

“The Mao Years”

1. **Film Synopsis:** This film is the middle section of the “China: A Century of Revolution” trilogy covering the history of the People’s Republic of China in the twentieth century. This film, “The Mao Years: Catch the Stars and Moon” covers the years from 1949 to 1976; it begins right as the Chinese Communist Party taking control after the 1949 Revolution. It covers the Communist consolidation of power; the Chinese role in the Korean war; early efforts at the collectivization of farming; Mao’s attempts at industrial modernization; the era of allowing “a hundred flowers to bloom;” the reaction against this; the failures of The Great Leap Forward; the recovery from The Great Leap Forward; the Cultural Revolution; Mao’s meeting with Nixon, his final months of life and Mao’s death. Also discussed are the internal politics/intrigues of the Chinese Communist Party concurrent with these events.
2. **Map of Events in the film:**

Image Map of China: Events occur all across China. See map of China below:



Events Map of film

Part I:

- [Chinese Communist Revolution: All of China]
- [Communist Consolidation of Power/Reforms/Women’s Rights: All of China]
- [Economic Reforms – Urban: All of China]
- [Economic Reforms – Countryside – Struggles against Landlords: All of China]
- [PRC – USSR Relations: All of China, Eurasia]
- [Korean War]
- [PRC – USA Relations: All of China; Pacific Rim]
- [Collectivization - - -> The Great Leap Forward; famine: All of China]

Part II:

- [Mao’s semi-retirement; in and around Beijing]
- [Recovery from “The Great Leap Forward” : All of China]
- [Mao’s re-entry into politics: All of China]
- [Genesis: The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: All of China]
- [The Cult of Personality of Mao and the Little Red Book: All of China]

[Condemnation of Party Leaders: All of China]
[Formation of the Red Guards: All of China]
[Attacks on the "Four Olds": All of China]
[Abuses of the Cultural Revolution detailed]
[The Cultural Revolution devolves into Factional Warfare/Civil War: All of China]
[Death of Liu Shaoqi/ The Humiliation of Wang Guangmei; Beijing]
[Death of Lin Biao: Beijing]
[Death of Zhou Enlai Beijing]
[Earthquake in Tangshan China]
[Mao's death; All of China]

3. **Critical Reaction:** This film has received very good critical reaction, as have the other two parts of the trilogy and Ms. Williams' additional works on China.

The paper of record for our nation, *The New York Times* (all the new print to fit, as we say) gave it a solid review, available here:

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805EFD7103EF930A25757C0A962958260>

Excerpt: *[It is] the second in the series of three films depicting the struggle of China to realize its economic and political goals. Now firmly under Communist Party leadership, following the direction of Chairman Mao Zedong, China must pursue the security of economic strength in order to support its enormous population. Rarely seen footage is used to illustrate the changes the country must undergo to feed its people and still adhere to strict party doctrine. Mao's Great Leap Forward resulted in a terrible famine.*

Another mainstream media view of the film, also very good, from the *Los Angeles Times* is presented here: http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-13/entertainment/ca-45285_1_mao-years

Excerpt: *The casualty numbers during Mao's rule are truly awesome. Even before 30 million died in the starvation of 1959-61, hundreds of thousands of landlords were killed by revolutionary zealots. (And '60s zealots killed hundreds of thousands more.) Each policy shift by Mao created new enemies of the state, new denunciations of "counter-revolutionaries," new prisoners, new deaths. Those, for example, who had supported his "Let 100 Flowers Bloom" campaign of criticism of party policies were trapped when Mao condemned the campaign.*

Indeed, Mao's rule seemed to be a series of campaigns, each more disastrous than the next. At the same time, Williams reveals the human cost in the faces of those, like Li Maoxiu and Ding Xueliang, who witnessed public beatings and whole families and villages wiped out. Ding's case is especially interesting. He saw people try to eat dirt to stay alive in the farmlands. Later, in the city, he joined the youth-driven red guard of Mao's "Cultural Revolution."

ABC-CLIO Video Rating Guide for Libraries gave an excellent review, available here from the UC Berkeley website: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/MaoYears.html>

Excerpt: *This lengthy but very rewarding program depicts the life of Mao Zedong from the time of the communist victory in 1949 to the 1966 Cultural Revolution and beyond. It effectively establishes the central role played by Mao in shaping the political, cultural, and economic life of China as its people struggled to achieve an idealistic, egalitarian society.*

A sample of the glowing review from [The Journal of Asian Studies](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=6786204) 01 February 1995 54: pp 275-276 <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=6786204>

Excerpt: *The Mao Years 1949-1976 is a worthy successor to China in Revolution 1911-1948. The two videos together offer a chronicling of the first three quarters of the century and are a must for any undergraduate course covering the period . . . It is fundamentally events-driven.*

If one is looking for a “Vox Populi” type of review of the entire trilogy on DVD, the Amazon.com website provides it. Beware: maladjusted people sometimes post bizarre comments here from time to time, or complain about Amazon.com’s service record as well.

<http://www.amazon.com/China-Century-Revolution-Three-Disc/product-reviews/B000Q7ZOLC?pageNumber=2>

Excerpt of sample review: *I teach a course on contemporary Chinese politics, in which most students have little background. These disks are ideal in providing that, allowing students to associate the often-difficult Chinese names with faces and personalities. And doing it in an engaging fashion*

4. **Director Statement and/or Biography:** The following biography is from the www.zeitgeist.com website:

Sue Williams founded Ambrica Productions with producer Kathryn Dietz in 1986 to produce quality documentaries of international scope and interest. From the start China has been a special focus. Williams was the writer, director, and producer of the company’s first project, CHINA: A CENTURY OF REVOLUTION, three feature length films that explored the turbulent social and political history of 20th century China. All three films - China in Revolution, The Mao Years, and Born Under the Red Flag – were broadcast nationally in over 25 countries. With China in the Red she continued the story begun in the CHINA trilogy. Shot over four years, from 1998 to 2001, it is an intimate portrait of ten individuals and their families as they struggle to adapt to China’s dramatic economic reforms. It premiered on PBS’s Frontline series in February 2003.

Williams wrote and directed Ambrica’s critically acclaimed biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. This 2½ hour documentary aired as part of the American Experience series in January 2000; 13 million viewers watched, making it one of the series highest rated programs ever. She wrote and directed two films which aired in 2005. Mary Pickford is a 90 minute portrait of the world’s first international superstar and one of the most powerful women in Hollywood history. It premiered on PBS’s American Experience series in April 2005. Time of Fear, about the internment of Japanese Americans in Arkansas during World War II was released nationally on PBS in May 2005. Ambrica’s films have received widespread critical acclaim and are in educational, home video and international distribution. They have also won awards at numerous festivals, including

the Full Frame Documentary Festival, Female Eye Festival, the Chicago International Television Festival, the International Film and Video Festival, the American Film and Video Festival, the US International Film and Video Festival, the Columbus International Film and Video Festival, and the San Francisco International Film Festival, and have received two Cine Golden Eagles and two Christopher Awards. Williams has presented her China films in a variety of venues including the Asia Societies in New York, San Francisco, and Hong Kong. She has been a guest speaker at Yale University Asian Studies Program, NYU Stern School of Business, Colgate College, Hong Kong University, the Esquel Corporation in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, and Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, China. Williams' newest film is YOUNG & RESTLESS IN CHINA. (from <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?mode=filmmaker&directoryname=chinaacenturyofrevolution>)

The Asia Society: A high quality, in-depth interview with Ms. Williams about her work is available here: <http://asiasociety.org/arts/film/new-perspective-china-sue-williams>

Excerpt:

Q: So, is that what you think made this film really different from other historical documentaries on China, presenting a new insight into the lives of the people at that time?

A: I think the footage was a big factor, but then we did something which not many people have done either, which is we spent a month in the documentary archives in Beijing. This gave us a lot of footage that hadn't been widely seen in the West. I think the one thing that interested me, at a personal level, was that I really wanted to tell this history from a Chinese perspective, not an American one. I didn't want to ask, "Why is it relevant that Sino-American relations were A, B, or C at the time?" I just really wanted to ask: "Why does a peasant woman join the Communist guerillas? What happened in the village after the Japanese came and massacred people? What was the motivation for soldiers joining the Nationalist Army?" It's just not American-centric, and so offers a new perspective.

Ms. Williams' motivations as to her entire career vis-à-vis China are also articulated more clearly here, in a interview on the PBS Frontline documentary series website as well:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/red/ordinary/>

Excerpt: At the same time, over the years of going to China, I was more and more struck by how little Americans know about China, and, in some instances, what negative perceptions they have about it. They do not seem to differentiate between the Chinese and the government, and they see the Chinese as somehow fundamentally different from us. This troubled me because the people I met -- the ordinary people who don't get much attention from politicians and the media -- were people I could connect with. They have had very different lives and experiences, but the people I met had similar interests and concerns to me -- jobs, family, making a living, housing, healthcare, bringing up their children. And I really wanted to show Americans how ordinary Chinese live.

5. Background Essay for Teachers:

This film discusses the seminal events of twentieth century history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). As the main title indicates, it covers the years Chairman Mao was in power, or vied to have absolute power, in the PRC in years after the Communist Revolution of 1949. The film is accurate and detailed, and makes a studied effort not to "take sides" as far as this possible. Hence, while a full spectrum of perspectives on Mao are presented, the documentary itself articulates no evaluation of the man, although most Western observers will perhaps naturally take a dim view of Mao's reign, given the events that transpired. The film draws no conclusions of its own, although sometimes obvious wrongdoing on the part of Mao are left for the viewer to infer. (Such is the case with Chairman Mao's serially "resting" with various young women during various "dance parties" thrown at Chairman's living quarters.)

The film presents several events/eras in Chinese history. The film opens with consolidation of power by the Chinese Communist Party after the Communist Revolution of 1949. It depicts the early consolidation of power by the Communists; the role of women; the PRC involvement in the Korean War; the effort to let "a hundred flowers blossom;" the backlash against this; the move to collectivization; the "Great Leap Forward" and its dire consequences; the recovery from the "The Great Leap Forward," the causes of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and its unfolding and impact; next we see the recovery from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The film finishes with the last years of Mao's life, Nixon's visit and his death. Alongside the above events, the details of the inner workings of the Chinese party (as far as is possible) are presented. Mao's life – as well as the activities of main leaders of the CCP – is presented as the backbone of the documentary.

While the film is objective, it is very honest as well. The costs of the perpetual upheaval during the Mao years are clearly depicted: countless lives are wrecked – or even lost – the maelstrom that resulted from Mao's policies. The filmmakers are very careful to put human faces on events – specific individuals often appear on camera to discuss the events of their lives. One particularly effective voice to look at is Li Zhisui, Mao's own private physician. It should be noted that he spoke from the safety of Carol Stream, Illinois when interviewed.

Be warned: the film is often very frank in its depiction of the violence, cruelty and suffering so common in the times it documents; this may be troublesome for "younger or more sensitive viewers." (Sexual matters, however, are only hinted at.) Teachers should be ready for this.

6. Discussion Questions:

(Social Studies)

Part I

- a. Who was the hero of the Chinese Communist Party and Revolution?
- b. What were the goals of the Chinese Communists when taking power?

- c. What did they do in power?
- d. How were women treated in pre-revolution China? How did the Communists change that?
- e. What were “work units” (*danwei*) and how did they function?
- f. What kind of changes happened in the “countryside?”
- g. What happened to people judged to be landlords, and their families even?
- h. What happened to Li Maoyu, and how did that reflect question “g”?
- i. What happened to peasants because of land reform? How does the experience of Zhou Yuanjiu reflect that?
- j. Who were: Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping?
- k. Describe Mao’s personality as far as you can.
- l. Explain the relationship between Mao and Stalin.
- m. Describe the relationship between the USA and the PRC and how it evolved over Mao’s years.
- n. Which country did China fight in Korea? How did the PRC’s people respond to the war?
- o. What happened during collectivization? How did people feel about it?
- p. What happened at the anti-rightist “struggle” meetings?
- q. Describe China’s relations with the USSR, Taiwan/Formosa, and Tibet.
- r. Describe causes and effects of “The Great Leap Forward.” How is this name ironic?
- s. How many people died in the ensuing famine?
- t. What happened to Liu Shaqi and Peng Dehuai? What do their fates illustrate?

Part II

- a. Who took over the CCP/PRC after Mao retired from active political life?
- b. What happened when reforms were enacted after his retirement?
- c. What happened when Mao exited from his semi-retirement? What event followed from this?
- d. What did Mao attack with in the Cultural Revolution? Who did he enlist to do this?
- e. What did the Red Guards attack?
- f. What were the “Four Olds?” How does Wang Ruowang’s experience reflect this?
- g. Describe some of the treatment people received during the Cultural Revolution?
- h. What might make the Cultural Revolution both a watershed event in Chinese history and yet unique in human history?
- i. Who were the Gang of Four – and what happened to them?
- j. Describe the fates of the Liu Shaqi and his wife during the Cultural Revolution.
- k. What did the Cultural Revolution gradually devolve into? What happened because of this?
- l. What happened to many of the youth who had been involved in the Cultural Revolution?

- m. Evaluate the “cult of personality” vis-à-vis Chairman Mao.
- n. What happened to Lin Biao?
- o. Explain the three-way negotiations/power-plays between the USSR-USA-PRC.
- p. What was the Shanghai Communiqué?
- q. What happened to Zhou Enlai? What did this lead to?
- r. How did Mao’s death affect the PRC?
- s. Evaluate Mao as a leader.

(English Questions)

- I. What kind of rhetorical devices do the Communist Party leaders and members use generally?
 - II. What kind of rhetoric did Mao seem to especially relish and use?
 - III. Analyze the language and imagery used in the Cult of Personality vis-à-vis Mao.
 - IV. Evaluate the role of propaganda techniques in communist attempts to rule their society.
 - V. What verbal irony is there in “The Great Leap Forward?” and “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution?”
 - VI. What kind of public communications are common in the PRC at this time? What are the analogues in today’s society?
 - VII. Evaluate the use of the euphemism “rested” in describing Mao’s relations with young girls/women. What do you think of this?
- 7. Lesson Plans:
 - 8. Lesson Plans:
 - 9. Bibliography:

Reviews

Kohler, Robert. “'Mao Years' Sheds Light on Series of Ruthless Campaigns.” April 13, 1994. *Los Angeles Times*. Available at:

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805EFD7103EF930A25757C0A962958260>

ABC-CLIO. Video Rating Guide. “Review of ‘The Mao Years.’” 1994. Available at:

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/MaoYears.html>

Cohen, Paul. “Review of the Mao Years.” [The Journal of Asian Studies](#) 01 February 1995 54 : pp 275-276. Segment of Review available from:

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=6786204>

Goodman, Walter. “The Price of Permanent Revolution.” *New York Times*. April 14, 1994. Available at:

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805EFD7103EF930A25757C0A962958260>

Amazon.com Reviews for the 3 episode DVD are available at: <http://www.amazon.com/China-Century-Revolution-Three-Disc/product-reviews/B000Q7ZOLC?pageNumber=2>

Biography of Director and Comments

“Sue Williams.” Unsigned biography on the Zeitgeist Website. Available at: <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?mode=filmmaker&directoryname=chinaacenturyofrevolution>

Fong, Jennifer. “A New Perspective on China from Sue Williams.” Available on Asian Society Website: <http://asiasociety.org/arts/film/new-perspective-china-sue-williams>

“I Wanted to Show Americans How Ordinary Chinese Lived.” Unsigned article on the PBS.org website. Available: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/red/ordinary/>

Availability of “China: A Century of Revolution”

The Amazon.com website is: <http://www.amazon.com/China-Century-Revolution-Three-Disc/dp/B000Q7ZOLC>

The Ambrica website is: <http://www.ambrica.com/themaoyears.html>

The Youtube website is: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m7YoNlkWzM&feature=related>

10. How to obtain a copy of the film:

There are several ways to watch this film. First, one may order it from Amazon.com at this website: [The Mao Years at Amazon](#). Alternatively, you may stream it at the Ambrica website as well: Ambrica: [The Mao Years at Ambrica](#). Lastly, one may view it streaming from Youtube, the complete video here: [The Mao Years on YouTube](#).

Additional Reading:

Fiction:

Yu Hua. To Live: A Novel. [Mandarin Chinese: *Huo zhe*, 1993.] Trans. Michael Berry. New York: Anchor-Random House, 2003.

Min, Anchee. Wild Ginger. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. April 2002.

Comment: The above two novels cover the time periods mentioned in the book, from circa 1949 to the end of the Mao years. The first is a Chinese novel aimed at adult audience that shows the life of one family during this era; the second is a YA book set against the same time and historical background.

Memoir:

Jiang, Ji-li. Red scarf girl : a memoir of the Cultural Revolution. New York, NY : HarperCollins, c1997.

Li, Zhisui. The private life of Chairman Mao : the memoirs of Mao's personal physician. translated by Professor Tai Hung-chao ; with the editorial assistance of Anne F. Thurston; foreword by Andrew J. Nathan. New York: Random House. 1994.

Comment: The above two books are memoirs of people who lived through the Mao years. The first is a YA memoir about a young girl's experience of the Cultural Revolution; the second are the insightful and intriguing personal memoirs of Chairman Mao's personal physician, which provide a detailed explanation of some of what is only hinted at in the film.

Biography:

Spence, Jonathan. "Mao Zedong: A Penguin Biography." New York: Viking Adult Publishers. 1999.

Comment: This biography is by the highly esteemed Sinologist Jonathan Spence, whose book, *The Search for Modern China*, is the seminal work on China since the Ming dynasty. This concise but readable book delivers deep insights into Mao, his life, and times.