

Setting the Record Straight

Social and Economic Achievements Under Mao

Didn't the Maoist revolution in China promise benefits but cause needless violence and create new suffering for people?

China's socialist revolution of 1949-76 resulted in a vast improvement in life for the Chinese people. Between 1949 and 1975, life expectancy in socialist China more than doubled, from about 32 to 65 years. By the early 1970s, infant mortality rates in Shanghai were lower than in New York City!¹ All this reveals a profound *reduction* in the violence of everyday life. The extent of literacy swelled in the span of one generation—from about 15 percent in 1949 to some 80 to 90 percent in the mid-1970s.²

Let's go a bit more deeply into the profound difference socialism made to most people. Before the revolution came to power in 1949, China had been dominated by foreign imperialist powers. By practically all available measures, the economy was near the bottom of the world development scale. It had little industry. Agriculture was brutal serfdom. China had the most ruinous inflation in modern world history. It had a vast criminal underworld of gangsters and secret societies, and almost 90 million opium addicts. For women, it was a living hell: foot binding, arranged marriages, and child brides were widespread social practices. Prostitution was rampant in the cities.

These kinds of social evils and the extreme polarization of wealth that existed before 1949 were eradicated by the revolution: through the establishment of proletarian state power and the creation of a just social and economic order that unleashed the masses of people and served their interests.

Only a revolution could, and did, uproot the feudal economic system in the countryside. The land reform and repudiation of peasant debt carried out under the leadership of the Communist Party in the late 1940s and early 1950s represented the most massive expropriation and redistribution of wealth from rich to poor in world history.³

The 1950 Marriage Law of revolutionary China established marriage by mutual consent, right to divorce, and outlawed the sale of children and infanticide. A new women's movement, larger and more sweeping in vision than any in history, set out to break down the subordinating division of labor between men and women and to break down the walls of domestic life.⁴

But I've read that the economy was a disaster under Mao.

You've been lied to. In reality, China's industrial economy under Mao grew impressively—at an average rate of 10 percent per year, even during the Cultural Revolution. China, the former "sick man of Asia," transformed itself into a major industrial power in the quarter century between 1949 and 1976—a rate of development comparable only to the greatest surges of growth in history.⁵ And it achieved this without relying on exploitation or foreign assistance, and in the face of a hostile international environment.

Agriculture grew by some 3 percent a year, slightly exceeding population growth. By 1970, the problem of adequately feeding China's population had been solved. This was accomplished through integrated economic planning, a system of collective agriculture that promoted grass-roots mobilization, flood control, steady investment in rural infrastructure, and the equitable distribution of food to peasants and rationing of essential foods so that all people were guaranteed their minimal requirements.⁶ This was a radical break with China's past in which floods, droughts, and feudal oppression caused routine mass starvation—a condition common

today in many Third World countries. And keep in mind that the amount of arable (farmable) land in China is only 70 percent of that in the U.S.— but had to provide for four times as many people.

China under Mao accomplished what the U.S. has never done. It established a system of universal health care. Health services were provided free or at low cost, and the health system was guided by the principles of cooperation and egalitarianism. Maoist China integrated Western and traditional medicine. Some 1.3 million peasants were trained as health care providers (“barefoot doctors”) to meet basic health needs in the countryside.⁷

To conclude

Not only is the real record of Maoist China light years apart from what you’ve been told.

It is also completely different from the polarized and sweatshop-ridden China of today, which has nothing in common with socialism or Mao.

References

¹Penny Kane, *The Second Billion* (New York: Penguin, 1987), chapter 5; Ruth and Victor Sidel, *Serve the People: Observations on Medicine in the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1973), pp. 255-66.

² Ruth Gamberg, *Red and Expert* (New York: Schoken, 1977), p. 41.

³ William Hinton, “The Importance of Land Reform in the Reconstruction Of China,” *Monthly Review* , July/August 1998, p. 148.

⁴See C. Broyelle, *Women’s Liberation in China* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977) and Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schoken, 1980).

⁵ See S. Ishikawa, “China’s Economic Growth Since 1949,” *China Quarterly* , June 1983, Table 1; Raymond Lotta, “The Theory and Practice of Maoist Planning,” in Raymond Lotta, ed., *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism* (New York: Banner, 1994); Carl Riskin, “Judging Economic Development: The Case of China,” *Economic and Political Weekly* , 8 October 1977.

⁶See Harry Harding, *China’s Second Revolution: Reform After Mao* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987), p. 30; Robert F. Dernberger, ed., *China’s Development Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), chapters 3 and 9; Jan Prybyla, *The Chinese Economy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1978), chapter 3; and Mobo C.F. Gao, *Gao Village: Rural Life in Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999). In speaking of agricultural performance in the Third World, agronomist and Nobel Prize winner Norman Borlaug observed: “China is the one country which has solved its food problems.” Cited in Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 24.

⁷See Teh-wei Hu, “Health Care Services in China’s Economic Development,” in Robert F. Dernberger, ed., *China’s Development Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

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