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CHAIRMAN MAO: PICTURE OF A DICTATOR

He rallied the Chinese peasants, then ravaged them

Mao Zedong was dead. His body had been put on display in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, and 300,000 citizens had come to pay their respects. Now, at the conclusion of the official week of mourning in September 1976, factory and train sirens blared all across China, and at this signal, the nation's 900 million men and women--a fifth of a fifth of the world's population--stood at attention for three minutes in his memory.

In a land as diverse as Europe, in a country with hundreds of dialects, they stood as one people. Mao did that. Mao unified China and gave it a new start. It was a remarkable accomplishment; had Mao retired in 1957, he would be regarded as the greatest Chinese in history. But with age, Mao grew more prone to abusing his power, and the decade of trauma that began in '58 marks him as a reckless, foolish tyrant.

When Mao Zedong was born on December 26, 1893, China could barely crawl. Starting in the 1840s, Western powers bullied the nation, using their superior military strength to dictate severe treaties to the Ching dynasty and reduce one of the world's noblest and proudest civilizations to a supplier of manual labor and raw materials.

Mao grew up in the village of Shaoshan, population 2,000, the son of a tough, stingy, wary peasant who clawed his way from poverty to modest affluence. He fought bitterly with his father over issues such as whether he should work in the fields or read his beloved books; he later said of his father, "I learned to hate him"--a highly unusual sentiment in a culture steeped in filial piety.

A schoolmate described the young Mao as "arrogant, brutal, and stubborn." He was also energetic, enthusiastic, and interested in becoming a rebellious hero of some sort, like the characters in his favorite Chinese historical novels.

He hit the road in 1910 at age 16, in search of better schooling. He already had some awareness of politics, but a pamphlet he read at this time, about foreign influence in China, was a turning point in his development. Years later he still recalled the opening sentence: "Alas, China will be subjugated!" As he read, he felt in his bones a duty to help his country become strong again. This early emotional reaction signals the key to Mao Zedong. His core conviction, his mainspring from boyhood to old age, was his love for China and his belief in its superiority.

In 1911, as Mao studied, a revolutionary named Sun Yat-sen overthrew the last emperor of the Ching dynasty, the six-year-old Pu Yi, and declared a republic. However, Sun had no army. He handed the presidency over to General Yuan Shih-k'ai, who had troops, but Yuan died in 1916. The nation lacked central authority. Warlords held sway over several provinces, Japan muscled into Manchuria and many coastal areas, and other foreign powers expanded their spheres of influence.

And so began more than 30 years of chaos and savage civil conflict during which millions of Chinese would die. The country's intellectuals searched for answers, for a form of government that would allow the country to prosper. Some of them believed in liberal democracy; some were anarchists; others looked to China's traditions; still others were excited by Marxism, especially after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1920-21, and Mao Zedong became a member in the summer of 1920 at age 26. Communism, he felt, offered a good way of organizing people and aiming them toward change. At about that time, he made an accurate prediction: Communists, if they worked hard, could rule China in "30 to 50 years' time."

Mao--relatively tall, broad-faced, intense, earthy, rough-mannered, argumentative--was a political organizer in the '20s. As he traveled the country, he saw firsthand that China's peasants (85 percent of the population) felt immense anger against their landlords, and he recognized that their fury could be channeled toward revolution. This was a major insight. Until Mao, Marxist dogma stated that communism must develop from cities, not the countryside.

In 1927, a general named Chiang Kai-shek, who claimed to be the political heir of Sun Yat-sen, was successful in overcoming the warlords and establishing a nationalist central government; he then turned with a vengeance on the Communists, killing them by the tens of thousands. Thus began a new phase in China's agony, a civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists that would rage for the next two decades. Both sides would do their full share of killing.

The civil war nearly ended in 1934 when Chiang appeared to be closing in on the Communists. Then, in October, Mao led the Red Army, 90,000 men and women, on a yearlong retreat through 11 provinces toward the northwest. This procession became known as the Long March. "It was for Mao's China what the Exodus was for Israel," writes historian Ross Terrill in his book *Mao*.

At first the march was a ragged retreat, but along the way it gathered martial and political discipline and momentum. Soon after it began, Mao won unquestioned leadership of the Communist Party. He preached that the journey was an opportunity for his followers to spread word of their cause, and to become educated and toughened. And he fostered patriotism; when they reached the north, he said, they would fight the Japanese.

For all the noble rhetoric, the march was deadly. The army crossed 24 rivers, some of them wide and turbulent, and climbed 18 mountain ranges, some of them towering. They

ate pine cones and grass. People vanished without a trace in the sinking mud of Gansu Province and the mountain snow of Sichuan, and were picked off by the Nationalists. Mao arrived in Shaanxi Province with about 10,000 soldiers.

But he arrived. The Long March marked the making of Mao Zedong as a leader. He discovered within himself new resources of perseverance, persuasiveness, cunning, and strength. And now he had a steely team around him. He would go on to fight the Nationalists and the Japanese for another 14 years, but Mao may well have felt, in October 1935, that the corner had been turned.

On October 1, 1949, a magnificent crisp autumn day, Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China and chairman of the country's central government council, stepped onto a podium overlooking Tiananmen Square and proclaimed, "The Chinese people have stood up." A huge crowd cheered. They loved him, they were ready to work, and they were eager to build. Mao, 55, the most powerful man in China, wanted to create a modern industrialized country from a backward state. Furthermore, he wanted to create new human beings: committed, tireless, not interested in material incentives. His quest for change would be one of the most massive such efforts in human history, comparable to the spread of great religions.

Over the next quarter-century Mao would shape most major Chinese events. Among them: the 1949-53 land reforms, during which he urged peasants to kill landlords and village leaders, and perhaps two million people died; the "thought reform movement" that began in the early '50s, which hoped to replace family loyalty with fidelity to the state; the Marriage Law of 1950, guaranteeing the rights of women; the Korean War of 1950-53, which killed one million Koreans, 250,000 Chinese, and 54,000 Americans, and where China demonstrated to the world that it was to be taken seriously militarily; the ideological split with the Soviet Union, 1960-63; and the rapprochement with the United States, climaxed by President Richard Nixon's visit in February 1972.

Two events stand out: the Great Leap Forward, 1958-62, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1965-76. Both were failures and tragedies from which China has yet to recover.

The Great Leap Forward was Mao's plan to achieve pure communism quickly, by decentralizing virtually the entire economy and breaking it into 24,000 communes supported by countless backyard steel furnaces.

The Great Leap transformed the economic and political life of 20 percent of the world, some 600 million people or 120 million families, in the space of one year, 1958. The citizens moved from small collectives into large "people's communes," several thousand households in size, in which all private property was confiscated and incomes were leveled down. Each commune was to be self-supporting.

The output of food and steel quickly fell. Management was lacking, and new farming techniques harmed the soil. People were overworked and undermotivated, and became exhausted, disillusioned, and indifferent. Officials inflated production statistics. An accompanying campaign to shame and humiliate "doubtful elements" within their communities resulted in many suicides.

Then, in 1959, floods inundated at least 150 million acres of farmland. The combination of man-made and natural disasters resulted in a terrible harvest. People starved. They continued to starve for the next three years. There is no precise figure for how many

perished from hunger and disease (the number is beyond accurate reckoning), but some experts accept the figure of about 30 million souls.

If a court of law were to try Mao for the Great Leap Forward, he would, perhaps, be guilty of manslaughter. With the Cultural Revolution, he would likely be convicted of murder.

After the failures of the Great Leap, Mao lost considerable authority within the councils of government, and retreated to ponder what had gone wrong. One of his conclusions was that the country had failed him. His 15 years of unrelenting effort, he realized, had not been enough to undo thousands of years of history. The culture and the Communist Party were still too conservative, too ingrained with old habits, too enamored of the West. "We must smash conventions," he announced. A side benefit of such smashing, he knew, would be to help him reestablish his dominance in the country's life. Thus began the Cultural Revolution.

Mao got the army to support him, and in late 1965 enlisted the energetic aid of his wife, Jiang Qing, who had been pining for years for something to do and now became a "cultural advisor" and leading activist. The new revolution began in late 1965 with criticisms of writers and government officials; in March of '66 Mao encouraged young people to revolt against their teachers. The first Red Guards, mostly teenagers, surfaced in late spring waving the so-called "Little Red Book" of Mao's pronouncements, and the destruction soon began. Gangs of youths roamed the streets. Homes were ransacked. Restaurants and shops were shut down. Among the targets of Red Guard hatred: cosmetics, sunglasses, silk, mah-jongg, rock 'n' roll, classical cuisine, neon signs, kite-flying, holding hands, scientists, actors, doctors, factory managers, school administrators, teachers and the Communist Party. "It was the greatest witch-hunt in history," writes historian Paul Johnson.

As the revolution reached its feverish peak in 1967, China was once again plunged into a state of civil war. Tens of thousands of people were killed weekly as rival Red Guard factions fought ferocious battles with weaponry that had been earmarked for ally North Vietnam. Lynch mobs ran amok. People were beaten to death at "struggle meetings."

Mao wanted a radical upheaval against the system, and surely knew that it would entail serious bloodshed, but he probably didn't anticipate that matters would grow so out of hand. He became alarmed in the fall of 1967 and called off the Red Guard, then ordered the army to institute a new reign of terror, this time to restore order and eliminate troublemakers. As with the Great Leap, there is no exact accounting of the number of deaths that can be attributed to the Cultural Revolution, but the figure is likely several million.

After the chaos, Mao regained his power. His more moderate rivals were chased out of office by the radical Cultural Revolution faction that surrounded him. But his great energy was flagging. In 1974, he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. He also suffered from heart disease.

In the last years of his life, vestiges of the Cultural Revolution remained in place, with his encouragement. For example, Jiang Qing still had a good deal of power, and expected to be anointed Mao's successor. But upon his death on September 9, 1976, the moderate wing of the Communist Party arrested Jiang and others, and began rehabilitating officials who had been thrown out during the upheaval of the '60s. One of these men, a tough, pragmatic, law-and-order politico named Deng Xiaoping, would become the most powerful