

# The Hundred Flowers campaign, 1956–57



## Source A

Mao Zedong, chairman of the CCP, announcing the founding of the PRC on 1 October 1949

**Beth Albery** looks at Mao's Hundred Flowers campaign and explores some of the possible reasons for it

**O**n 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong, chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), stood victoriously atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace at Tiananmen Square and announced the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Having fought and defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang forces in civil war, Mao and the CCP embarked on

their mission to consolidate Communist rule in China, and to rebuild a nation that had suffered from decades of political and economic unrest. Yet, despite its outward commitment to creating a nation free from oppression, the CCP soon resorted to the use of violence and terror to secure its rule across China.

## The origins of the Hundred Flowers campaign

In May 1956, however, a change occurred in the approach of Chairman Mao and the leadership of the party, which on the surface appeared to be a step

## Source B

Chairman Mao announcing the founding of the PRC on 1 October 1949:

*We have...defeated both domestic and foreign oppressors...and now we are proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic of China. From now on our nation will belong to the community of the peace-loving and freedom-loving nations of the world.*

towards establishing a more liberal society where a greater freedom of expression would be tolerated. Mao invited the Chinese people to express their opinions on the progress of the country, hinting that the CCP would be more open to their ideas and attitudes, even those that constructively criticised the policies of the party. This extraordinary decision evolved into the Hundred Flowers campaign.

Within weeks, however, hundreds of thousands of people had lost their jobs and been sentenced to re-education and hard labour for responding to his request. Others faced imprisonment and execution. The reasons for the Hundred Flowers campaign have been widely debated by historians. Was the campaign a carefully calculated plan to weed out those who opposed the regime? Alternatively, was it a miscalculation on the part of Mao and the CCP, who had misread the mood of the Chinese people?

## Terror in the early 1950s

In the early 1950s, Mao and the CCP had launched a series of campaigns to target those who opposed communism and their leadership, and threatened their control over China.

## The 'Campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries'

From March 1950, the CCP rounded up citizens who had worked for, or were associated with, the previous Guomindang regime and capitalist nations of the West. Those targeted were accused of being 'counter-revolutionaries' (people who opposed the Communist revolution) and were subject to arrest, public humiliation and trial, and execution. The deaths of approximately 800,000 people were recorded during the first half of 1951.

## The 'Three-antis campaign'

The focus of the campaigns soon turned towards the CCP itself, and officials within the party who were seen to have abused their positions of power. Launched in August 1951, the 'Three-antis campaign' targeted waste, corruption and inefficiency within the party. Those found guilty were imprisoned, executed, or replaced by loyal and trusted employees.

## Source C

### A timeline of events before the Hundred Flowers campaign, 1949–57

<b>1 October 1949</b>	The People's Republic of China was founded
<b>March 1950</b>	The 'Campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries' began
<b>August 1951</b>	The 'Three-antis campaign' began
<b>February 1952</b>	The 'Five-antis campaign' began
<b>May 1956</b>	Mao first suggested inviting people (particularly China's intellectuals) to express their opinions on the progress of the country
<b>February 1957</b>	Mao reiterated his message and announced his decision to 'let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend'
<b>May 1957</b>	People began to raise criticisms about the progress of the country in increasing numbers
<b>June 1957</b>	The Hundred Flowers campaign was abandoned; the 'Anti-rightist campaign' was launched

## The 'Five-antis campaign'

The 'Five-antis campaign' from February 1952 targeted 'capitalists' within China, such as private business owners, with the aim of putting a stop to: bribery; tax evasion; the theft of government property; the theft of government information; and cheating on government contracts. The campaign increased the party's economic power significantly. Many guilty business owners were replaced with CCP officials, while others were forced to pay heavy fines or to sell their companies to the state.

Therefore, what had developed in the People's Republic of China in the early 1950s was an environment of fear, repression and uncertainty and, with it, the submission of the people to the leadership of Mao and the CCP.

## The Hundred Flowers campaign

It was surprising, therefore, when Mao first suggested inviting the people to express their opinions on the progress of the country on 2 May 1956. In a speech on 27 February 1957, Mao reiterated this message, announcing his decision to 'let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend'. He called on the public — particularly China's intellectual (or educated) class — to contribute towards the development of the nation by identifying problems in China which were hindering its progress.

Unsurprisingly, people were at first extremely reluctant to speak out. In light of the campaigns of the early 1950s, they did not know whether to trust Mao and the CCP, and many remained silent. However, from May 1957 criticisms about Mao and

- Study Source B.
  - What does it suggest about Mao's vision for the PRC?
  - How far was this vision met in the early years of Communist rule?
- Study Source C.
  - Who did the CCP target in the campaigns of the early 1950s?
  - Describe the environment that had developed in China in the early 1950s.





### Source D

Chairman Mao Zedong giving a speech in 1957

3 Study Source E.

a What does it suggest about the initial response of intellectuals to the Hundred Flowers campaign?

b Why did China's intellectuals respond in this way?

4 Study Source F.

What does it suggest about Mao's motives for launching the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1957?

the CCP began to accumulate. Complaints about the CCP's policies, ideology, officials and leadership multiplied.

Millions of letters were sent to party offices. Posters, such as those on a 'Democracy Wall' created in Beijing University, condemned the restrictions placed on freedom of expression in the country, as well as the significant power of Chairman Mao. The violent campaigns of the CCP were compared to those of the Nazis. People denounced the lavish lifestyles of party officials, while the masses survived on low wages and lived in hardship.

Workers went on strike in favour of better working conditions, and peasants refused to pay taxes that they declared were too high. Universities, in particular, became hotspots for complaints against the CCP — some students took to the streets calling for an end to Communist rule, while others occupied government buildings.

The stream of criticism that had erupted stunned Mao and party officials. Everything the Communist regime stood for came under fire. Within weeks, the approach of Mao and the CCP changed as they turned against those who had let their voices be heard.

### The 'Anti-rightist campaign'

Those who had spoken out became the victims of the 'Anti-rightist campaign' launched in June 1957. China's intellectuals, such as scientists, journalists, academics and teachers, as well as party officials

### Source E

A Chinese intellectual responding to Mao's call to 'let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend' in February 1957:

*[Intellectuals] have to guess whether [his] call is sincere or just a gesture. They have to guess to what extent, if the call is sincere, flowers will be allowed to blossom, and whether [the policy will be reversed] once the flowers are in bloom. They have to guess whether [it] is an end, or just a means...to unearth [hidden] thoughts and rectify individuals.*

Quoted in *Mao: The Man Who Made China* by Philip Short, 2016

### Source F

Extract from an article written by Chairman Mao, which was distributed to party leaders on 15 May 1957:

*We shall let the rightists run amok for a time and let them reach their climax. The more they run amok, the better for us. Some say they are afraid of being hooked like a fish, and others say they are afraid of being...rounded up and annihilated. Now the large numbers of fish have come to the surface themselves, there is no need to bait the hook.*

Quoted in *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* by Frank Dikötter, 2013

who had encouraged criticism against the regime, were turned on in numbers far greater than the campaigns of the early 1950s.

The CCP ordered for 5% of people in each *danwei* (place of work) to be condemned as 'rightists' (those who held right-wing views that opposed communism). It has been estimated that between 400,000 and 700,000 people lost their jobs and were sent without trial to 're-education through labour' camps (called *laojiao*). Here, they could be held indefinitely and were subject to hard labour, poor living conditions and political education. Many more were imprisoned, and students who had led violent protests against the regime were executed. Even prominent CCP leaders, such as Zhou Enlai, were forced to confess publicly to wrongdoings.

The 'Anti-rightist campaign' confirmed that anyone, regardless of their role or status in society, could be targeted and punished. It promptly re-established the environment of fear, repression and uncertainty that had characterised the early 1950s, and saw Mao and the CCP reassert their control over the Chinese population.

### Reasons for the Hundred Flowers campaign

Explaining the reasons for the Hundred Flowers campaign remains an area of ongoing dispute between historians.

### Argument 1: a calculated plan

Some historians argue that the Hundred Flowers campaign was a deliberate and calculated strategy to find and remove those who opposed and threatened Communist rule by encouraging them to speak out. Indeed, in the campaigns of the early 1950s Mao and the CCP had demonstrated their intentions to defeat those who threatened the stability of their rule over the PRC.

### Argument 2: a response to international events

Other historians suggest that Mao launched the Hundred Flowers campaign in response to events in Communist Eastern Europe. In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev (leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964) condemned the oppressive rule of his predecessor, Josef Stalin, and the environment of terror that had developed in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern European countries that the USSR influenced.

Khrushchev provided the impetus for people in Eastern Europe, such as in Hungary, to rise up in violent protest against their Communist governments. Historians claim that Mao was taken aback by these events and launched the Hundred Flowers campaign to prevent uprisings from happening in China itself. Giving the public the freedom to

### Source G

In public, he [Mao] had insisted that 'poisonous weeds' must be allowed to grow; in private, he said they would be cut down and turned into fertiliser. In public, he had said there were 'only very, very few' counter-revolutionaries [in China]; in private, that they must be resolutely suppressed. In public, he had spoken of allowing disturbances; in private, of allowing 'bad people' to 'expose and isolate themselves'.

From *Mao: The Man Who Made China* by Philip Short, 2016

### Source H

Some have seen...[the Hundred Flowers Campaign as] an indication of Mao's liberality. Others have seen in it only a sinister excuse to coax the opposition out into the open in order to destroy it. The truth is rather different. In the speeches in which Mao urged his policy...he several times used the metaphor of immunisation against disease...He believed that in Hungary and elsewhere in the communist world the discontent which flared up in 1956 was justified by the repressive policies of the preceding years...He decided that a campaign in which the Chinese public were encouraged to criticise the Party would enable the regime to respond to popular discontent and restore relations with 'the masses'.

From *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s* by Jack Gray, 1990



### Source I

Nikita Khrushchev publicly denouncing the policies of his predecessor, Josef Stalin, in February 1956

speak out would reveal the more liberal nature of Communist rule in China, allow the party to appease people's criticisms, and bring the Chinese public on side.

### Argument 3: a miscalculation

A third argument put forward by historians is that Mao was confident in the successes of Communist rule, and was convinced that the public were on side. In the 1950s, for example, the country had experienced economic growth, particularly under the First Five Year Plan (1953–57). Therefore, Mao thought that the time was right to allow greater freedom of expression in China, which he believed would lead to observations about the greatness of Communist rule, as well as expert advice and cooperation from China's intellectuals about furthering the development of the country. Instead, Mao's efforts to establish a more liberal society in which the party and intellectuals could work together backfired.

### Conclusion

In the early 1950s, the prospect of a 'peace-loving and freedom-loving' PRC had become ever more unlikely. At first, the Hundred Flowers movement hinted towards the establishment of a more liberal society. Instead, it gave rise to a repressive campaign which was on a scale far greater than those that had preceded it. If Mao's motive behind the Hundred Flowers campaign had been to uncover and suppress those who opposed the Communist regime, he had succeeded. If, however, he had aimed to increase cooperation between the CCP and China's intellectual class to further the progress of the nation, he had failed. **HS**

5 Study Sources G and H. What is the main difference between the historians' views about the aims of the Hundred Flowers campaign?