Communist Party was damaged.

Overall, the Cultural Revolution was a massive set back. Over a million people had died and a whole generation had missed out on their education which meant there was a shortage of people for jobs such as doctors and teachers.

Political Changes

Although, there were many economic and social changes under Mao, there were also many important political changes that affected the lives of the Chinese people. First I shall examine 'The Organisation of the people' which I have already discussed under social changes, but which also played a role in political changes.

During 1950 and 1951, the Communist Party publicly tried and executed about a million 'reactionaries.' These were public 'enemies' and counter revolutionaries, mainly people who had collaborated with the Japanese or fought in the Guomindang armies.

In 1951, the Party started a 'thought reform'. It was called the 'Movement for the study of Mao Zedong's Thoughts'. It also launched the 'Three Antis Campaign' followed by the 'Five Antis Campaign' in 1953. Party-run interest groups were also established, as well as mass rallies and campaigns.

The Five-Year plan from 1953-1957 had put terrible strain on China and people in cities had plenty to complain about. The population in the cities had risen by 40 million, there were food shortages and overcrowding. Peasants in the country were also unhappy about the higher stage co-operatives. The Communist Party was losing a lot of its early popularity.

So, in 1956, Mao Zedong decided to give the Chinese people an opportunity to say what they wanted about the Communist Party, its leaders and its policies. Mao said 'Let a hundred flowers bloom, which meant that free speech and arguments were healthy and should be encouraged. However, people spoke more freely than Mao Zedong liked. People were saying things like 'Mao is hot-tempered and not sober-minded; impetuous and not prudent; reckless and not self-assured'. This was more than Mao had bargained for and in June 1957, he cracked down on his critics. Many were arrested and sent to camps in the country for 'thought reform'. Others had been sacked from their jobs. People were forbidden to speak freely and press was censored. Overall, the hundred flowers had been another big failure.

Propaganda played a key role in the Great Leap Forward, starting in 1958. Propaganda was used to try to influence the Chinese people towards the Communist Party's views and ideas. Mao did not want people to think independently and used his loyal Party workers as 'propagandists' to spread Communist ideas. Overall, there were 1.5 million propagandists in workplaces such as factories, up to 10 per cent of the workforce were propagandists. They put up wall posters, ran discussion groups, accusation groups, story-telling groups and memory groups. Ordinary people had to attend such meetings three or four times every fortnight.

The most common form of propaganda was wall posters. In 1957 and 1958, students at the University of Peking produced half a million wall posters attacking waste and intolerance in Chinese society. They produced so many that they ran out of walls to put posters on. The Party controlled all newspapers and the government made propaganda films. Roadside loudspeakers broadcast the latest success of the Communist Party.

Anyone who may spread anti-Communist ideas such as foreigners, missionaries and businessmen were forced to leave the country. Everyone learned to hide his or her true feelings. They learned to do and say everything that the Communist Party wanted them to. If they showed any signs of resistance, they would be pressurised into changing their opinions. If they didn't, they would be sent to labour camps to be re-educated or to the country where they could learn from peasants. Thousands were killed. All this meant that Chinese people could not have any freedom of speech and the Communist Party controlled everything they did and said.

From 1959 to 1961, there was a major famine in China, which was partly the result of Mao Zedong. Liu Shaoqi, a deputy leader in the Communist Party said,

‘ The disaster was seventy per cent man-made and thirty per cent due to natural causes.’

Other leaders also blamed Mao Zedong and wanted him to resign. However, Mao was too popular among the Chinese people so he was persuaded to hand over the post of Head of State’, to Liu Shaoqi. He was left as Party Chairman, but this meant that he no longer did any practical work of governing China. This was done by a group of moderate leaders; Head of State Liu Shaoqi, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and Party Secretary Deng Xiaping.

They introduced some realistic economic policies and in late 1960, they abandoned the Great Leap Forward. Communes were made smaller and peasants working in back-yard steel production were sent back to fields where they were allowed to own their own land and sell extra produce for their own profit. Town worker’s wages were increased. This meant that a lot of Mao’s work had been undone.

Mao was given no say in running the country and the moderates controlled the economy. But, people regarded Mao Zedong as a revolutionary hero and he had a huge influence over the Chinese people.

Although Mao was well intentioned, he spent a lot of time trying to reform yet most of his attempts seemed to backfire or go wrong. The two five year

plans didn't exactly have the effect that Mao had hoped for, but they did boost the economy and morale. He went over the top trying to introduce Communist values leaving China in a state of more ruin than when he had come into power. Before he came into power, many had died due to war, but Mao managed to destroy the hope of millions. Many people died of starvation due to the lack of organisation at harvest time and generally throughout the year.

He hadn't done much to help peasants and in some cases their living conditions became worse. Even the red guards when they reached the country realised that peasants lives in the country were a lot worse than their own in the cities. Due to the Cultural Revolution a whole generation had missed out on their education. During Mao's reign, the rich were stripped of their riches and intellectuals were ignored. Overall, Mao did not achieve what he had set out to do and his rule was a failure. As soon as a new leader emerged all the old values and ways were changed and the old China of Mao was left behind, but China remained Communist.