

## 2 Mao's establishment of an authoritarian state

▶ *Key question: How did Mao impose his authority on China?*

By what means did Mao consolidate his hold upon China?

### → The creation of the People's Republic of China

In Beijing, on 1 October 1949, Mao formally declared the People's Republic of China (PRC) to have come into being. He was now in a position to shape China to his own design. His political approach was essentially simple: China was to be a one-party state and the people were to act in total conformity to the dictates of the new government. The Yanan years had been a preparation for this.

#### The structure of the PRC

For administrative purposes, the country was divided into six regions, each governed by a bureau of four major officials:

- chairman
- party secretary
- military commander
- political commissar.

Since the last two posts were filled by officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) this effectively left China under military control, a situation which Mao Zedong considered offered the best means of stabilizing China and guaranteeing the continued rule of the CCP.

#### The structure of government

The Communist Party claimed that all power rested with the people and that the party officials and the government acted as servants of the nation. Source E shows a model of how the government supposedly operated. It was the workers and peasants who exercised authority through the various connected and overlapping bodies. The Chinese Communists made much of the claim that all party officials were elected. What was not emphasized was that only one party could stand for election, all others being outlawed, and that even those who stood as independents had to acknowledge publicly that the CCP had an absolute right to rule.

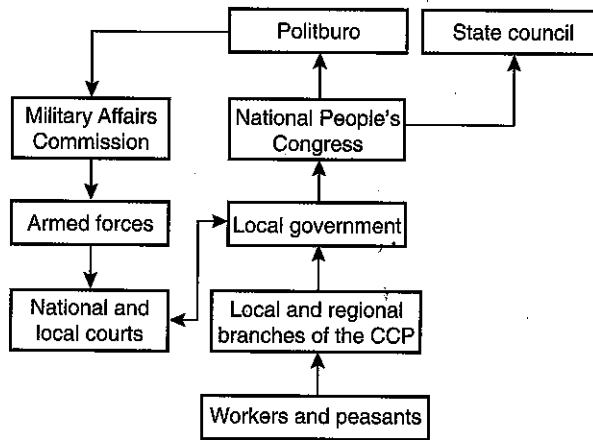
#### KEY TERM

**Politburo** An inner core of some twenty leading members of the Communist Party.

The reality was that government was carried out by the **Politburo**, which was under the authority of Mao Zedong. This did not mean that he initiated every detail of policy; sometimes he chose not to attend Politburo meetings. Nevertheless, nothing could be done of which he disapproved. His was the ultimate authority.

**SOURCE E**

**The structure of Chinese Communist Party rule.**

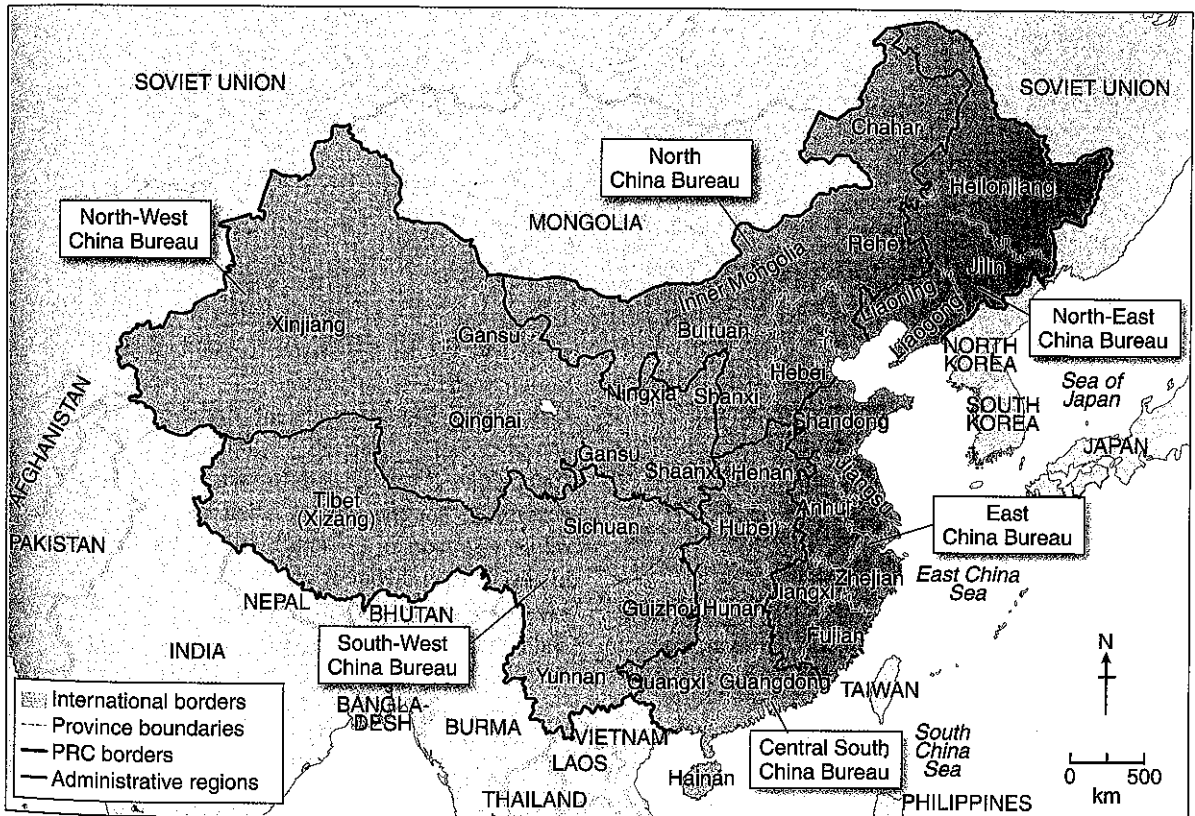


Examine Source E. How was power supposedly distributed within the CCP?

**SOURCE F**

**The administrative regions of the PRC.**

Review Source F. How was power delegated regionally within the PRC?



## KEY TERM

### 'Reunification'

**campaigns** The Chinese government's euphemism for forcibly bringing the invaded provinces into line in 1950.

**Anti-movements** The targeting of those accused of such crimes as waste, corruption and tax evasion.

**United Nations** The organization that superseded the League of Nations in 1945, committed to maintaining international security and promoting human rights. It began with 51 member states and was initially dominated by the USA upon whose financial support it depended.

## The imposition of military control

A clear sign of how dominant the new government intended to be was evident in the way it enforced its control over the outlying areas of China. In 1950, in a series of **'reunification' campaigns** three separate PLA armies were despatched west and south. Officially they were sent in order to help improve local conditions and it is true that troops did contribute to such schemes as road building. But their main purpose was to impose martial law and repress any sign of an independence movement:

- One army was sent into Tibet (Xizang).
- A second went into Xinjiang (Sinkiang).
- A third went into the southern province of Guangdong (Kwantung).

## The anti-movements

The government deliberately created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty by a series of **'anti-movements'**, launched against 'the remnants of the bourgeois class', those whom the CCP regarded as socially or politically suspect. The Chinese people were encouraged to inform on anyone they knew who was unwilling to accept the new regime. A special government department drew up a *dangan*, a dossier, on every suspected Chinese person. If an individual's dossier was dubious, he stood little chance of obtaining work or housing. The restrictive atmosphere this created was intensified by Mao's decision to enter the Korean War in 1950 in support of the North Koreans. This struggle provided further reasons for Mao to demand solidarity and loyalty from the Chinese people.

## The Korean War (1950-53)

The war began with communist North Korea's invasion of US-backed South Korea. The USA responded by sending its forces, under the banner of the **United Nations**, to defend South Korea. Stalin then persuaded Mao to join the struggle on the North Korean side by suggesting that China would be at grave risk if it did nothing in the face of 'American aggression'.

There was some opposition within Mao's government to China's entering the Korean War. Lin Bao, Mao's

deputy, and some of the generals argued that the young PRC's primary task was to use its limited resources to crush its internal enemies, not to fight in Korea. Mao's counter-argument, based on Stalin's analysis, was that the PRC could not run the risk of staying out: if the US were to take Korea it would possess a stepping stone to China itself. His argument won the support of the Politburo which fully backed his decision in favour of war. Opposition was not entirely quelled but Mao suffered no serious challenge and remained in full control.

### Anti-landlord campaign

A particularly fierce anti-movement was the anti-landlord campaign. The property of landlords was confiscated and redistributed among their former tenants. Some landlords were allowed to keep a portion of their land provided they became peasants, but the great majority were put on public trial and denounced as enemies of the people. The evidence that later came to light revealed that as many as 1 million landlords were killed during the PRC's land campaign of the early 1950s.

Study Source G. What information does it provide regarding the way trials were conducted in the people's courts?

#### SOURCE G

A landlord on trial in 1953.



## KEY TERM

**Purges** A system of terror, used by Lenin and Stalin in the USSR and Mao in China for removing anyone regarded as a threat to their authority.

**Rightists** Those who argued for a slower, less violent development of revolution.

## The '100 Flowers' campaign, 1957

Mao's **purges** extended to the Communist Party itself. Members suspected of not being fully supportive of Mao and the new China were referred to in such derogatory terms as 'rightists', 'revisionists' and 'capitalist roaders'. A variant on, and seeming contradiction of, this hard line was Mao's invitation to CCP members to criticize government and party policies. In 1957, using the slogan 'Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend', Mao called on members to debate the great issues facing China. Although wary at first of responding, members eventually began to voice their feelings. Initially, only mild suggestions for improving things were expressed, but these were soon overtaken by increasingly bitter denunciations of individuals and government policies. There were even attacks on Mao; a university professor referred to the 'arbitrary and reckless' character of the Chairman's authority. Declaring himself appalled by the outpouring of disloyalty from 'rightists', Mao ordered an immediate ending of the Hundred Flowers campaign. Those who had spoken out too strongly were condemned as 'anti-socialists' who had abused the campaign in an attempt to undermine the CCP and the nation. Thousands of such 'rightists' were arrested and imprisoned.

What were Mao's motives in launching the 100 Flowers campaign?

## → Key debate

### Was the campaign simply a ruse?

Many historians have discussed the question of why Mao introduced the 100 Flowers campaign. The reason for concentrating on this particular theme is that it is seen as illustrating the essential nature of Mao's approach to the governing of China. Some writers, most notably Jung Chang in her 2005 biography of Mao, argue that the speed with which he reversed his policy was proof that the campaign had been a trick on his part from the beginning. She suggests that, far from being intended as a liberalizing measure, it was a deliberate manoeuvre by Mao to bring his critics into the open so that they could be easily exposed, identified and removed (see Source H).

#### SOURCE H

**An excerpt from *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, published Jonathan Cape, London, 2005, p. 435.**

*Few guessed that Mao was setting a trap, and that he was inviting people to speak out so that he could use what they said as an excuse to victimise them. Mao's targets were intellectuals and the educated, the people most likely to speak up.*

As Jung Chang sees it, the 100 Flowers campaign was part of the movement towards a controlled society in which all expression of opinion had to meet the criteria of political correctness as defined by Mao. The way in which 'the anti-rightist' campaign purged the government and Party of his critics was of a scale and ruthlessness that anticipated the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution a decade later (see page 142). This is a strongly put case, but it needs to be pointed out that Jung Chang has become renowned, not to say notorious, for her personal hatred of Mao, an animus that other writers have

? According to Source H, who were Mao's targets in the 100 Flowers campaign?

suggested distorts her judgement. In *Was Mao Really a Monster?* (a 2010 book edited by Gregor Benton and Lin Chun), fourteen scholars offered a powerful rebuttal of Jung Chang's claims by pointing to her suspect methodology and lack of balance.

### Was Mao genuinely seeking criticism?

Prior to Jung Chang's biography appearing, Lee Feigon, an American scholar, had published a revisionist argument in which he contended that Mao had been genuine in his original appeal for ideas to be expressed. This was not to say Mao was being tolerant. His intention was to undermine the bureaucrats in the government who in the short time that the PRC had been in existence had come to have too big an influence in the running of affairs. Feigon puts it in these terms:

#### SOURCE I

**An excerpt from *Mao: A Reinterpretation* by Lee Feigon, published by Ivor R. Dee, Chicago USA, 2002, p. 112.**

*By giving scientists and engineers the freedom to express their ideas, Mao sought to prevent party bureaucrats from interfering with technical decisions. He wanted intellectuals to expose and attack corruption and bureaucracy. He also wanted peasants, students and workers to speak out and even demonstrate to prevent government bureaucrats from running roughshod over their rights.*

According to Source I, what means did Mao use to restrict the influence of party bureaucrats?

### Was the campaign part of a structured process?

Interpreting the motives behind the campaign as sinister, Yves Chevrier, a French scholar, suggests that the 100 Flowers campaign was a stage in an unfolding process by which Mao set out to reassert his authority and destroy all vestiges of opposition (see Source J).

#### SOURCE J

**Excerpt from *Mao and the Chinese Revolution* by Yves Chevrier, translated by David Stryker, Interlink Books, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA, 2004, p. 123.**

*The 100 Flowers turned out to be the eye of the cyclone that would bring the Great Leap, itself a precursor of the Cultural Revolution. This moment of open debate, when contradictions were openly discussed for the first time in years, was like a carnivorous flower, ready to close upon its prey ... it enabled his [Mao's] political comeback within the Party leadership.*

According to Source J, how is the 100 Flowers campaign linked with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution?

### Did the 100 Days Campaign result simply from a muddled dispute within the CCP?

Jonathan Spence, widely acknowledged by his fellow historians as the leading authority on Mao's China, dismisses the idea that the 100 Flowers campaign was a ruse by Mao to bring his enemies into the open. Spence sees the affair as the confused result of contradictory thinking among the CCP leaders (see Source K, page 138).



According to Source K, what central argument divided the CCP's leaders?

**SOURCE K**

**An excerpt from *The Search for Modern China* by Jonathan Spence, published by Norton, New York, USA, 1990, p. 574.**

*It was rather, a muddled and inconclusive movement that grew out of conflicting attitudes within the CCP leadership. At its core was an argument about the pace and development that was best for China, a debate about the nature of the First Five-year Plan and the promise for further growth. From that debate and the political tensions that accompanied it sprang the Great Leap Forward.*

**Further points in the debate**

There is also the possibility that Mao was influenced by events in the USSR: 1956 was the year that the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, shook the communist world by launching an extraordinary attack on the reputation of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin, who had died three years earlier. Khrushchev denounced Stalin for his 'cult of personality' (see page 49). Mao could see how easily this charge could be made against him in China. His apparent encouragement of criticism from within the Party was, therefore, a way of taking the sting out of such a suggestion and preventing the comparison being made between him and Stalin. However, if Mao had indeed launched the 100 Flowers out of a fear of being compared with Stalin, the fear greatly lessened from late 1956. In November of that year Khrushchev sent Soviet tanks into Budapest to crush the **Hungarian Uprising**. That was the Soviet leader's way of making it clear that de-Stalinization did not mean the lessening of the grip of the Communist Party over the USSR or the weakening of Soviet control over the **Eastern bloc**.

Mao fully approved of the Soviet action for two reasons. In the first place, he believed it was the kind of tough line that communist governments should take in order to maintain their authority. In the second, he was relieved by the knowledge that the Soviet Union had merely been flirting with liberal ideas. This meant that he did not need to compete with Khrushchev in the defence of hardline communism. Neither leader had any intention of relaxing his political control over the people.

It might be wondered why Mao was so sensitive to happenings in the USSR. The answer is that, at this early stage of its development, the PRC still regarded itself as being dependent on the economic and diplomatic support of the Soviet Union. It would not be until later that Mao and the Chinese Communists would feel strong enough to throw off Soviet dominance and challenge the USSR for the leadership of international communism.

**Conclusion**

In the event, what most scholars agree on is that whatever Mao's motives may have been, it was the scale of the criticism that the 100 Flowers unleashed that took him aback. He had not realised the extent of the dissatisfaction with the Party which the campaign had revealed. In practical terms there was little difference as to whether he intended from the

**KEY TERM**

**Hungarian Uprising** An attempt, in October to November 1956, by the Hungarian communist government to break free of the Soviet Union's control; it was crushed by invading Soviet forces.

**Eastern bloc** The countries of central and eastern Europe which were dominated by the Soviet Union between the late 1940s and late 1980s.

beginning to flush out opponents or whether he decided to do this once he had discovered the extent of the opposition. The outcome was the same: Mao crushed those he thought were opposed to him.

## Economic policies

Nothing illustrates Mao's concept of the PRC as a collective nation more clearly than his economic programme. Although he had led a great peasant movement to victory in 1949, his basic aim was to develop China as an industrial power. However, despite attempting initially to establish the economy through a **Five-Year Plan**, introduced in 1952, the PRC had lacked the available resources and had had to rely on aid from the USSR. Mao had never been happy with this since the Soviet Union charged heavily for the loans and material it provided.

### 'The Great Leap Forward', 1958–62

By 1958, Mao had become resolved to break the Soviet grip. He had convinced himself that rapid industrial growth could be achieved by a huge communal endeavour of the Chinese people, which would create the resources needed. The centrepiece of this strategy was a Five-Year Plan introduced by Mao in 1958 as 'the Great Leap Forward'. It was based on two principal assumptions:

- The peasants would produce a surplus of food to be sold abroad to raise money for the expansion of Chinese industry.
- The workers, largely through the mass production of steel, would create a modern industrial economy, powerful enough to compete with the Soviet Union and the capitalist West.

Mao used the word 'leap' to suggest that China could bypass the stages through which the advanced nations had gone, and go straight from being a rural, agricultural economy to becoming an urban, industrial one. He called on the people from the youngest to the oldest in every town and village to work together in this great project.

With extraordinary enthusiasm the mass of the Chinese people tried to meet the production quotas laid down in the plan. Throughout China, the sky glowed red at night as families everywhere endeavoured to produce steel in homemade kilns. But goodwill alone cannot produce good steel. By rejecting modern technology in favour of mass effort Mao had made the targets unattainable. What was catastrophically worse than the economic failure of 'the Great Leap Forward' was the widespread famine that directly resulted from it.

### China's great famine

The first step in 'the Great Leap Forward' had been a mass **collectivization** programme, under which:

- China's half a billion peasants were obliged to live and work in **communes**
- 70,000 of these were now created across China

← What did Mao's economic policies aim to achieve?

#### KEY TERM

**Five-Year Plan** A programme for industrial development based on a set of production quotas.

**Collectivization** Depriving the peasants of their land and requiring them to live and work in communes.

**Communes** Collective farms.



- individual peasants or families would no longer be allowed to farm for themselves or make a profit
- any surpluses became the property of the state, to be invested in industrial growth.

Mao had believed that collectivization would lead to a great increase in food production. The opposite happened. Disorientated by the disruption to their way of life, the peasants were unable to adapt to the new system imposed on them; they had no understanding of how to farm on a large communal scale. Crop yields fell sharply and hunger became widespread.

#### SOURCE L

##### China's agricultural record, 1956–62.

Year	Grain production (million tons)	Meat production (million tons)	Index of gross output value of agriculture
1956	192.8	3.4	120.5
1957	195.1	4.0	124.8
1958	200.0	4.3	127.8
1959	170.0	2.6	110.4
1960	143.5	1.3	96.4
1961	147.5	1.2	94.1
1962	160.0	1.9	99.9

Study Source L. What insight into the famine does the source provide?

#### The death toll

Blaming the reported shortfalls on poor local management and grain hoarding by rich peasants, Mao pressed ahead with collectivization. He claimed that it was the peasant masses who were demanding to be collectivized. Production figures were rigged to show how plentiful the harvests had become. The party launched a propaganda campaign detailing the benefits of collectivization. Newspapers carried images of beaming peasants gathering giant mounds of grain and rice. It was all untrue, but officials who expressed doubts were replaced, while peasants who protested were put into **labour camps**. Between 1958 and 1962, some 40 million Chinese starved to death. By his adherence to collectivization, Mao had turned China's rural provinces into killing fields. The death toll in the worst hit areas was:

- Shandong – 7.5 million
- Anhui – 8 million
- Henan – 7.8 million
- Sichuan – 9 million
- Qinghai – 1 million
- Tibet – 1 million.

#### Lack of opposition to collectivization

If there was any moment in Mao's rule of China when his opponents could have taken up the attack, the onset of the famine would seem to have

#### KEY TERM

**Labour camps** Prisons and detention centres in which the inmates are required to perform heavy work.

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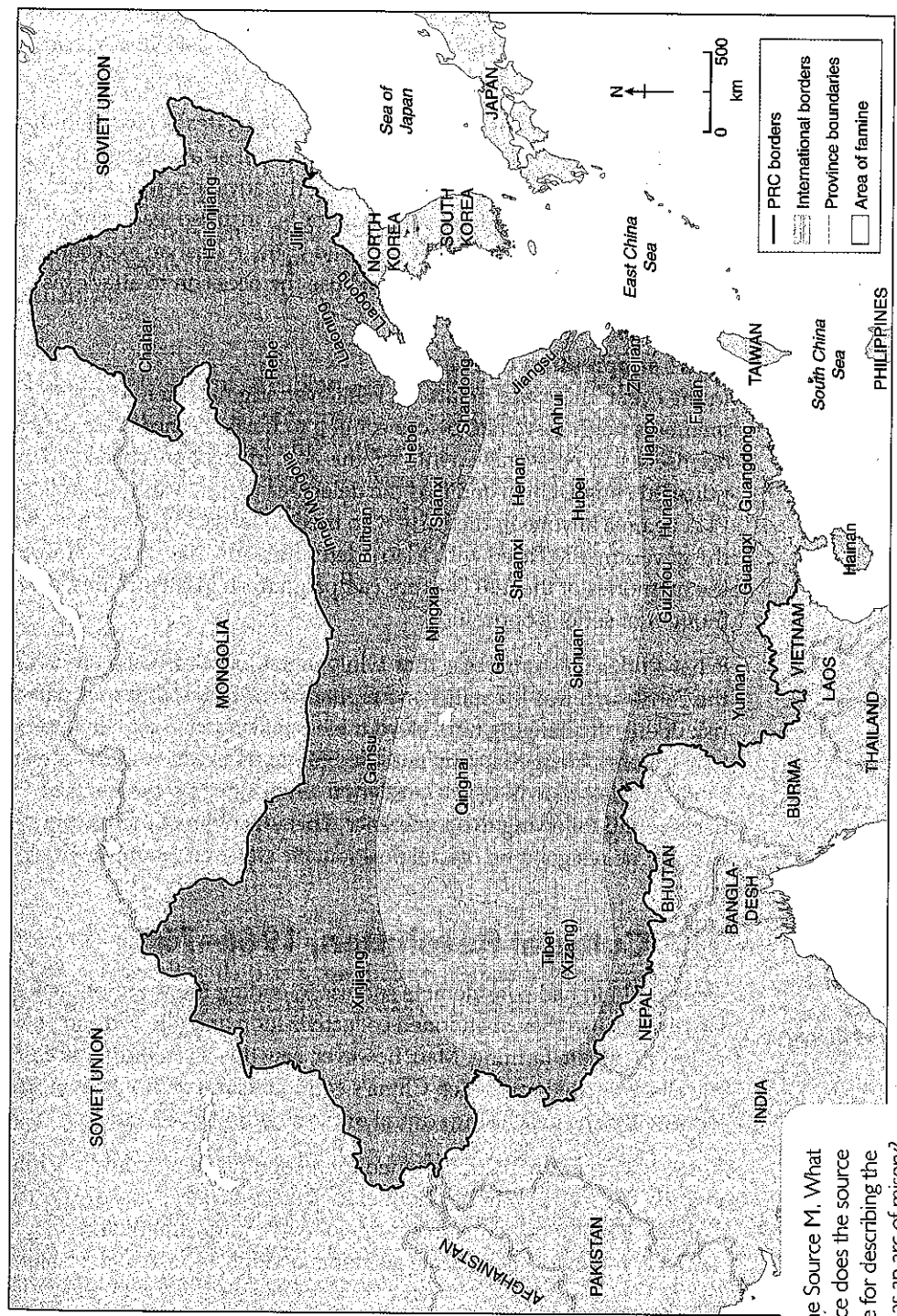
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**SOURCE M**

Map showing the worst hit areas in the Great Famine.



Examine Source M. What evidence does the source provide for describing the famine as an arc of misery?

provided it. At a Party gathering in Lushan in 1959, Peng Dehuai, the PRC's Minister of Defence, recounted the horrors of the famine he had seen in his own province of Anhui and begged that action be taken to alleviate the suffering. This was the moment for the other Party delegates to back him by confirming the truth of what he had described.

But none did. Unwilling to offend Mao, the delegates persisted in their obedience to him by denouncing Peng's account as a fabrication. They then proceeded to make speeches noting the advances made under the Great Leap Forward and praising Mao for his inspired leadership. The particular irony of this was that Mao had gone to Lushan expecting trouble. He feared that some members would use the occasion to attack his economic policies.

### **Mao's suppression of dissent**

In the event, there was no attack. Whatever original intentions some members might have had before coming to Lushan, once there they allowed themselves to be overawed into submission. In an angry speech, Mao ridiculed Peng Dehuai and told the delegates that he was prepared to use the PLA against anyone in the Party who tried 'to lead the peasants to overthrow the government'. Faced with Mao's determination, the Party members, with the memories of the '100 Flowers' campaign fresh in their minds, dropped all thought of serious opposition.

What all this illustrated was that, while there doubtless were critics of Mao in the Party, such was his status and reputation as leader that they dared not risk openly challenging him. Nevertheless, having instructed two prominent party figures, Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, to tackle the task of restoring food supplies, Mao judged it prudent to withdraw into the political background following the conference. This was not a relinquishing of power as such; he resigned no official position. He was free to return whenever he chose.

In what ways was the Cultural Revolution intended to make Mao's control of China permanent?

## → **The Cultural Revolution, 1966–76**

Deng and Liu had considerable success in ending the worst of the famine, largely because they abandoned collectivization and allowed the peasants to return to private farming. Mao, however, saw this as an undermining of the socialist principles on which China's communist revolution rested. He worried that he was losing control of the situation in China.

In 1966, Mao returned, determined to reassert his dominance in Chinese politics. The means that he adopted to achieve this was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a massive purge of party, government and people, aimed at removing all possible elements of opposition, real or imagined.

### **Mao's motives**

A variety of intentions and motives can be adduced to explain Mao's implementation of the Cultural Revolution.