

Four Who Shaped Modern China

By Tripod Staff

The revolution that brought the Communists to power in 1949 had its roots in the minds and hearts of millions of ordinary Chinese men and women who were convinced of a need for change. To achieve their end, ordinary citizens had to rely on certain persons whose charisma would galvanize public trust and persuade others to follow them through the pain that any political and economic revolution must of necessity bring to bear on its people. In any large scale social upheaval certain persons seem to rise above others, and for better or for worse, for good or for evil, manage to change the course of their nation's history forever.

In looking through lists of possible "heroes" and "antagonists" that have shaped events since the founding of the People's Republic of China, we have selected the four men that we think have, over the last fifty years left the most profound impact on present day China. They are Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin.

These men are interesting. Their complex personalities reflect the enigma that China remains among world powers. The outside world can easily penetrate the bamboo curtain today, but to understand the heart of the dragon is not so easy, for it seems to beat to a drummer often quite different from that of its neighbors.

In the following profiles, we have not attempted to evaluate the extent to which these men imposed their personality on the main events of the last fifty years. We have merely tried to give some facts about their persons and their lives. Others have written long definitive and popular biographies of these men. They have analyzed their achievements and successes; they have condemned their aberrations and failures. What we have done for this anniversary issue is merely to select the four men that we consider the world will long remember as the architects of modern China. The reader might have selected others.

Mao Zedong (1893-1976)

Born in a peasant family in Shaoshan village, Xiangtan prefecture, Hunan Province, in 1893, Mao joined the CCP while working in the Peking University library under Li Dazhao, a founder of the CCP in 1921. He rose to party leadership by the 1930s, stressing that China's Marxist revolution would be won by the peasants, and not by an urban proletariat. He led the CCP on the Long March and then established the People's Republic of China in 1949. Until his death in 1976, he was the paramount political leader and theorist of the CCP.

Influential movements under Mao's leadership included the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1957, in which the nation's intellectuals were encouraged to criticize the Communist Party. The resultant outpouring of expression was immediately cut off when an "antir-rightist campaign" was launched against those who had spoken out. In 1958-61, the Great Leap Forward was launched to heighten economic productivity through mass organization and stirring up revolutionary fervor among the people. This ill-advised program ended in a widespread famine in which it is estimated that some 20 million died.

The Cultural Revolution in 1966-76 was another of Mao's programs that led to social upheaval. It began as a struggle between Mao himself and other top party leaders for dominance in the CCP. It ended up having a deleterious effect on all of China.

In spite of these terrible fiascoes, Mao has been hailed as a great revolutionary of the mid-20th Century. He successfully seized the power using the Marxist-Leninist theory and adapted it to the realities of the situation in China. Some people, however, consider that he spent too much of the nation's energy on mass movements and destructive conflicts, which hampered national progress.

Zhou Enlai (1898-1976)

Born in Huaian, Jiangsu Province, in 1898, Zhou was a student leader in Tianjin during the May 4th Campaign in 1919. He went to France to study in the early 1920s and joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1922. Zhou was named director of the political department of the Whampoa Academy after he returned from France. He was one of the most powerful and respected leaders of the CCP from the days of the Long March, the 6,000-mile journey

made by the Communist forces escaping the suppression of the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party) led by Chiang Kai-shek. Zhou was a member of the politburo standing committee from 1956-76. He served as premier of China from 1954 until his death in 1976.

Zhou was influential in formulating and initiating Chinese foreign policy and won praise in the revolutionary struggle and in the management of state affairs. In his speech at the Fourth National People's Congress in 1975, he laid the groundwork for what has since become known as the Four Modernizations: a comprehensive modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. The program's aim was to lead China to the front ranks of the world by the end of the century. Throughout his years in the Party, Zhou submitted to Mao Zedong's leadership, running the government while moderating certain of Mao's excesses. In the Tiananmen demonstrations of April 5, 1976, the Chinese people expressed their admiration for Zhou as a moderating influence during the Cultural Revolution.

Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997)

Deng Xiaoping was born in Guangan, Sichuan Province, in 1904. He went to study in France in 1920 and joined the CCP in 1924. During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45), he was one of the leaders responsible for the base areas of resistance against Japan behind the enemy lines in northern China. He also led the People's Liberation Army against Guomindang troops in many battles. In 1952, he was appointed the vice-premier of the Political Council. He was elected secretary-general of the Party and became a member of Politburo Standing Committee in 1956.

A veteran of the Long March, Deng rose to high positions in the Central Committee during the 1950s and early 1960s. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he was attacked and criticized as a capitalist-roader in the Party. He was purged, but was rehabilitated in 1973. In 1976, he was purged again. He returned to power in 1978, replacing Hua Guofeng as paramount leader in 1980.

Deng was elected twice as "Man of the Year" in 1978 and 1985 by Time Magazine in the United States, in recognition of his part in ending the Cultural Revolution and then for the opening of China. A paramount leader of China, Deng was instrumental in implementing the Four Modernizations. Under his leadership, China was diverted from Mao's "politics in command" to his "economics in

command,” hoping to turn the country into an advanced nation by the beginning of the 21st Century. In the early 1980s, he met with Margaret Thatcher, then British Prime Minister, to discuss the future of Hong Kong. Deng fixed the resumption to Chinese sovereignty over the British colony for 1997 and suggested a new and creative plan of ruling Hong Kong with a the formula of “one country, two systems.”

However, Deng’s plan, in the hands of the Party still restrains and controls democracy and freedom. Any person or activity unsympathetic to the Party’s course, is quickly censured for fear that the country’s stability might be disturbed. In the student movement on June 4, 1989, Deng approved of the use of military force to crush the democracy protests at Tiananmen Square. Despite his resignation from all leading posts of the country in 1990, Deng continued to be considered by the Chinese people as the paramount leader, and chief designer of the new China.

Jiang Zemin (1926-)

In 1989, Jiang Zemin rose from relative obscurity to head of the Party when Zhao Ziyang was purged as Party chief after the Tiananmen incident.

Jiang Zemin was born in Yangzhou, Jiangsu, China, on August 17, 1926. By profession, he is an electrical engineer. In the early 1950s, he acted as a counselor at the Chinese embassy in the USSR, and during the 1960s and 1970s he held a variety of industrial positions.

Jiang began his political career in 1980 as Vice-minister in the State Administrative Commission for Import and Export Affairs. Later he served as Vice-minister then minister of the electronics industry until he became Mayor of Shanghai in 1985. In 1987 he became a member of the Politburo. He succeeded Deng Xiaoping as President of the People’s Republic of China in 1993. Today, he is also General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Party’s Central Military Commission.

Jiang is steeped in Communist tradition, but he can also be credited for continuing the reforms started by Deng and for steering China into becoming a more open and modern society.

But it was the pro-democracy protests of 1989 that thrust Jiang into the limelight. He backed Party conservatives who wanted

to use force to end the protests. When the then Party chief, Zhao Ziyang, opposed the use of force to quell the demonstrations, Deng, then top leader, called Jiang to replace Zhao. Later Jiang also headed the propaganda drive calling the Tiananmen massacre a “largely bloodless suppression of a counterrevolutionary rebellion.”

In the recent ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the People’s Republic, Jiang emerged as paramount leader. Standing among the leaders on the Tiananmen Rostrum where Mao Zedong proclaimed the birth of the new China on October 1, 1949, he alone wore a Mao suit. To the music of the military band, and standing in the open car, he reviewed the troops, and exhorted them to serve the people. It was clear to any onlooker that Jiang Zemin was taking his place among China’s “greats”: Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. In the long run, will he be their equal?

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