

# Mao's Leadership Footprint is Still Alive and Thriving in China

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“Passivity is fatal to us, our goal is to make the enemy passive”

Mao Zedong

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is beginning to challenge the international system as one of the world's leading powers. To understand current Chinese leadership thinking, it becomes essential to understand the leader who laid the foundations of modern Chinese society's development, Mao Zedong, founding father of the PRC. Mao's revolutionary leadership and legacy have survived for almost a century, and serves as a guiding light for current Chinese leaders, who continue to apply his concepts for strategy development, mission command, and his vision for shaping Chinese culture. This article presents the remarkable similarities between Mao's leadership perspectives and how Chinese leaders are still applying them, and how Mao has left an indelible footprint in today's China.

It is crucial to analyze Mao's leadership legacy in order to understand what is happening in China's current domestic environment, beginning with his strategic thinking. It is remarkable how fast and precise he could analyze the Chinese environment during China's civil war, one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. He was able to understand the complexity of the situation to create a conceptual approach which made his strategy work. He took over the role perfectly, explained James Browning, who stated Mao "... possesses the conceptual understanding of the increasing levels of sophistication in the breadth and complexity of the variables constituting a strategic environment."<sup>1</sup> In fact, in order to understand the magnitude of his achievements, it is essential to outline the very disadvantageous conditions in which he had to maneuver. How Mao developed creativity and adaptability were vital; both were fundamental to plan a protracted war, the type of war he chose to overcome the enemy. At the time, the image and leadership of Mao gained so much power that people who followed him became fanatics and were called Maoists rather than communists.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Mao's impressive creativity and adaptability were crucial to revert the disadvantageous situation of his army. One example was the crafting of the Long March in 1935: During that historic over 5,000 mile march, Mao began to apply his "exhaustion strategy" against the enemy, and managed to create a mental revolution—a concept that was used by Gen Stan-

ley McChrystal to explain how to rewrite the rules of the game to be successful struggling in a complex environment.<sup>3</sup> Currently, it appears that PRC's leaders are using Mao's principles to generate an approach that could be called a "protracted war against western countries," not only from a military instrument of power perspective, but other instruments of power as well. As an example, China's current implementation of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a very ambitious project which has Mao's footprint: Creativity and adaptability applied to a protracted struggle against the enemy—represented by western nations.

It is also significant that, besides having remarkable strategic thinking, Mao also had the impressive ability to delegate responsibilities while effectively conducting one of the most successful campaigns of an insurgent movement in history. Mao developed the principle of mission command quite well when he orchestrated guerrilla warfare to overcome the more formidable Japanese forces that invaded the country during the second Sino–Japanese war, which occurred in the middle of the Chinese civil war, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fought against the Kuomintang (KMT). Mao's concept for guerrilla warfare exploited the rapid-moving, small-scale actions of irregular forces against a conventional military force.

To succeed, it was crucial to execute mission command through centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution, as US Air Force doctrine proscribes.<sup>4</sup> Centralized command was under the control of Mao as the most important representative of the CCP at that time; distributed control was delegated to several subordinates down-range, who planned and coordinated activities to plan surprise attacks at the Japanese rear; then subunits exploited opportunities while fighting in a decentralized approach.

Mao separated his strategy into three stages to defeat the Japanese: the enemy's strategic offensive, the enemy's strategic consolidation, and the Chinese strategic counter-offensive. One of the most important of these stages was focused on attacking the enemy's strategic consolidation—Mao wrote about the successful experience: "Our forces were to be switched in large numbers to the enemy's rear in relatively dispersed positions, based on areas not occupied by the enemy, and coordinating with the people's local armed forces, were to launch extensive, fierce guerrilla warfare against enemy-occupied locations."<sup>5</sup>

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) uses a mission command style and, under President Xi Jinping, is presently modernizing to transform itself into a world-class military force by 2035, and capable of fighting and winning wars in any theater of operations by 2050.<sup>6</sup> To accomplish this long term goal, the PLA has made remarkable advancements in the past few years, not only with better equipment or training for its personnel, but finding better military leaders as well.

There is evidence that the PLA wants adaptive and innovative military leaders, and most notably, officers that can exploit opportunities, act independently and take the initiative—abilities that are all part of mission command's principles.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it appears the PLA has recognized the importance of this concept, trying to embrace it as a part of its modernization. Mao's leadership and thoughts about mission command were vital to defeat the Japanese and the KMT; he perfectly developed the strategic thought process and employed mission command to perform guerrilla warfare.

Once in power, however, Mao understood that he had to change Chinese culture and shape it according to his vision of a new China. After successfully winning the protracted war against the Japanese and the KMT, Mao went on to shape and reform Chinese society and culture as a whole. Without debating the merits of the very controversial aspects of the Chinese cultural revolution, it serves to recognize Mao's ability to transform the old ways of Chinese society. Moreau mentions it unequivocally: "His methods were misguided, perhaps, but most Chinese appear to believe that his motives were well-intended."<sup>8</sup> Mao's influential perception with the population would overcome the strong resistance from powerful existing authorities and create nationalist feelings, in line with Mao's feelings against capitalism and for Chinese cultural traditions.

The absolute magnitude of his influence is evident after the chaos that ensued throughout the country after the wars, when various ethnic groups tried to impose their cultural values. Mao ultimately shaped attitudes and behaviors in wide-ranging and durable ways, as stated in the definition of cultural change by Boris Groysgerg.<sup>9</sup> Mao's sociopolitical Cultural Revolution, which he started in 1966, greatly influenced the Chinese population's fierce rejection of western influence, nowadays still supported by current Chinese leaders like President Xi Jinping. In 2020, during his speech at the 100th Anniversary of the CCP, President Xi Jinping mentioned that, after a century of humiliation from external powers, China is back, and that only socialism has been able to develop China, forming a new great wall represented by 1.4 billion of people.

It might be said that Mao Zedong was just a brutal and fortunate dictator who capitalized on every opportunity he had. It might also be said that he did not care about his people, so he never doubted twice when he realized that his plan would cost millions of lives—the Chinese civil war and the sino-Japanese war were by far the bloodiest conflicts in history, with more than 17 million deaths, and that Mao knew that through profound devastation, people would become more malleable.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it might be said that the brutality of Mao's policies during the cultural revolution while trying to forcibly modify the culture of a nation, resulted in excessive repression and destroyed rich Chinese traditions only to fit his pur-

poses—similar to how Chinese authorities are currently treating the Uyghur population and other smaller minorities in China. Thus, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s currently widely controversial policies can be considered as part of Mao Zedong’s heritage.

The PRC is experiencing remarkable growth and is on its way to fulfill its long-term plan to be the world’s leading power in the upcoming years. To comprehend current Chinese leadership thinking, analysis of Mao Zedong’s leadership, as the founding father of the PRC, is a must; as Mao’s radical leadership, strategic thinking, particular understanding of mission command concept, and his ability to change traditional Chinese culture has become the model for current Chinese leaders to follow.

This article presented the extraordinary resemblances between current Chinese leadership and Mao’s leadership style, thus demonstrating Mao’s footprint is still active in current Chinese state behavior. Analyzing Mao’s legacy enables an interpretation of Chinese current leadership decisions, and predictions for possible future scenarios. As China’s intent to become the leading world power becomes reality, it is important to follow its behavior to prevent any possible threat to worldwide security. □

## Notes

1. James W. Browning, *Leading at Strategic Level in an Uncertain World*, (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2013), p 65.
2. Gary Moreau, *Understanding China*, (South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), p 250.
3. Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams*, (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2015), p 50.
4. Air Force Doctrinal Publication 1 (10 March 2021). Chapter 4: p 13.
5. Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), p 212.
6. Edmund J. Burke, *People’s Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, (USA: RAND Corporation, 2020), p 1.
7. Roderick Lee, *Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders*, (USA: Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs), p 140.
8. Gary Moreau, p 253.
9. Boris Groysberg, et al., *The leader’s Guide to Corporate Culture*, (USA: Harvard Business Review, 2018), p 46.
10. Mao Zedong, p 215.

*Mao's Leadership footprint is still . . .*



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