

# MAO ZEDONG AND THE YAN'AN RECTIFICATION MOVEMENT

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In 1938, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened the Sixth Plenum, a meeting that marked a decisive shift in the party's strategic orientation.<sup>1</sup> At this meeting, representatives from Moscow and the Comintern, the international communist coalition, withdrew their support for CCP leader Wang Ming following his military losses to the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> This decision enabled Mao Zedong and his political faction to expand their power and influence within the party. Mao emerged from the 1938 Sixth Plenum in a strong position of power within the CCP, aided by the support of international communists, particularly the Soviets. Yet four years later, in early 1942, Mao delivered a speech criticizing the CCP's reliance on Soviet communist ideology —marking the beginning of the Yan'an Rectification Movement.<sup>3</sup> This movement was Mao's means of indoctrinating the CCP with his own version of communism to consolidate and solidify his position within the party. Mao initiated this campaign because he understood that a leader without a monopoly on ideology could easily lose political standing and control. Therefore, the Yan'an Rectification Movement represented an innovative political strategy, as Mao transformed a

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1 Thomas Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership* (United Kingdom: 2000), 99.

2 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 88, 96.

3 Frederick Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification: Inner-Party Purges and Education before Liberation," *The China Quarterly*, no. 65 (1976): 25; Gao Hua, Stacy Mosher, and Guo Jian, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*, (Hong Kong: 2018), 319: "At the opening ceremony of Yan'an's Central Party School on February 1, 1942, Mao delivered a speech mobilizing the entire Party in a campaign to 'Rectify the Styles of Our Party, Study, and Writing' (with the title in Selected Works of Mao Zedong as 'Rectify the Party's Style of Work')." "

contingent position within the CCP into an ideologically entrenched one, thereby institutionalizing his power and authority.

Since its formation in the 1920s, the CCP based its ideology on the Soviet model of communism which emphasized strict adherence to classical Marxist-Leninist texts and prioritized the urban proletariat as the primary revolutionary force.<sup>4</sup> Mao's experiences growing up in rural Hunan shaped his intellectual and political development, and during the late 1920s he began to question whether the Soviet focus on industrial workers could be effectively applied to China's population, which primarily consisted of rural peasants.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he developed a modified communist ideology, one that tailored original Marxist theory to Chinese circumstances.<sup>6</sup> This new framework, "Mao Zedong Thought," reoriented revolutionary strategy around the peasantry and emphasized the importance of having one central figurehead to lead revolutionary movements.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the new doctrine merged communist ideas with traditional Confucian values, aiming to increase general acceptance among the masses.<sup>8</sup> Instead of promoting this unique way of thinking upon its inception, Mao exercised strategic patience during the 1930s, accumulating more authority and prestige within the party before introducing his new doctrine more deliberately.<sup>9</sup>

Mao built his authority and prestige in the CCP primarily with military success, beginning in the early 1930s.<sup>10</sup> During

4 Flora Sapio, "The United Front Principle: Expansion and Adaptation," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 134, 139; Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 23, 24.

5 Brantly Womack, *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917–1935* (Hawaii: 1982), 2, 3, 6.

6 Sapio, "The United Front Principle," 139.

7 Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967), <https://michael-harrison.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Mao-Tse-Tung-SW1.pdf>, 71. Mao wrote that the "Chinese revolution was a people's democratic dictatorship of the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, new-democratic revolution led by the proletariat, which was different from the proletarian dictatorship in the Soviet Union."; Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 1, 2; Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 21.

8 Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 21. Womack, *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought*, 197. "It was rather his concern for effectiveness and his willingness to learn from the masses that minted the revolution in his image."

9 Womack, *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought*, 1, 9, 17, 18

10 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 2.

this period, he shifted tactics to a mix of guerrilla and regular methods to fight the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT) in the Chinese Civil War.<sup>11</sup> While many in the CCP initially rejected these approaches in favor of using a more conventional warfare, CCP members eventually turned to Mao and his mixed tactics for military direction when the more conventionally organized Red Army lost against the KMT in the encirclement and suppression campaigns in the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> In 1935, Mao led the Red Army on a strategic retreat through rural China during the Long March.<sup>13</sup> This journey served as another step in his increasing military influence because it enabled Mao to gain the trust of the Red Army, expanding his network through the CCP fighting forces. At the 1935 Zunyi conference, crucial members at the upper levels of the CCP fell from favor in the party, and Mao's influence in military affairs increased.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next three years, advocates of conventional warfare, like Wang Ming, saw their influence decline. Wang's career illustrated how military control without ideological control, coupled with military failures, could quickly lead to a fall from favor in the party. Although Wang held prominent positions within the international communist movement and exercised substantial influence over the CCP's military policy, Wang's dependence on Moscow meant the Comintern could replace him.<sup>15</sup> Wang operated under nominally international

11 Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1968), 29, 30. In terms of training, Mao emphasized tactics based on a mix of guerrilla and regular warfare. Ideologically, Mao emphasized political indoctrination. For example, new soldiers received political education to become "class-conscious, learn the essentials of distributing land, setting up political power, arming the workers and peasants." According to Mao, by emphasizing indoctrination, the soldiers know "they are fighting for themselves, for the working class and peasantry" and can thus "struggle without complaint." In other words, they will become dedicated to the communist cause and thus better soldiers; Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 76.

12 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 68, 69; Mao, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, 95, 112, 123. Mao thought the Red Army was small and weak compared to the large and powerful KMT forces and understood that conventional warfare was not an option.

13 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 66; Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, 193. Mao writes that the "error" of military losses was "corrected at the enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee at Tsunyi in January 1935."

14 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 76.

15 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 12, 13.

advisors who were effectively Soviet, and adhered to orthodox Marxist-Leninist interpretations of communism to drive policy direction in China. When Wang Ming failed militarily during the Encirclement and Suppression Campaigns, the Soviets and Comintern withdrew their support, leading to his fall from power. To fill Wang's place, the Comintern endorsed Mao, whose authority and legitimacy rested on demonstrated military success and growing internal networks, as the CCP leader.<sup>16</sup>

The endorsement by international communists further legitimized Mao's position as military leader, both within the CCP and internationally, solidifying his importance in the party. However, this support did not grant him ideological control over the party. Instead, the very nature of Soviet support and Comintern backing meant that Soviet Marxist-Leninist doctrine – with its focus on dogma and the working class – still structured the CCP's approach to organizing its cadre, running its meetings, and spreading its message.<sup>17</sup> Mao recognized that if he continued to operate under external Soviet philosophies, he would be a replaceable figure in the CCP, like Wang before him. However, Mao concluded that if he could install his own unique ideology – Mao Zedong Thought – at all levels of the party, he would gain ideological control, decoupling his legitimacy and position of power in the CCP from Soviet leadership. Doing so would allow him to secure a more durable foundation of power, making him irreplaceable. This realization underscored to Mao that he had to act to secure his position by implementing his own ideology within the party to reduce political vulnerabilities.

Between 1939 and 1941, Mao began pursuing this new objective. Seeking greater control over the CCP's ideological mechanisms, he worked to shape meeting agendas and imple-

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16 Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, 76, 94; Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 279.

17 Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 29, 50.

ment “study movements” to shift the CCP’s doctrinal discourse and structural basis away from Soviet models and towards his own philosophies.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, in 1942, he continued to operate within a party structure largely influenced by the Soviet ideological system. Thus, on the eve of the rectification movement, Mao did not have full ideological control as he did not fully command either the CCP’s ideological basis or its organizational agenda.

In early 1942, Mao perceived an opportunity to launch a rectification movement in Yan’an to gain a monopoly over party ideology and thus shore up his leadership position by injecting his philosophy into the CCP. Mao decided to act at this point because he believed he had cultivated a critical mass of support among key party leaders, providing him with the means to successfully propagate his ideas in Yan’an. Furthermore, Mao believed that the conditions were favorable for a mass movement because he knew the party would not face external threats from the Soviets, the KMT, or the Japanese during this time as these actors were engaged in conflicts elsewhere.

By 1942, Mao understood he had the support of critical leaders in the CCP because he had spent the decade leading up to 1942 cultivating relationships with key leaders.<sup>19</sup> Liu Shaoqi, secretariat of the CCP during the Rectification, and Kang Sheng, who directed political efforts during the Rectification, exemplify Mao’s influence.<sup>20</sup> In 1938, Wang Ming criticized Liu for failing

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18 Teiwes, “The Origins of Rectification,” 20, 21.

19 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 235, 239, 246-249. “On the one hand, Mao wanted to use inner-Party struggle to wipe out his political rivals, while, on the other hand, he wanted to create a new Party tradition built around his personal philosophy, organically combining these two outcomes to consolidate his leadership status. This formidable mission could not be accomplished merely through a handful of people, such as Liu Shaoqi, Kang Sheng, Chen Boda, and Hu Qiaomu. Mao required the assistance of other cadres and operational organs as well. They needed to wield the power of certain organizations to resolutely carry out Mao’s intentions, create a system, and to train new people to support and cooperate with Mao’s actions. In the early 1940s, Ren Bishi, Chen Yun, Li Fuchun, and the Secretariat and the Organization Department of the Central Committee under their command, effectively played the role of Mao’s ‘stewards.’”

20 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 238. “Mao supported Liu for his own political purposes, and Liu repaid him by increasing his criticism of Wang Ming. Mao and Liu were a perfect team, with Liu becoming the ‘cannon’ in Mao’s chess game to ‘capture’ Wang Ming’s pawn.”

to align with his position, creating an opportunity for Mao, who also opposed Wang, to gain Liu as an ally.<sup>21</sup> This alliance meant that Mao appointed Liu to positions of power in the CCP in exchange for Liu's unwavering support at party meetings.<sup>22</sup> Like Liu, Kang Sheng also became a Mao supporter. Kang shaped his beliefs to align with what he believed would give him the most power. In the early 1930s, he supported Wang Ming, believing him to be the core of power in the party.<sup>23</sup> However, Kang witnessed Mao's rise to power after coming to Yan'an in the late 1930s and shifted his support from Wang to Mao, speaking out against Wang during CCP meetings and supporting Mao's ideas as the correct solution to party decisions.<sup>24</sup> Mao immediately rewarded this support. One month after Kang spoke out in favor of Mao at a CCP meeting, Mao appointed him to be the manager of the CCP Central Security Commission.<sup>25</sup> This reciprocal relationship continued, and by the rectification movement, Kang directed various political networks in Yan'an.<sup>26</sup> At critical moments, Liu or Kang chose to side with Mao, and in exchange, he elevated them to positions of power in the party. This enabled Mao and his network to rise together in the party while leaving Liu and Kang's authority contingent on Mao's support.<sup>27</sup> If Mao fell from power, then so too would his supporters, giving them a vested interest in supporting his leadership. Mao certainly understood the nature of this relationship and felt the dynamics would continue during the rectification movement. Thus, in

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21 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 235.

22 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 235, 236. For example, "Mao appointed Liu to the position of secretary to the North China Bureau and Central Plains bureau. In this position Liu cultivated a loyal group of subordinates to push Mao's political agenda in North and Central China. In 1941, on the eve of rectification, Mao brought Liu to Yan'an to help him lead the rectification movement. Mao assigned Liu to secretariat of the Central Committee, the CCP's main decision-making body in the area. Mao and Liu developed their mutual trust by nature of a shared enemy, Wang Ming. Liu supported Mao in party meetings by denouncing Wang and lauding Mao. In exchange, Mao elevated Liu in the party, increasing Liu's power, while also ensuring that Mao had loyal supporters in key positions."

23 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 241, 244.

24 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 244, 245.

25 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 244, 245.

26 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 245.

27 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 246.

1942, he initiated the movement because he felt reassured that his loyal network would help him succeed.

Next, Mao knew that he had the means to propagate his philosophical ideas in Yan'an because he had loyal allies within the party leadership, and evidence suggests he also commanded an extensive, loyal cadre network in Yan'an as well. After the KMT's 1935 victory, the Red Army marched to Yan'an and established a base area by building schools and hospitals and by implementing land reform and changing tax structures.<sup>28</sup> The veterans from the Long March led the CCP's organization and education in Yan'an.<sup>29</sup> Then, starting in 1941, the CCP began moving cadre from around Chinese rural areas to Yan'an to lead the rectification.<sup>30</sup> CCP organs like the Organizational Department sorted through incoming cadre, placing them in different jobs in Yan'an based on their skillset.<sup>31</sup> Oftentimes, the CCP also sent incoming cadre to schools in the area for further education. Lastly, if the CCP identified a newcomer with ideological beliefs that did not fully align with the CCP's school of thought (i.e., overly sympathetic to the KMT), the CCP sent them away from Yan'an towards KMT areas to push communist thought there. Through CCP organs such as the Organizational Department, Mao ensured he had a cadre more loyal and receptive to his way of thinking who would be able to educate the population of Yan'an on Mao's philosophy when the time came.

In addition to having a loyal cadre, Mao understood that Yan'an had an extensive information exchange network. Besides operating the CCP organs like the Organizational Department, the CCP ran schools.<sup>32</sup> Mao likely knew he could use these schools to educate cadre and others on his new philosoph-

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28 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 260, 261.

29 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 221.

30 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224.

31 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 254.

32 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 222.

ical thought. Furthermore, the CCP printed numerous newspapers and distributed them around Yan'an.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the Liberation Publishing House, run by the CCP, printed numerous books on Marx and Engels as well as general political propaganda.<sup>34</sup> The printing capacity in Yan'an ensured that Mao could have the means to print and publish essays outlining his philosophy. The written word was more powerful and permanent than verbal discourse, enabling Mao to outline his philosophy. Opera houses, clubs, and ballrooms opened in numerous locations throughout Yan'an, providing space for verbal informal conversation as well.<sup>35</sup> This informal network supplemented the formal distribution of Mao's ideas, which occurred in the education and printing spheres. The extensive information network, coupled with a loyal cadre, meant that when Mao initiated his rectification campaign, he knew he and his cadre could use it to disseminate Maoist Thought to the population in Yan'an.

Part of the reason Mao knew he could use this network to spread his ideology was that he understood Yan'an had a large population receptive to his ideas. The CCP had just experienced an influx of new members who were especially receptive to Maoist Thought. The CCP estimated that the party had increased nearly twenty times since 1937, from around 40,000 to over 800,000 members.<sup>36</sup> The new members consisted mostly of illiterate peasants who were often uneducated in traditional Soviet thought.<sup>37</sup> Mao recognized that this audience would be more receptive to Maoist thinking than those already indoctrinated in Soviet ideology. The illiterate peasantry was likely receptive to

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33 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224; *Liberation Daily* (解放日报延安版), People's Republic of China, Yan'an, 1941. <https://archive.org/details/jfrib-1941.05.17>.

34 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224.

35 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224. "Yan'an, including New China Daily (expanded in 1941 to become Liberation Daily), Liberation Weekly, The Communist, Eighth Route Army Military and Political Affairs Magazine, Chinese Youth, Chinese Women, The Chinese Worker, Chinese Culture, and so forth. Yan'an's largest publication unit, Liberation Publishing House, also produced a Marx-Engels series of books."

36 Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 21.

37 Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 22.

Maoist Thought because they had no contradictory knowledge with which to refute it. Essentially, the new population was a blank slate for Mao. Thus, Mao likely knew he could use the loyal cadre to leverage the information network in Yan'an to indoctrinate new, more receptive communist members in Maoist Thought.

Mao felt secure in using his cadre and information network to spread his mode of thinking because he believed he would not face external threats to these efforts. Mao and the CCP had three main enemies: the Soviets, the KMT, and the Japanese. Mao perceived he would not face Soviet backlash because the Germans had just launched Operation Barbarossa, their invasion of the USSR, in June of 1941.<sup>38</sup> Next, Mao understood that the KMT would not meddle in internal CCP affairs. Mao had a spy network that could alert him of any KMT action against the CCP.<sup>39</sup> The same network gave Mao the information to understand that the KMT also struggled with internal affairs, namely consolidating urban centers and fighting the Japanese.<sup>40</sup> Mao, using his spy network and knowledge of international relations, knew that the KMT would keep to themselves, giving him the space to alter internal CCP ideology. Mao knew that the Japanese could not intervene in his rectification. The main Japanese force was located geographically distant from Yan'an, focused on defeating the KMT forces.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. had recently placed economic embargos on the island chain, and the Japanese were preparing their response.<sup>42</sup> Mao likely felt that the Japanese would shift their focus to the larger Pacific region as opposed to destroying the communist threat. The absence of external opposition in Yan'an in 1942 gave Mao the opportunity

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38 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 232, 234, 235.

39 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 227, 228.

40 Teiwes, "The Origins of Rectification," 52.

41 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224, 227.

42 Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose*, 224, 227.

to take ideological control of the party without distractions.

Mao decided to begin the Rectification Movement in Yan'an in 1942 because he knew he did not yet possess ideological control of the party, despite his military and political power at the time. In 1942, the Soviet method of thinking and operating still dominated the CCP. Mao's experience of seeing other party leaders fall from power convinced him that, to secure his position in the party, he needed to advance his philosophical thought through all levels of the CCP before attempting to take power. Mao had the means to promote his thought in Yan'an because he possessed a loyal cadre network that could use an extensive information machine to indoctrinate thousands of new communist members. Mao felt reassured that he could undertake this internal indoctrination and break from Soviet thought without facing external consequences, from the Soviets, the KMT, or the Japanese, because each was occupied in other conflicts. Thus, Mao decided to launch the rectification campaign in Yan'an in 1942. Here, he disseminated Maoist ideology throughout all levels of the party. This ideological shift consolidated Mao's power and ensured his position as party leader for decades to come.

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