

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “CHINA UNDER MAO”

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On-screen text:
China Under Mao
a discussion with Andrew Walder

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Professor Walder: Most of what Mao tried to do backfired on him. The central organizing theme of the book, starting with chapter 7 and going through the very end, is that each time Mao tried a bold initiative, it had outcomes that must have surprised him—certainly [that] he did not welcome—and he repeatedly changed his tactics and ran into new problems. In the end—although this isn’t explicitly argued—I think you could probably draw the conclusion from the story that Mao lost his way in the end and ended up doing things that did enormous harm to China. He became so fixated on maintaining his vision that he lost sight of the damage that it was causing the country.

What’s remarkable about him as a leader of a communist country is that he’s the only one who ever fomented rebellion against the state that he’d set up. If he had only wanted to get rid of officials who disagreed with him, he didn’t need to do that. I think that’s the thing that is really most remarkable about Mao as a leader.

The other thing that I think people should walk away [with] after reading the book is that the period from 1949 through 1976 was really the core of the Chinese revolution. We tend to think of revolutions as being over when a new government takes power. But in China, that was just the beginning.

China had not changed very much in 1949. The party had only controlled limited areas of the countryside. It ran no cities. It had this extremely rapid military conquest of China. The revolution in China was not one where ordinary people rose up under the leadership of guerrilla forces and took power in the cities. The Communist Party was able in the late 1940s to create a large modern army in Manchuria, and it basically rolled south and then west across China. It was a military conquest. So basically, the transformation of China that took place—the revolution—really began in 1949 and ’50, after this army took power. That’s another thing that I think people should walk away from the book thinking about.

One of the things that surprised me in doing research for the book—and this is some of the new histories of the late 1930s and 1940s movement in Yan’an that I drew upon, things that weren’t available when I first started doing work on China in the ’70s and ’80s—it’s very clear that for a period of two or three years, Mao felt like he really had to burnish his credentials as a Marxist and also as a leader of a major communist party. He studied Soviet textbooks and encyclopedia articles under the tutelage of people like Chen Boda, who later helped him launch the Cultural Revolution [and] who had studied in Moscow in the previous years. The Marxism and the Soviet-style communism that he studied was Stalinism. It was the early Stalin era. Mao adopted those ideas wholeheartedly. He adopted the idea—which was Stalin’s idea—that class struggle did not end when you’ve created the foundations for a socialist economy. In other words, exploiting classes are still out there trying to undermine the revolution.

The other idea [that he adopted] is that there has to be one supreme leader that decides which ideas are correct and which ideas are traitorous, and people who disagree with that leader and who persist have to be removed. This is when you started to get portraits of Mao. He consciously set out to develop the thoughts of Mao Zedong, helped greatly by these better-educated editors and thinkers like Chen Boda. That was the beginning of it.

Over the years, as the Cultural Revolution unfolded, it reached a level that I suppose you can laugh at in retrospect, but he was treated as almost a godlike figure. At a certain period—for about a year, in 1968–69—people, when they went to work in the morning, went to little altars that had a bust of Mao or a photograph of Mao and recited some of his sayings from the “Little Red Book” of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*. They would ask for instructions and bow to his portrait. And then at the end of the day they would have another meeting, a little assembly in [their] workgroup, and do the same thing. They also had something called the “loyalty dance”—loyalty to Chairman Mao—where people would do a series of movements and sing a song about a million hearts beating in unison and loving and cherishing Chairman Mao.

There were other aspects of this, and the Mao cult really went wild in '67, '68, '69. Apparently, at one point, Mao, at a party meeting—there was kind of a dose of realism—said, “What is all this? This is ridiculous.” And then it just ended. He still was very much an icon, but the dancing and the religious worship kind of faded away.

Actually, through most of the last half of the Mao era, the end of a lot of the negative things that happened really didn't come about until Mao himself said, “We should really stop this” or “Why are we doing it this way?” And it's interesting that the party—the people under him—then immediately took the signal and toned things down.

The things that Mao stood against—a leadership that is concerned with stability, with economic development, with security, with improving the standards of living of the Chinese people... those are the ultimate values for the leadership today, and Mao denigrated those ideas throughout his life. He did not want stability. He thought that if China was left to develop under stable dictatorship of the party, the party members would set themselves apart from ordinary people, would have a better lifestyle, would grasp privileges for themselves. He saw this happening in the Soviet Union, and he called this “revisionism.” He had this strange idea that it was capitalism or reversion to capitalism; it actually was the opposite of capitalism. What he foresaw as a future of China that he disapproved of was a bureaucratic dictatorship based on total state control and the privileges that inevitably came from that.

If you understand in a clear-eyed fashion what Mao stood for and what he tried to fight for in his life, you realize that China's leaders today—whatever their reverential attitude towards him is—they are doing everything that he fought against during his life. I think people in China are very fortunate that that is the case. In many ways, the polite and semi-worshipful attitude towards Mao by the current leadership really glosses over absolutely fundamental differences between China in that period and the leaders today.

Another way in which it helps us to understand China today—and this is related to the campaign against corruption and all the similar things that people write about, things that have gone wrong in China under its market reforms—is that party officials (and I said this in the first few minutes) were under extraordinary scrutiny. They were under constant threat of being removed from power, criticized, even being put in prison for disobeying party policy. After Mao's death, the party relaxed this kind of super-aggressive, almost punitive attitude

towards party officials, and gave them a great deal more space to do what they wanted. One of the results, in the context of a market economy, is that they've enriched themselves. What's interesting is this is more like capitalism, but it's very different from what Mao said was capitalism back in the 1960s and '70s.

Another way in which it helps us to understand China today is that the relaxation of the control over party officials, the relaxation of the campaigns that were so damaging and bloody in China in that period, has led to an exacerbation of the abuse of power and the use of people's positions to enrich themselves. As much as Mao was worried about this in his life, that was almost absent. People today look back on the Mao period, I think with some justification, as one where party officials were not as corrupt as they are today. They may have abused their power somewhat, but they led very simple, even spartan lives. No one amassed fortunes. Party officials today can travel abroad; they fill up the business and first class cabins of international air flights; they come here and they buy real estate. They're part of the international jet set, the international elite. There was nothing like this when Mao was alive, and I don't think he could even have imagined that this was a possibility.