

China Expand Under the Communists

In the early years of Mao's reign, Chinese troops expanded into Tibet, India, and southern Mongolia. Northern Mongolia, which bordered the Soviet Union, remained in the Soviet sphere. In a brutal assault in 1950 and 1951, China took control of Tibet. The Chinese promised autonomy to Tibetans, who followed their religious leader, the Dalai Lama. When China's control over Tibet tightened in the late 1950s, the Dalai Lama fled to India. India welcomed many Tibetan refugees after a failed revolt in Tibet in 1959. As a result, resentment between India and China grew. In 1962, they clashed briefly over the two countries' unclear border. The fighting stopped, but resentment continued.

Mao's Brand of Communism

Mao was determined to reshape China's economy based on Marxist socialism. Eighty percent of the people lived in rural areas, but most owned no land. Instead, 10 percent of the rural population controlled 70 percent of the farmland. Under the Agrarian Reform Law of 1950, Mao seized the holdings of these landlords. His forces killed more than a million landlords who resisted. He then divided the land among peasants. Later, to further Mao's socialist principles, the government forced peasants to join collective farms. Each of these farms comprised of 200 to 300 households.

Mao's changes also transformed industry and business. Gradually, private companies were nationalized, or brought under government ownership. In 1953, Mao launched a five-year plan that set high production goals for industry. By 1957, China's output of coal, cement, steel, and electricity had doubled. Steel production quadrupled.

The Great Leap Forward

To expand the success of the first Five-Year Plan, Mao proclaimed the “Great Leap Forward” in early 1958. This plan called for still larger collective farms, or communes. By the end of 1958, about 26,000 communes had been created. The average commune sprawled over 15,000 acres and supported over 25,000 people. In the strictly controlled life of the communes, peasants worked the land together. They ate in communal dining rooms, slept in communal dormitories, and raised children in communal nurseries. And they owned nothing. The peasants had no incentive to work hard when only the state profited from their labor.

The Great Leap Forward was a giant step backward. Poor planning and inefficient “backyard,” or home, industries hampered growth. The program was ended in 1961 after crop failures caused a famine that killed about 20 million people.

New Policies and Mao's Response

China was facing external problems as well as internal ones in the late 1950s. The spirit of cooperation that had bound the Soviet Union and China began to fade. Each sought to lead the worldwide Communist movement. As they also shared the longest border in the world, they faced numerous territorial disputes.

After the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the split with the Soviet Union, Mao reduced his role in government. Other leaders moved away from Mao's strict socialist ideas. For example, farm families could live in their own homes and could sell crops they grew on small private plots. Factory workers could compete for wage increases and promotions.

Mao thought China's new economic policies weakened the Communist goal of social equality. He was determined to revive the revolution. In 1966, he urged China's young people to "learn revolution by making revolution." Millions of high school and college students responded. They left their classrooms and formed militia units called Red Guards.

The Cultural Revolution

The Red Guards led a major uprising known as the Cultural Revolution. Its goal was to establish a society of peasants and workers in which all were equal. The new hero was the peasant who worked with his hands. The life of the mind – intellectual and artistic activity – was considered useless and dangerous. To stamp out this threat, the Red Guards shut down colleges and schools. They targeted anyone who resisted the regime. They targeted anyone who resisted the regime. Intellectuals had to “purify” themselves by doing hard labor in remote villages. Thousands were executed or imprisoned.

Chaos threatened farm production and closed down factories. Civil war seemed possible. By 1968, even Mao admitted that the Cultural Revolution had to stop. The army was ordered to put down the Red Guards.