

Mao Zedong

His ruthless vision united a fractured people and inspired revolutions far beyond China's borders

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Mao Zedong loved to swim. In his youth, he **advocated** swimming as a way of strengthening the bodies of Chinese citizens, and one of his earliest poems celebrated the joys of beating a wake through the waves. As a young man, he and his close friends would often swim in local streams before they debated together the **myriad** challenges that faced their nation. But especially after 1955, when he was in his early 60s and at the height of his political power as leader of the Chinese People's Republic, swimming became a central part of his life. He swam so often in the large pool constructed for the top party leaders in their closely guarded compound that the others eventually left him as the pool's sole user. He swam in the often stormy ocean off the north China coast, when the Communist Party leadership gathered there for its annual conferences. And, despite the pleadings of his security guards and his physician, he swam in the heavily polluted rivers of south China, drifting miles downstream with the current, head back, stomach in the air, hands and legs barely moving, unfazed by the globs of human waste gliding gently past. "Maybe you're afraid of sinking," he would chide his companions if they began to panic in the water. "Don't think about it. If you don't think about it, you won't sink. If you do, you will."

Mao was a genius at not sinking. His enemies were **legion**: militarists, who **resented** his journalistic **barbs** at their incompetence; party rivals, who found him too zealous a supporter of the united front with the Kuomintang nationalists; landlords, who hated his pro-peasant **rhetoric** and activism; Chiang Kai-shek, who attacked his rural strongholds with relentless **tenacity**; the Japanese, who tried to smash his northern base; the U.S., after the Chinese entered the Korean War; the

Soviet Union, when he attacked Khrushchev's anti-Stalinist policies. Mao was equally unsinkable in the turmoil — much of which he personally instigated — that marked the last 20 years of his rule in China.

Mao was born in 1893, into a China that appeared to be falling apart. The fading Qing dynasty could not contain the spiraling social and economic unrest, and had mortgaged China's revenues and many of its natural resources to the apparently insatiable foreign powers. It was, Mao later told his biographer Edgar Snow, a time when "the dismemberment of China" seemed **imminent**, and only heroic actions by China's youth could save the day.

Mao's earliest surviving essay, written when he was 19, was on one of China's most celebrated early thoughts of **cynicism** towards the fearsome 4th century B.C. administrator Shang Yang. Mao took Shang Yang's experiences as **emblematic** of China's crisis. Shang Yang had instituted a set of ruthlessly enforced laws, designed "to punish the wicked and rebellious, in order to preserve the rights of the people." That the people continued to fear Shang Yang was proof to Mao they were "stupid." Mao attributed this fear and distrust not to Shang Yang's policies but to the perception of those policies: "At the beginning of anything out of the ordinary, the mass of the people always dislike it."

After the communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Mao's position was immeasurably strengthened. Despite all that the Chinese people had endured, it seems not to have been too hard for Mao to persuade them of the visionary force and practical need for the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. In Mao's mind, the intensive marshaling of China's energies would draw manual and mental labor together into a final **harmonious** synthesis and throw a bridge across the chasm of China's poverty to the promised socialist paradise on the other side.

In February 1957, Mao drew his thoughts on China together in the form of a rambling speech on "The Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." Mao's notes for the speech reveal the curious mixture of **jocular** and cruelty, of utopian visions and blinkered perceptions, that lay at the heart of his character. Mao admitted that 15% or more of the Chinese people were hungry and that some critics felt a "disgust" with Marxism. He spoke too of the hundreds of thousands who had died in the revolution so far, but firmly rebutted figures — quoted in Hong Kong newspapers — that 20 million had perished. "How could we possibly kill 20 million people?" he asked. It is now established that at least that number died in China during the famine that followed the Great Leap between 1959 and 1961. In the Cultural Revolution that followed only five years later, Mao used the army and the student population against his opponents. Once again millions suffered or perished as Mao combined the ruthlessness of Shang Yang with the absolute confidence of the long-distance swimmer.

Rejecting his former party allies, and anyone who could be accused of **espousing** the values of an older and more gracious Chinese civilization, Mao drew his sustenance from the chanting crowds of Red Guards. The irony here was that from his youthful readings, Mao knew the story of how Shang Yang late in life tried to woo a moral administrator to his service. But the official turned down Shang Yang's blandishments, with the words that "1,000 persons going 'Yes, yes!' are not worth one man with a bold 'No!'"

Mao died in 1976, and with the years those adulatory cries of "Yes, yes!" have gradually faded. Leaders Mao trained, like Deng Xiaoping, were able to reverse Mao's policies even as they claimed to revere them. They gave back to the Chinese people the opportunities to express their entrepreneurial skills, leading to astonishing rates of growth and a complete transformation of the face of Chinese cities.

Are these changes, these moves toward a new flexibility, somehow Mao's legacy? Despite the agony he caused, Mao was both a visionary and a realist. He learned as a youth not only how Shang Yang brought harsh laws to the Chinese people, even when they saw no need for them, but also how Shang Yang's rigors helped lay the foundation in 221 B.C. of the fearsome centralizing state of Qin. Mao knew too that the Qin rulers had been both hated and feared and that their dynasty was soon toppled, despite its monopoly of force and efficient use of terror. But in his final years, Mao seems to have welcomed the association of his own name with these distant Qin **precursors**. The Qin, after all, had established a united state from a universe in chaos. They represented, like Mao, not the best that China had to offer, but something ruthless yet **canny**, with the power briefly to impose a single will on the scattered emotions of the errant **multitude**. It is on that grimly structured foundation that Mao's successors have been able to build, even as they struggle, with obvious nervousness, to contain the social pressures that their own more open policies are generating. Surely Mao's simple words **reverberate** in their ears: As long as you are not afraid, you won't sink.

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