

By Invitation

China learning, unlearning, relearning

As the country marks its 70th anniversary, it should celebrate a remarkable but less noted achievement that predates 1949



Wang Gungwu

For *The Straits Times*

When Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won the civil war in 1949, the country was in ruins.

That was not because of the bitter fighting on the battlefield, but more the outcome of nationalist China's runaway inflation and economic collapse. But to the surprise of many, the new regime quickly contained the damage and started a recovery that raised people's hopes and inspired a whole generation for at least a decade.

Perhaps more surprising was Mao's launch of the Great Leap Forward, which sought to leapfrog all economic knowledge and bring the industrial revolution to every village in a matter of years.

After that, the world was subjected to even greater disbelief. I refer to his Cultural Revolution that roused millions of youth into helping him remove the CCP's senior leadership.

The result was that China was left with a stagnant economy, a hollowed-out authority structure and the displacement of all social relations.

Incredibly, Mao had, single-handedly, turned his own unexpected victory into an extraordinary unravelling of all the pillars of good governance.

In one generation, he had taken the country from a promising start to the edge of self-destruction. That happened in the first 30 years.

A great deal has been written about the sad end to the CCP's initial triumph and the remarkable success of Deng Xiaoping's efforts to rebuild on the foundations of the first post-1949 decade.

The highlights are obviously how his reforms took some 800 million people out of poverty and expanded a new middle class.

Not least, the speed at which China has caught up with the developed West in the areas of science and technology, finance and entrepreneurship has been astonishing. I have little to add to the long list of achievements.

But there is one feature that deserves more attention. I refer to the second round of relearning after 1949.

We all know that, during the first 30 years, most of the best minds in the country spent decades unlearning everything that they had studied and known. There are no estimates of what was lost when these minds were forced to soak in the rhetoric of Sovietism.

LEARNING AS CULTURAL PHENOMENON

However, for the years after 1978, we have a fuller record of the reversal of that relearning after Mao's death.

Indeed, it was extraordinary how much the Chinese have been able to unlearn and then catch up with the new knowledge now made available. So many people were able to unload their burdens of quotation-slogans and start afresh to master whatever they could.

Here, I want to focus on Chinese learning as a cultural phenomenon. It is something that happened not only during the past 70 years, but also the 80 years before 1949.

New learning from the West started slowly. It picked up speed after the 1911 Revolution and, although disrupted again and again until the 1980s, has accelerated ever since at every level of society.

This desire to learn had begun with the call for "wealth and power" after the Second Opium War and the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion. The leaders affirmed that there was nothing wrong with China's heritage of wisdom; all that was needed was *yangwu*, or Western learning.

Of primary interest were subjects such as science and technology, and military and capitalist industries. The target was to gain the strength to fend off the foreign invaders who dominated the empire's coastal regions.

All that came crashing down when the Japanese sank the Chinese navy in 1894. For the next decade and a half, there was a great deal of rethinking about what and how to learn; unfortunately, the efforts to unlearn and relearn came too late, and the Qing dynasty fell.

The next stage took off at great speed. That generation was



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

desperate to save the country from division by warlords or from being carved up by foreign interests. They sent students to Japan and the United States to learn just about everything they could.

It was recognised that catching up would take long years of learning. But the 30 years of civil wars, followed by the Japanese invasion, had ensured that resources were limited and, except for a brilliant few, little of the highest standards of learning could be achieved.

These few did make a difference, but nothing could save the Kuomintang regime. Learning from the advanced liberal capitalist West not only came to a abrupt halt after 1949, but also resulted in decades of painful unlearning.

SOVIET AND MAO YEARS

Mao's China then turned to another West, the Soviet Union inspired by Marx and Lenin, that called for a new language and an alien internationalist worldview.

Dissatisfied with that model after Stalin's death, Mao chose to bring China into his own "black hole" of continuous revolution, in which

everything from every part of the West and also Chinese tradition was rejected.

For two decades, no Chinese could be sure what he should learn to fulfil Mao's dream, except to read snippets of Mao Thought.

It is with this background in mind that the flurry of frantic learning after 1978 can best be appreciated.

The release of pent-up energy was accompanied by a nationwide willingness to learn everything as quickly as possible. Also, although there were clear priorities about which fields of learning should be mastered first, everything did seem to mean everything.

I witnessed the beginnings of these changes in the 1980s with amazement. Comparing the pathetic conditions of the country's universities in 1973 with what I saw in the 1980s and 1990s, the pace of transformation was breathtaking.

DENG'S HOPES

What was truly unbelievable was Deng's confidence that the students whom he agreed to send abroad would advance China's development programme, no matter what they did.

I still recall, when asked if he knew that many of the brightest studying at the best universities would not return after obtaining their qualifications, he quietly replied that as long as some came back, China would prosper.

China has come a long way in the past two decades. More of the best are returning and the resources made available to those who come back can be exceptionally generous. And the advances in China's universities and academies are spectacular.

What remains to be seen is whether the learning will continue, and the Chinese will never have to unlearn and relearn again.

This seems to me the most remarkable development that everyone could celebrate on the country's 70th birthday.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Wang Gungwu is a professor at the National University of Singapore and professor emeritus of the Australian National University. He is also the author of *China Reconnects: Joining A Deep-rooted Past To A New World Order*, published this month.