

## Transcript Interview

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Interviewer: Does Mao's reign still affect China today?

J. Murray: Certainly, Mao Zedong continues to be a major force in Chinese political and cultural consciousness. His tomb is still in the political heart of the People's Republic of China, in Tiananmen Square, and his massive portrait still hangs in the square. Some believe that the current Party chairman and president, Xi Jinping, is hoping to revert to a kind of strong-man rule style similar to Mao. So in this way, his precedent of concentrated power in the hands of one charismatic leader may be something Xi is hoping to reproduce. How his peers in the top political echelons of Chinese power accept this is something we should watch.

Interviewer: Why did Mao become so popular during the war between the Nationalists and even afterwards? Why were the Chinese so eager to support Mao?

J. Murray: One word that comes to mind in my understanding of Mao's early rule is pragmatism. While we know that Mao's rule was highly ideological in the 1950s and 60s, in the 1930s and 40s, I would argue that Mao had a highly pragmatic approach to rule. This "whatever it takes" mentality meant that he was willing to make many compromises and alliances of conveniences with various segments of the population in order to drive out first the Japanese and then the Nationalists. The most important face of his pragmatism was of course his willingness to go to the countryside to make revolution, instead of in the cities as the Russians had done. Building revolution on the Chinese peasantry meant giving them what they wanted, namely land reform and land redistribution. This pragmatic policy and many others made Mao and the early Chinese Communist Party very popular. Only in later years, after the 1949 victory of the CCP, did Mao begin to implement his vision of a more radical political vision.

Interviewer: Does the Great Leap Forward correlate with the Cultural Revolution?

J. Murray: The Great Leap Forward was an epic failure of Mao's vision for an accelerated "leap" into a Communist utopia. In the early 1960s, Mao retreated from the public eye, allowing his associates to essentially clean up the political and economic fallout of this disaster, which included millions of lives lost to famine. Indeed for many no amount of clean-up would bring them back to the side of Mao, and we now know that the disillusionment for many Chinese people after the GLF was absolute and irreversible. But Mao still hoped to reassert himself on

the body politic, and after several years in the background he did so. Thinking that his more moderate associates were taking the Chinese revolution in the wrong direction, he launched the Cultural Revolution as a means to reinvigorate the people of China with enthusiasm and vigor. While many people were disillusioned, he reached out to the urban students and young people as the leaders of the movement, since many of them had no memory or experience of the GLF disaster, which was mainly in the countryside. This is the connection between the GLF and the CR.

Interviewer: Are there any official statistics on the Great Leap Forward?

J. Murray: Yes, Yang Jisheng's new book, *Tombstone*, takes up this question. The [Chinese] government has official statistics, and some believe they are too low on the starvation figures.

Interviewer: How is China's communism today?

J. Murray: This question is a very large and complex one. It is essential to understand the transition in rule from Mao, who died in 1976, to Deng Xiaoping, who took over in 1979 and was paramount leader until 1997. Here again we're back to the idea of pragmatism, and "whatever it takes" to succeed. Deng famously said, "I don't care if it's a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches mice it's a good cat." What he meant by this was that labels (Communist, capitalist, or whatever) didn't matter to him. What mattered was results. If a mixture of communist state planning and capitalist economics were going to bring wealth and power to China, he was willing to leave behind his ideological prejudices of utopian communism and instead engage in a mixed plan for the Chinese economy. He called this "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and it had a very pragmatic aspect to it, meaning China's politicians and planners were willing to improvise a lot, or "cross the river while feeling for the stones" under the water's surface. This combination of grassroots pressure for reform (farmers resisting state policies) and governmental economic flexibility combined to bring China into the state of wealth and power that it enjoys increasingly today.