**What kind of ruler was Mao?**

Some early authors, particularly those on the left, suggested that Mao was a visionary reformer whose mistakes were outweighed by his positive achievements. Jean-Paul Sartre referred to Mao as ‘profoundly moral’, Simone de Beauvoir claimed he was ‘no more dictatorial than, for example, Roosevelt was’, whilst Edgar Snow portrayed Mao as a hero who liberated the Chinese peasants from feudalism and Japanese invasion. The US historian Stuart Schram also praised Mao’s ‘unique vision’ and ‘strong continuous nationalism’ and suggested that many of his apparently unreasonable decisions were logical responses in the circumstances of the time.

These authors were writing before the Cultural Revolution and, since then, authors have been more critical. However, until recently, most felt Mao should not be regarded as harshly as Hitler or Stalin. **14**

Philip Short, author of *Mao: A Life* (1999), for example, excused some of Mao’s excesses because ‘one has to understand the context, which is of an autocratic tradition’. Short wrote of Mao as a ‘visionary, statesman, political and military strategist of genius who combined a subtle, dogged mind, awe-inspiring charisma and endish cleverness’ to produce remarkable achievements for China. Jonathan Spence, in *Mao* (1999), claimed that ‘despite the agony he caused, Mao was both a visionary and a realist’. Lee Feigon, in *Mao: A Reinterpretation* (2002), claimed that Mao grew ‘increasingly original and creative in the late 1950s and the 1960s, when he set China on the road to fundamental change’.

However, Chang, who wrote *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991) and, with her husband Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), as well as Jasper Becker, author of *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine* (1995), have countered these views. Becker accused Mao of starving 30–40 million people to death during the Great Leap Forward of 1958–61, whilst Chang has called him the greatest mass murderer in human history, responsible for the deaths of over 70 million people – more than Hitler and Stalin combined. Given the huge size of the Chinese population (around 600 million in 1960), Mao clearly had more potential victims than either Hitler or Stalin but, according to Chang, Mao persecuted individuals simply because of their thoughts, thus making him more tyrannical.

The recent reinterpretations of Mao’s rule, including that of Chang (although coloured by her family’s own sufferings during Maoist China), would suggest that, with the bene t of hindsight, Mao’s rule contained much to condemn. Mao implemented a doctrine that aimed not only to transform China, but also to create the ‘new socialist man’. Mao achieved authoritarian power in order to impose this ‘vision’ on the people, but it came at the cost of millions of lives. Mao’s attempt to stir the masses by ideological commitment actually made his aim of a prosperous, stable and successful China more difficult to achieve.