

# CHINA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

MODERNIZATION  
AND TRADITION



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## **PRC POLITICS UNDER MAO: 1949–1976**

### **CONSOLIDATION OF POWER, 1949–1955**

Mao Zedong was under no illusions that the revolution had been won when the CCP took power on the mainland; he explicitly compared the founding of the People's Republic of China to the first step on a new Long March. Victory had come more quickly than even the optimists had predicted. During the later stages of the war, the communists troops' main challenge was not fighting the KMT troops, who were in full retreat, but running after them. Some soldiers jokingly referred to this as "the battle with the feet." Still, CCP leaders were aware that they had not won the hearts and minds of the majority of the population. The next few years may be characterized as the party's efforts to legitimize its power.

A first step was the establishment of the organs of government. In the fall of 1949, the CCP convened a meeting of over more than twelve hundred "persons from all strata of society" called the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). In addition to CCP members, delegates included representatives of assorted patriotic associations and minor political parties, including the China Democratic League and the KMT Revolutionary Committee. The latter had broken away from the main body of the KMT some years

earlier in protest against some of its policies. Also attending were several warlords, a few former members of the KMT, prominent lawyers, doctors, professors, social workers, artists, members of ethnic minorities, and religious leaders. There appear to have been two criteria for receiving an invitation to the CPPCC. First, the invitees had to be influential with a sizable number of people either because, like the warlords, they held a great deal of power or because, like the religious leaders and the professional experts, they were highly respected. Second, the individual had to have indicated that he or she agreed with the idea of social change. Given the economic and social chaos in China at the time, this second criterion was not difficult to meet.

The rationale for this type of meeting is to be found in a creative adaptation of Marx written by Mao several years before, called "On the New Democracy." In it, Mao argues that since China was still colonial and semifeudal, its principal enemies were imperialism and semifeudal forces. Thus, all other forces, even the bourgeoisie, should unite against these enemies in a democratic dictatorship of several revolutionary classes under the leadership of the proletariat. In this way, China could pass through the bourgeois-democratic phase called for by Marx while preparing the conditions for the socialist revolution. The CPPCC would serve as the vehicle to initiate this dictatorship.

The CPPCC, its disparate composition allowing the CCP's carefully organized voice to dominate, passed a document called the Common Program. It would function as a protoconstitution until elections could be held and a more legitimate constitution agreed upon. The program declared that China was a democratic dictatorship of four classes: the working class, the peasant class, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeoisie included such people as tradesmen, peddlers, and owners of small shops. The national bourgeoisie was understood to mean persons of more substantial means who were considered patriotic: They had not collaborated with the Japanese or been suborned by any other foreign power.

Under the leadership of the working class and the CCP, the People's Democratic Dictatorship would suppress those lackeys of imperialism the landlord class, the bureaucratic capitalist class, and the KMT reactionaries.<sup>1</sup> Those who could be re-educated would be dealt with leniently; those who could not or would not would be dealt

with ruthlessly. The CPPCC also adopted a flag symbolic of this class structure: red, with four small gold stars representing the four classes surrounding the large gold star of the CCP. The design of the flag has also been officially described as the large star representing the dominant Han nationality and the smaller stars standing for the more important minority groups—Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus, and Muslims.

The decision to include the bourgeoisie in the coalition allowed the adoption of parliamentary forms, since China was judged to be in the bourgeois-democratic phase of the revolutionary process. It also provided the theoretical basis for a new united front. Unlike the two previous united fronts, this was composed of several different *classes* rather instead of an alliance of the CCP and the KMT. Its job was to promote the unity of all the people against the nonpeople, the category composed of big landlords, capitalists, and those who had collaborated with foreigners. While democratic in theory, this alliance was to be under the dictatorship of the workers and peasants in the institutional form of their party, the CCP.

Class labels were assigned to everyone, with a certain amount of arbitrariness. Many bourgeois who considered themselves very patriotic might have cooperated with foreigners, sincerely believing that what they were doing was good for China as well as for themselves. One person's judgment of patriotic cooperation might be another person's verdict of treasonous collaboration. Also, a number of peasants had a landlord or person of some wealth in their background. As one peasant about to be assigned a bad class label argued poignantly to party officials, given the fact that marriages entailed the payment of expensive bride prices from the groom's family and the provision of dowries by the bride's, the sort of really poor peasant family favored by communist propaganda would have been unable to arrange a match and was apt to have died out as a result.

To make matters worse, class labels were not only assigned for life, they were hereditary. This caused problems when the children of bad classes wished to get married, apply for jobs, or seek educational opportunities. Such hereditary designations cannot be considered Marxist, since if a person no longer controls the means of production, he or she cannot be considered a member of the exploiting class. They do not even seem properly Maoist since, as we have seen, Mao emphasized the value of persuasion and education

in molding socialist attitudes. Hereditary class designations are decidedly antimodern—in fact, feudal. As time went on, they were increasingly irrelevant to the Chinese context, since former landlords became the exploited class and party members took charge of the means of production (albeit on behalf of the collective) and prospered thereby. Why, then, did the CCP not undertake a new class analysis? Quite clearly, it was because this would risk alienating its main supporters.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the party set about creating unity among those it had designated the people. A series of mass campaigns was begun in order to build up popular enthusiasm behind a common cause. The first of these was a 1950 campaign to “Resist the United States and Aid Korea.” In addition to allowing the leadership to support its socialist brethren in North Korea and castigate its chief enemy, the United States, the theme was an excellent one in terms of building a sense of national unity against an external threat. As previously mentioned, many Chinese had stronger loyalties to clan, village, and province than to the nation. This made it difficult to coordinate responses to external aggression. Unity and patriotism would allow the leadership to give concrete form to Sun Yat-sen’s sheet of loose sand.

This campaign, and others like it, took place in a celebratory atmosphere. Workers received time off to attend and were given small flags to wave; children in brightly colored costumes performed traditional dances. The military paraded, to the accompaniment of bands. Stirring speeches were punctuated with firecrackers and concluded with a display of fireworks. The new symbols of loyalty were much in evidence: the national flag and large pictures of Mao Zedong.

Other, less dramatic efforts at unity were also undertaken. The party attempted to impose a common spoken language (standard Mandarin, which the new regime, understandably having no desire to honor the mandarins, referred to “the national language” or “common speech,” in official documents). China is a land of many dialects, some of them mutually unintelligible even when the groups who speak them live in close proximity. Attachment to one’s dialect is one indication of localism; imposing a standard that everyone was required to learn was one way of breaking down local barriers.

The party also took charge of printing and distributing mass-circulation magazines and newspapers using a written language that

was closer to actual spoken Chinese than the literary language that had been used by the official class. This had been one of the demands of the May Fourth generation. Publications written in this "new" form were much easier to read, and hence the party's message could be absorbed more easily. Since the magazines and some of the newspapers were distributed nationwide, they also contributed to unity. At least in theory, Chinese all over the country would be reading the same things. The plethora of currencies that had existed in China prior to the communist takeover was also standardized.

A second mass campaign, which began a few months later, had the counterrevolutionaries as its main focus. Secret societies and anticommunist groups were searched out and, to the extent possible, destroyed. The nonpeople were identified, brought to mass meetings, and struggled against. Repentance might save one, but there were in fact a number of executions after the mass meetings had assessed guilt. Drug dealers, war profiteers, big landlords, pimps, and prostitutes were among the victims. Efforts were made to be more lenient with the less culpable who might have been forced into their illicit trades through poverty. There were programs to train beggars and prostitutes for other professions, and cold-turkey rehabilitation for drug addicts. The methods were crude but effective. Official sources indicate that there were eight hundred thousand executions; other estimates run up to ten million. Party leaders defended the process as necessary: "A revolution is not a dinner party," and "to make an omelet, one must break some eggs." Meanwhile, a generally successful effort was made to convince people that the new government was *for* the people.

The third major campaign, begun in 1951, is known as the *sanfan*, or "three antis": anticorruption, -waste, and -bureaucracy. Its main targets were the cadres (as the CCP called officials, in preference to the old term for bureaucrat that they despised) of party and state organs. There was concern within the ruling elite that a number of opportunists had joined the CCP when its victory was assured, with the motive of profiting themselves and their careers rather than because they had sincerely espoused the party's goals. Other party and state cadres, they worried, had become corrupted by the new opportunities that supervising activities in postwar China offered them. The *sanfan* aimed at purging party and government of careerists.

At first, outside observers viewed the campaign through the per-

spective of the eighteenth-century revolution in France: The Chinese revolution was devouring its own children. Later, opinion changed, and the *sanfan* came to be seen as a manifestation of party health rather than sickness. The attack on deviations and weaknesses within its own ranks was seen as increasing CCP strength and discipline. A few months later, in January 1952, a *wufan* or "five anti" campaign began, with its target the bourgeoisie. The *sanfan* had revealed that most party and government corruption occurred in agencies that dealt with economic matters and had ties with the bourgeoisie. Hence it was decided to attack them as well. The five antis were bribery, tax evasion, fraud, theft of government property, and theft of state economic secrets. Since the two movements overlapped so closely both in time and targets, they are sometimes referred to as the *sanfan-wufan*, or three-anti, five-anti campaign.

Also during the first years after it came to power, the party worked hard to restore the economy and bring it under party control. This included ending the inflation, rebuilding and expanding the infrastructure, instituting land reform, and preparing for collectivization. These will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. It is important to remember, however, that changes in the political party line were often made with economic goals in mind.

### **ESTABLISHING THE ORGANS OF POWER**

For the first few years after the communist takeover, China was divided into six large regions under the administration of Military Administrative Committees, later to be known as Administrative Committees. Since China is so large, and because communications at the time were quite primitive, organizations such as these made sense in terms of allowing the CCP to consolidate its power. There is some evidence that the leadership was worried about the existence of centrifugal forces within these large areas. For example, the leaders of the Northeast and Shanghai regions were both removed on grounds that they had colluded to set up "independent kingdoms" (that is, bureaucracies that could evade Beijing's control), but precisely how far the central leaders thought these regional powerholders intended to go has never been made clear. Although central-regional tensions were a concern during this period, we have too little information to assess how serious a problem they were.

Consonant with the concept of a people's democratic dictatorship, the communist party is and has been the only meaningful party in China since 1949. Also in line with people's democratic dictatorship, a complete state apparatus was set up as well, after basic-level elections had been held in 1953 and a constitution was ratified in 1954. Thus there are two parallel hierarchies, the party and the government, with interlocking memberships (see Charts 5.1 and 5.2). This type of structure is quite different from the Western concept of political parties competing for control of the organs of government. Westerners, noting the overlap in leadership positions at the top of the hierarchy—leading government offices are almost always held by leading party members—are often puzzled by the apparent redundancy of the system. The answer to why two organizations exist where one would seem adequate is that the party is supposed to provide spiritual and ideological input for policies, and the government is supposed to execute the policies provided by the party by working out the administrative details thereof and supervising the routine decisions that follow from it. The party's will is, at least in theory, supreme.

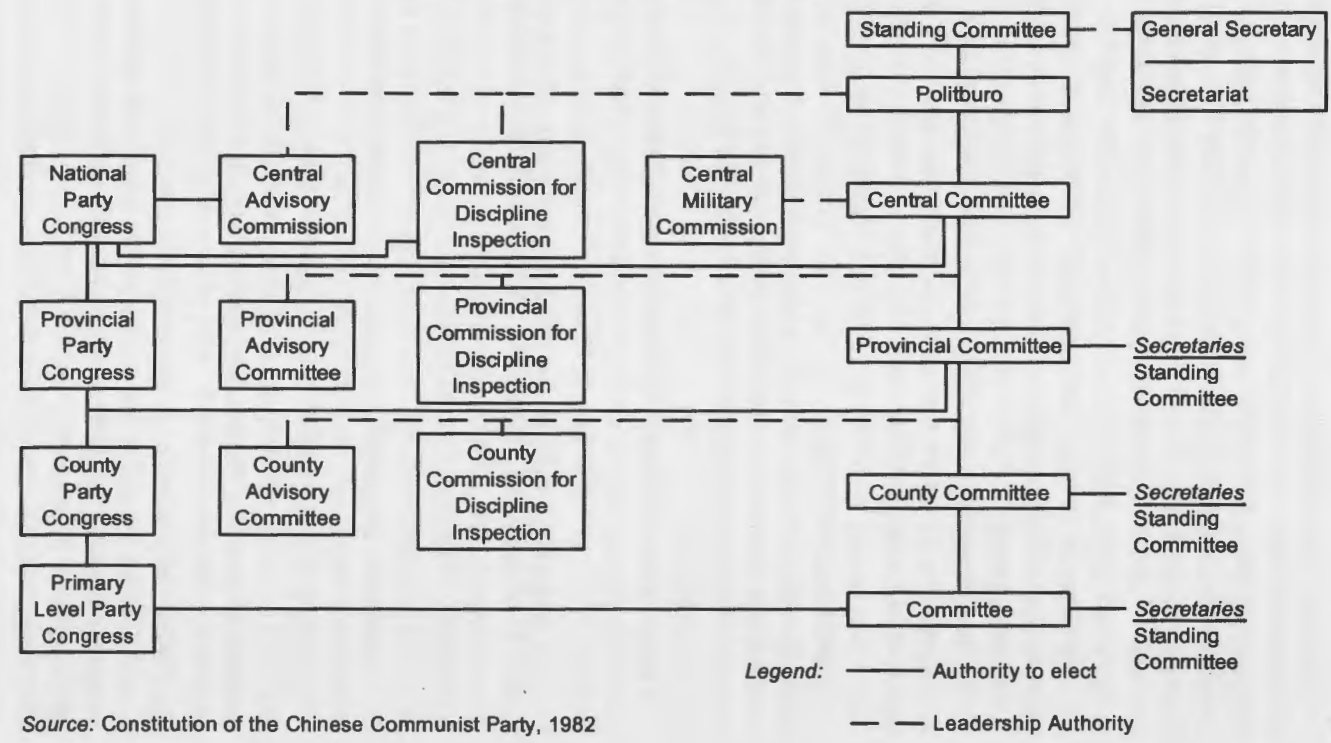
Though given no formal decision-making role in either party or government hierarchy, the military has been a key political actor as well. However, as will be seen in Chapter 9, the dividing line between military and nonmilitary in the PRC has not been sharply demarcated. This was especially true in the early years of its existence. Since members of the elite frequently held leading positions in party, government, and military at the same time, or moved from positions in one hierarchy to another and back again, this was not a case of the military, as a discrete institution, exercising influence over the party or the state.

Chinese political institutions are modeled on those of the former Soviet Union but are not exact duplicates. There is nothing comparable to the Soviet of Nationalities in the PRC, and China's constitution, unlike that of the USSR, does not allow the PRC's constituent units the right to secede.

The highest organ of state, at least in theory, is the National People's Congress (NPC). It is empowered to enact laws, ratify treaties, and select the president and vice-president. Although the presidency and vice-presidency are held by important and frequently powerful people, the offices themselves are largely ceremonial. NPC members are influential within their communities and, like candi-



Chart 5.1  
Organization of the Chinese Communist Party



Source: Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party, 1982

dates at every other level of the state hierarchy, are individuals who are considered acceptable to the party. It is not necessary that they belong to the CCP, although many of them do. Unlike the American Congress, the NPC has no fixed size, though typically there are two to three thousand members. This unwieldy size plus the fact that the NPC meets infrequently means that power is in fact delegated. There is a Standing Committee of the NPC with perhaps 150 members, which is still rather large for interactive debate. It meets fairly frequently, seemingly to explain party policy to the more important nonparty officials. The organ that performs most administrative work is the State Council, headed by a powerful premier assisted by several vice-premiers. Again, there is no fixed number of vice-premiers. The various ministries and commissions are responsible to the State Council.

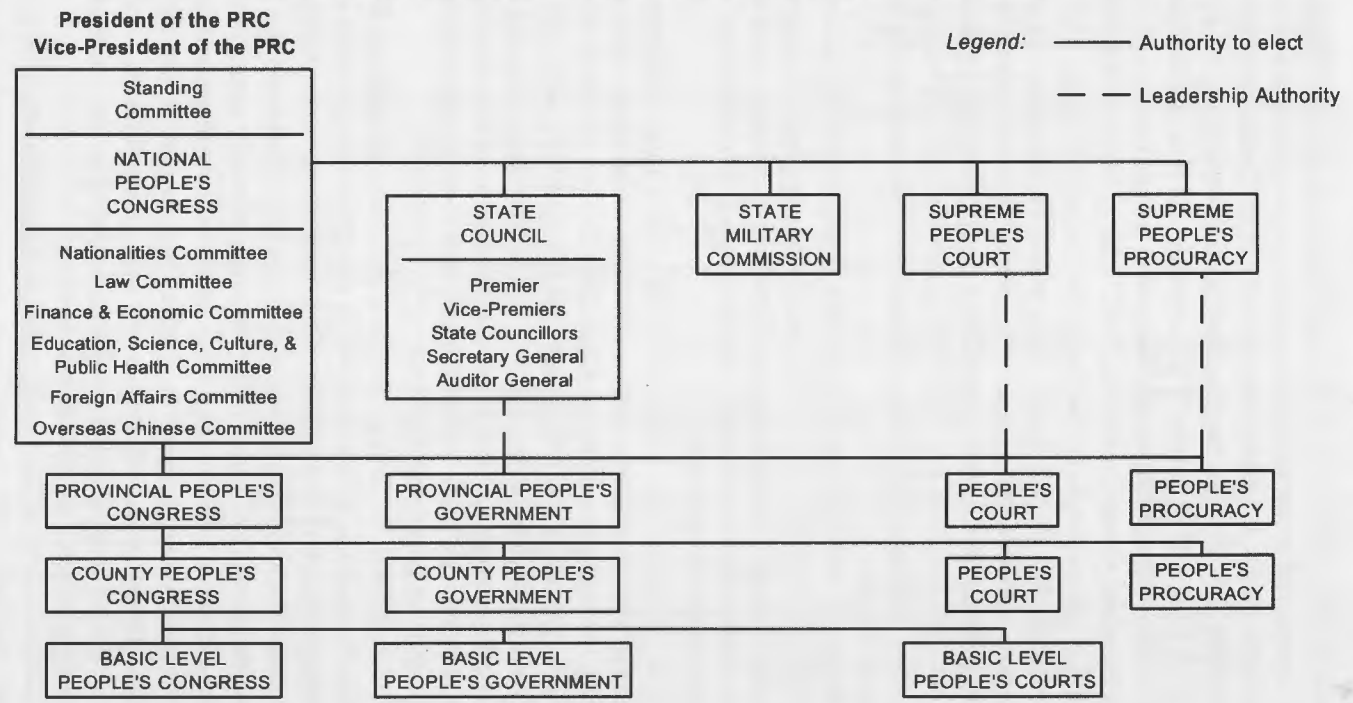
Below the NPC in descending order of importance are provincial or municipal people's congresses, county or city people's congresses, township people's congresses, and basic-level people's representatives. Below the State Council, also in descending order, are people's governments at each level.

It is, of course, the party hierarchy that is more important. A National Party Congress, again a very large body, elects—at least in theory—a central committee (CC). The CC has no fixed size, although typically it will have about 150 full members, who vote, and 125 nonvoting alternates. The CC has a secretariat, selected from among its members, which in turn supervises the descending hierarchy of provincial party and municipal committees, and so on down to basic-level party organizations.

CC members in theory choose a Politburo of perhaps fifteen members, and it in turn selects five or six of them as members of the Politburo Standing Committee. These individuals, and particularly the chair of the Standing Committee, may be considered the most powerful people in China. While the chair normally exercises enormous authority, he is not, and never has been, a totalitarian dictator. It would be more accurate to describe him as first among almost-equals. Decision-making appears to take place through coalition formation among Standing Committee members; the voice of the chair is generally, but not always, decisive.

The process by which lower levels elect higher levels, who in turn make decisions to be passed down along the hierarchy, is called

Chart 5.2  
Organization of the Government of the People's Republic of China



Source: Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1982

democratic centralism. In reality, individuals are chosen rather than elected in free competition, and higher levels appear to choose members for lower levels rather than vice versa. Although all congresses in China claim to be organs of popular political power, only the basic-level congresses are directly elected by the people. Other levels are formally elected by the level just below.<sup>3</sup>

After the establishment of the institutions of state power, the CPPCC did not pass out of existence, but remained as the organ of the united front. Typically, the party congress will meet first and changes, which have been formulated earlier by the Politburo Standing Committee, will be ratified with little debate. Then the National People's Congress will convene and endorse the party congress's decisions. Lastly, the CPPCC will meet and do the same thing.

The relative stability of party and government organs during the last several decades belies the political battles that have swirled around them. From 1956 to 1977, no party congress served its full five-year term, and neither did any of the central committees appointed by the party congresses. The Eighth Central Committee, by contrast, served almost eight years beyond its term. On the government side, the National People's Congress did not even convene in thirteen of the thirty years it was formally in charge, and did not meet for one entire eight-year period between 1966 and 1974. One head of state, Liu Shaoqi, whose term would have officially ended in January 1969, was deposed in October 1968, not by the National People's Congress, which was the only organ legally entitled to do so, but by a plenary session of the party central committee, which did not have a quorum. In 1976, Hua Guofeng was appointed prime minister and Deng Xiaoping removed as deputy prime minister, both of these being government positions, by the *party* Politburo, with no attempt at constitutional legitimization. Deng returned to power, and in 1985 retired several members of the Politburo at a party conference, apparently because he feared the opposition of the constitutionally designated body, the party central committee. And from 1989 on, Deng, the universally acknowledged paramount leader of China, held *no* leadership position in party or government.

The party made considerable efforts to draw the average individual into the political process. Mass organizations were founded, just as they had been in Yan'an. There is a China Youth League, a trade union federation, a women's organization, and a medical associa-

tion, to name just a few of the more important. To reach the individual on a still more personal level, a device based on small study groups was instituted. In the rural areas this was done through the production team, and in urban areas through the *danwei*, or work unit. These were further broken down into *xiaozu*, or small groups, of eight to fifteen people. Based on the model developed at Yan'an, the most common form of the *xiaozu* was the political study group, in which members engaged in long discussions of study materials under the guidance of a group leader. Under the rubric of "criticism and self-criticism," each member was required to express his or her views, criticize himself, and submit to the criticism of others in the group.

The *xiaozu* was of use to the party in a number of ways. First, it gave cadres a forum through which to personally transmit party policy to the average citizen. Second, it placed policy changes in the context of face-to-face discussion, enhancing the possibilities for personal persuasion. Third, since the *xiaozu* normally consisted of people who lived near and worked with each other, it could exercise strong pressures for conformity within the group. Since group conformity was highly valued by Chinese tradition, the CCP could use this predilection to its advantage in gaining unanimous acceptance for policy changes. Fourth, the small group could give individuals a sense of participation in the political process, as well as providing a channel of information for the party on those individuals who showed stubborn or deviant tendencies. Finally, the small group was a method of strengthening the weak vertical integration of Chinese society—the leadership's ability to mobilize popular sentiment behind its policies being an important means of giving structure to the society Sun Yat-sen had described as a sheet of loose sand.

All of this, of course, assumes that the group functions according to plan. It did not always do so. Cadres complained of "individualism" and "particularism" among small-group members who stubbornly resisted accepting an unpopular party policy. Many people were simply bored, and attended the meetings physically while mentally tuning out their content. Even the politically unsophisticated could comprehend that they were being manipulated. Moreover, long periods of time spent in political study meant less time to spend in economically profitable activities. And frustrated cadres often resorted to behavior referred to in party documents as "formalism"

and “commandism.” By 1956, there was a noticeable trend toward ritualism rather than true participation in the small groups.<sup>4</sup>

### **THE HUNDRED FLOWERS PERIOD, 1956–1957**

During the first few years after liberation, there had been fairly broad agreement within the Chinese population on goals, and the party had done a reasonably good job of implementing them. Railroads had been rebuilt and irrigation systems put back in order. The cities, which had been short of food, were better supplied. Inflation was halted and the currency revalued. Land reform was carried out.

By about 1955, however, tensions and stresses had begun to emerge. The mass collectivization of agriculture, handicrafts, private commerce, and industry had proved not nearly so popular as land reform. A much larger number of people perceived themselves as disadvantaged by the collectivization than during land reform and made their views known in a variety of ways. A repression campaign against certain writers had led to a decline in both the quality and quantity of what was written, to the dismay of party leaders.

Mao Zedong realized that these tensions existed and was concerned to do something about them. Elsewhere in the communist world after the death of Stalin, popular discontent had boiled over into rioting in several areas. The Chinese leadership seemed to agree with the analyses made elsewhere that an important cause for these outbursts was that dissension had been repressed for too long.

The Hundred Flowers was Mao’s attempt to do something to ease the tensions within Chinese society. In May 1956, he made a speech that included the phrase “let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend.” The second half of the slogan is a reference to the numerous philosophies that vied for preeminence in the Warring States period two thousand years before. The hundred flowers metaphor seems to have been coined by Mao himself, the assumption being that criticism would have the end result of strengthening socialism, because in the end truth wins out. In the course of debate, more people will become convinced that socialism is true precisely because the controversies will have forced them to

think carefully about various options. This sounds remarkably like ideas advanced by the British utilitarian scholar John Stuart Mill, though there is no evidence that Mao was familiar with Mill's writings.

Mao's speech was made to a group of party leaders and was never published. What we know of it comes from references to the speech that appeared in the Chinese press. These indicate that there were limits within which free speech was to be encouraged. Pornography was explicitly forbidden, as were attitudes such as "The moon in America is rounder than the moon in China" and "Let's all play mahjonn and to hell with state affairs." The assumption was that differences of opinion would not be serious because they would be examples of what Mao referred to as "nonantagonistic contradictions" (that is, those which do not need to be dealt with by coercive means) within the people.

At first, the result of this call for debate was a deafening silence. A well-known anthropologist hinted at the reason with an oblique reference to fear of "early spring weather"—which encourages buds to bloom but is inevitably followed by a frost that kills the flowers. In February 1957, Mao made another speech, not published at the time. Quotations and excerpts that appeared in the press indicate that this second effort went considerably further in encouraging freedom of speech. Backed up by party pressures, it did yield results. Initially, the criticism was mild. Intellectuals asked for a larger role for the CPPCC and democratic parties, and for the right to import more foreign periodicals that were relevant to their work.

Later, the citizenry became bolder, indicating that it now interpreted the still-unpublished second speech as sanctioning freedom of expression. Criticism escalated in ways that the leadership found shocking. Students at Beida designated a particular wall as the place to vent their feelings, and covered it with "big-character" posters highly critical of the party. A Tianjin engineer complained that the communists had promised China a revolution but given it no more than a change of dynasties. A journalist wrote that the party had quickly become estranged from the masses, and that most of its members were "flatterers, sycophants, and yes-men." A professor pointed out that Marx and Lenin had constantly revised their theories and opined that they would not be pleased to learn that people with petty bureaucratic minds (the CCP leaders) were applying their doctrine so rigidly.

Peasants complained that the cooperatives were no good and demanded their land back. Workers proclaimed that the wage system was irrational, and voiced their annoyance at being required to "volunteer" to work overtime without pay. Some people even said they had been better off under the KMT. Ethnic-minority groups advocated splitting off from China and founding independent states.

Clearly this was not the kind of criticism that would be conducive to unity, as the party had hoped for. In fact, it seemed to be pointing toward disunity and centrifugal forces. Mao's February 1957 speech, entitled "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," was finally published, but some passages appear to have been added on. Among other things, it was noted that certain criticisms were not to be considered as fragrant flowers, but rather had been reclassified as noxious weeds in the garden of socialism. As antagonistic contradictions, they would have to be uprooted and destroyed.

The frosty weather that would kill the hundred flowers began in June 1957, and took the form of yet another mass campaign. Known as the Anti-Rightist Campaign, it had identified more than three hundred thousand people as rightists by the end of the year. Many of China's brightest and most dedicated intellectuals were among them. Rather than being encouraged to use their skills in economics, engineering, and astrophysics to help develop China, they had their careers ruined. Jail, reform through labor, or banishment to rural areas (the latter being to acquaint them with the "real" China, thus enabling them to understand the country better, while breaking down the sharp distinction between city and countryside) were among the punishments meted out. Careers were ruined and families split. Some who had been branded rightists divorced, or were divorced by, their spouses in an effort to minimize the stigma on the rest of the family. Others committed suicide; a few were executed.

Despite speculation that the Hundred Flowers had been cleverly contrived from the first to ferret out malcontents, this does not seem to have been the case. The party optimists, including Mao, were apparently genuinely convinced that the campaign would solidify a unified population behind the party and ratify its plans for collectivization. Ideological hard-liners within the party appear to have had from the beginning real doubts about the wisdom of this course, and to have reminded the optimists of this when criticism escalated. Mao then espoused the hard-line position by rewriting his speech and



allowing it to be published. Unity was now to be obtained by weeding out the dissident "rightists."<sup>5</sup>