

Commander Mao

Better than Napoleon?

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Inwardly, I often smiled at the extravagance of Mao's claims, which then seemed more naive than Gandhi's hopes of conquering the British by love power. There he sat, with two pairs of cotton pants to his name, his army a minuscule band of poorly armed youths, facing a precarious existence in the most impoverished corner of the land. Yet he spoke as if his Party already had an irrevocable mandate over 'the workers and peasants' of all China, acted as if he believed it, and told the foreign powers just how a free China of the future 'could' and 'could not' cooperate with them.

Still, if social revolution could provide the dynamics which can regenerate China, then in this profoundly historical sense, Mao Tse-tung may become a very great man. Red Star Over China. Edgar Snow, 1937.

Commander Mao



Though outnumbered ten to one, commanding ragged, underfed troops and lacking artillery, communications, airplanes, heavy equipment, reserves, and trained officers, Mao won most battles decisively. Nor was he an armchair general. He stayed behind in Yan'an with a small force to attract the Nationalists and allow the Red Army to withdraw unmolested. His bodyguard was killed while standing beside him, and a bomb that drenched him with a soldier's blood left him unscathed. "Death never seemed to want me," he shrugged.

Said former British officer and visitor Robert Payne, "Mao's invisible army played a cunning, furious, violent game, circling the Nationalists in the shadows, just out of reach, feinting, threatening, needling, then suddenly striking blows from quarters so unexpected that entire armies sometimes collapsed in shock".

His scattered armies lacked communications equipment, so he united them with simple principles. Mao's standing order to commanders, *The Four Nevers*, covered most contingencies: "Never be afraid to negotiate; never be afraid to retreat; never be afraid to change your plans; never be afraid to attack".

By arranging sixteen characters into four rhyming verses, he taught tactics to millions of peasant troops, who sang as they marched: "When the enemy advances, we retreat; when he escapes, we harass; when he retreats, we pursue; when he is tired, we attack". As he later explained, "Those sixteen characters are the basic directives for a counter-campaign against encirclement—and the phases of both the strategic defensive and the strategic offensive—as well as for strategic withdrawal and the strategic counteroffensive in a defensive operation. In a sense, all that came afterward was just an elaboration of those sixteen characters". He taught his peasant warriors by reducing strategic principles to marching songs and won battles by maneuver and morale alone.

Montgomery

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery knew Mao, compared his campaigns to the best of Alexander's and Napoleon's, especially his Battle of the Four Crossings. His thirty thousand troops crossed the Chishui River under fire from four hundred thousand Nationalists, an exhausting, terrifying maneuver – then recrossed it thrice more, attacked the enemy's flank and reversed the course of the war.

Payne observed dryly that Mao played the game so well because he wrote the rules,

"Mao's contribution to the strategic operations can always be detected. Mao is the surgeon, exploring the wound, insisting above all on the delicate probing, the discovery of the enemy's weakened nerve, the dangerous point where weakness is balanced by strength: at this point, he will order the attack. There follows a cunning interweaving among the enemy columns. As Mao describes his tactics, they have something of the inevitability of a dance. Finally, there is the withdrawal to the chosen terminus, which may be within the enemy lines, or deep in enemy territory, or safely within the territory the Reds have circumscribed for themselves. The theory, as he relates the battles, seems to be pure Mao. Mao's notes on the actions, compiled with the help of Chu Teh, give an impression of illusory ease to the whole campaign. It is almost a dance or a game of skittles.

As Mao said after one campaign, "We faced the enemy with poise and ease".

Amidst the fighting Mao opposed political violence, kept peace among the leadership by prescribing re-education for heterodox views. Hearing of Stalin's bloody purges, he established a rule which still holds: "Not a single person must ever die from internal political struggles". After capturing Chiang Kai-shek, whose agents had murdered Mao's wife and thrown his children onto the street, Mao treated him honorably, returned him to his troops, and offered to place the PLA under American command.

Flexibility

By war's end, China was agrarian, backward, feudalistic, ignorant, and violent. Most of its four hundred million people could neither read nor write, life expectancy was thirty-five years, and fifty-million drug addicts roamed its cities. Peasants paid seventy percent of their produce in rent; women's feet were bound; desperate mothers sold their children for food; poor men sold themselves, choosing slavery over starvation. The Japanese had massacred twenty-million people, and US Ambassador John Leighton Stuart reported that ten million starved to

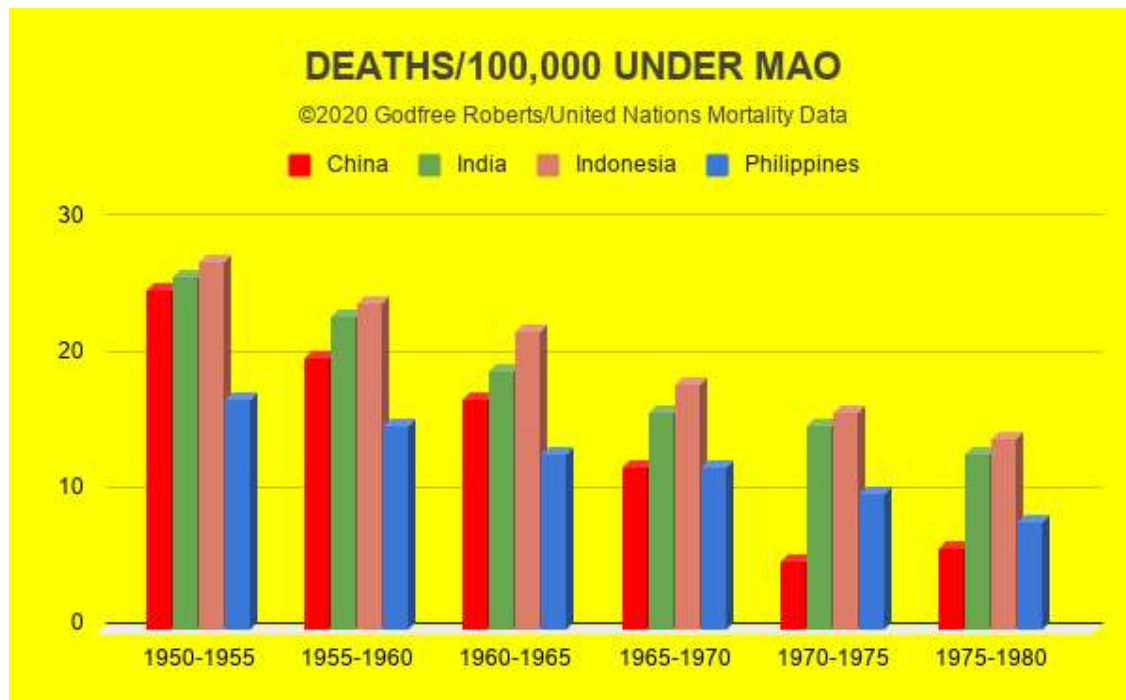
death in just three provinces. Hundreds of millions, lives catastrophically dislocated by a century of war, needed vast quantities of food, clothing, and shelter merely to survive.

Entering Beijing in 1949, the ordinarily self-assured Mao was anxious, “We don’t know enough about managing a whole country. We’ll be lucky if we don’t get thrown out!”

Convinced that China needed foreign investment, Mao sent President Roosevelt a plea he repeated to Truman and Eisenhower, “China must industrialize, which can only be accomplished by free enterprise. Chinese and American interests fit together, economically and politically. America need not fear that we will not be co-operative. We cannot risk any conflict”.

When they ignored him, he was philosophical, “Some people refuse to understand why we do not fear capitalism, but, on the contrary, develop it as much as possible. Our answer is simple: we have to replace foreign imperialist and native feudalist oppression with capitalist development because that is the inevitable course of our economy, and because both the capitalist class and the proletariat benefit. What we don’t need is not native capitalism, but foreign imperialism and native feudalism”.

Denied capital and intellectual property, under embargoes that make today’s look mild, he began laying the foundation of the China we see today.



Godfree Roberts wrote [*Why China Leads the World: Talent at the Top, Data in the Middle, Democracy at the Bottom*](#), and publishes the newsletter, [*Here Comes China*](#).