

Why did Deng Xiaoping emerge as China's paramount leader by 1980?

Introduction

- In 1980, Deng was named paramount leader after he declined to accept formal positions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership except that of the Chairman of Military Affairs Commission
- This came after a power struggle with two other contenders for the leadership of the CCP: the Gang of Four, which had become powerful during the Cultural Revolution, and Hua Guofeng, which Mao had named as his chosen successor before he died
 - Reasons why a power struggle happened:
 - There was no constitutional mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power

Mao had prevented any faction from being too powerful; he wanted to remain at the top; thus there was no immediately dominant faction after Mao's death

- Several factors led to this rise to the paramount leadership: the unpopularity of the Gang of Four, the mistakes of Hua Guofeng, Deng's political acumen, and the rising tide of pragmatism within the CCP
- However, the underlying factor behind all these factors was the Cultural Revolution; it can be considered the most fundamental reason for Deng's rise to paramount leadership of the CCP

Theme 1: the unpopularity of the Gang of Four among the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA)

- The Gang of Four was a group of four members led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing
- They had originated from the Cultural Revolution Group during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution
- They played an important instigator role in the Revolution, helping to engineer and implement Mao's plan to destroy what he saw as a corrupt CCP
- Thus, many party members and PLA members were attacked and humiliated during the Revolution
 - Jiang Qing and Lin Biao (head of the PLA at that time, but later discredited by Mao) provided the Red Guards with a list of ministers and officials who would be abused and humiliated
 - The CCP officials were subjected to a replacement rate of about 60% and up to 400,000 died
- This incurred the dislike of many party and PLA members towards the Gang
- The Gang hence lacked a wide and strong support base within the power structures of Communist China (where since a one-party state was established, the CCP and PLA were all-powerful, even after the tumultuous Cultural Revolution)
- The Gang was only preserved up to 1976 because of Mao's existence: he shielded them from attack by party and PLA members and became their legitimiser
 - E.g. Zhou had launched an offensive against the Gang but Mao had refused to give him open support
- So, after Mao's death in 1976, the Gang's hold onto power became tenuous

- Mao died on 9 September 1976
- Their lack of support within the party and army made it likely that their attempt to assume power after Mao's death in 1976 failed
 - The Gang's attempt to assume power:
 - By 1976 the Gang formed the majority in the Politburo, controlled workers' militias in the major cities, the mass media and the cultural bureaucracy
 - They schemed to distribute weapons to the Shanghai militia
 - However, the radical militia leaders in Shanghai were quickly checked when the PLA seized their weapons and took control of the factories and trade unions
 - The Gang was arrested on 6 October 1976
 - They were put on trial in 1981 and convicted of anti-party activities
- This made way for less ideologically-motivated and more pragmatic leaders like Deng to be able to rise to the CCP leadership (the Gang had discriminated against leaders whom they saw as being too pragmatic)
- However, even after the Gang's downfall, for Deng, another contender for power remained in the person of Hua Guofeng, who had been named by Mao himself as his chosen successor
 - On 30 April Mao had allegedly told Hua, "with you in charge I am at ease"
- Therefore, the mistakes that Hua Guofeng made were as important as the unpopularity of the Gang in contributing to Deng's rise to become CCP leader

Theme 2: the mistakes of Hua Guofeng

- Hua Guofeng had made some clever political moves after Mao's death
- He had collaborated with some PLA elements and worked together with them to remove the Gang from power
 - The plot that arrested the Gang had been led by Marshal Ye Jianying
- This, along with Mao's endorsement, allowed him to become chairman of the Central Committee and the chairman of the military affairs commission on 7 October 1976 ⑦ became paramount leader of China
- However, after assuming power, Hua made mistakes that cost him support within the CCP and PLA
- Firstly, he had sought to keep Maoism at the heart of the CCP's policies
 - Sought to build up his own personality cult by stressing Mao's faith in him
 - Began to change his looks to resemble Mao which people ridiculed
 - In February 1977 he declared, "whatever policies Chairman Mao decided, we shall resolutely defend; whatever instructions Chairman issued, we shall steadfastly obey" (a.k.a. the two whatevers policy)
- However, this showed his lack of understanding of changing mood of the CCP
- The party and the PLA wanted a reversal of Maoist, ideologically-inspired policies, which were blamed for the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and which had adversely affected the party and some parts of the PLA
- Pragmatism was on the rise in the CCP

- Secondly, he made mistakes in the area of economic policy
 - In February 1978 Hua pushed through a highly ambitious 10 year plan
 - Wanted to undo Mao's extreme decentralisation of the economy in favour of a highly centralised Stalinist approach
 - Focused on heavy industry
 - But the result was that the budget deficit rose to a record 15.5% of state revenue which caused inflation to soar
- This further reduced support for him as the party and the PLA sought someone who could implement economic policies to reverse the poor state of China's economy, which had suffered a shock after Mao's Cultural Revolution
- Thus, eventually Hua was forced to resign from the Politburo in December 1980
- With both the Gang and Hua removed from power, the paramount leadership was open for Deng to assume
- But he himself had to be politically astute throughout the power struggle that took place after Mao's death to come out as a prime contender for the paramount leadership in 1980
- Therefore, Deng's political acumen is also important in contributing to his rise to paramount leader in 1980

Theme 3: Deng's political acumen

- Firstly, after Hua's rise to paramount leadership, Deng, a skilled political manipulator, managed to remove Hua's supporters from key positions in the CCP leadership, replacing them with his own supporters
 - Four Politburo members who were lukewarm or unsympathetic towards Deng and his policy were relieved of their high party and government posts
 - On the other hand, two of Deng's protégés were appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee: Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang
 - Hu also became head of the newly organised party Secretariat in charge of the party's daily affairs
- Secondly, he followed the mood of de-Maoification that occurred after Mao's death, and in the place of Maoism, Deng installed his own interpretation of socialist ideology that chimed better with his pragmatic vision for China
 - Deng's "economics in command" triumphed as the new line, over the Mao's "politics in command"
 - Deng's two principles, "Practice is the sole criterion of truth" and "Seek truth from facts" increased in importance
 - Actually these were at the heart of Maoist thought, but instead of practice aiming to achieve Mao's "politics in command", "economics in command" was to be the goal of practice and pragmatism
- Both these actions built up his support base within the CCP, allowing him to become paramount leader in 1980
- However, Deng was a pragmatist, and previously Mao and Hua had been motivated more by ideology in their policies

- Therefore, there needed to be a shift in the party's mood away from Maoism and ideology, and towards pragmatism, and there was such a shift:
 - Once Mao was dead and the Gang smashed, Mao's image became quickly tarnished
 - The Party elevated Zhou Enlai to a position of near parity with Mao, ending the solitary eminence of the Helmsman
 - In 1978, the 57th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, a speech made by Mao in 1962 was reprinted to show that he confessed to mistakes and an ignorance of economic planning, industry and commerce
 - Both the second and third anniversary of Mao's death passed without observance by the Party
 - Increasingly, the editorials of the People's Daily referred to Mao as comrade rather than as chairman and criticisms of his role in the Cultural Revolution became more pronounced
- Thus, the factor of the rise of the tide of pragmatism within the CCP is needed to account for Deng's rise

Theme 4: the rising tide of pragmatism within the CCP

- The trend in the CCP towards pragmatism can only be explained in the context of the Cultural Revolution
- The Cultural Revolution had sought to destroy the CCP and remove corrupting influences against Maoist purity before rebuilding it
- So, the party was weakened during the Revolution
- However, the Revolution encouraged calls for greater freedoms for the people and the reduction in party control, much like how Mao's Hundred Flowers Campaign had unleashed a torrent of criticism against the CCP and Mao which had been suppressed for several years
- This was dangerous for Mao, who, apart from being motivated by his ideology, was also concerned with keeping power
- Thus Mao allowed for a reassertion of Party power, which reversed the policy direction of the Revolution
- Pragmatic CCP members which had once been denounced as 'capitalist roaders' during the Revolution were brought back into the Party structure to help enforce Party power over the people
 - The 10th Congress in August 1973 saw the return of the old guard, including Deng
 - Zhou Enlai helped to restore Deng in 1973 because he recognised that Deng had a detailed knowledge of the workings of the party
 - In January 1975 Deng was made a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo
 - Deng became responsible for the State Council and signed for all documents on behalf of the ailing Zhou
- As a result, pragmatic policies made a comeback
 - E.g. Zhou's Four Modernisations

- Zhou made a keynote speech at the 4th National People's Congress in January 1975
- This laid the foundation for the Four Modernisations
- The priority was given to agriculture, light industry then heavy industry
- Made efforts to get the education system working again
- There was a stress on science and technology
- For agriculture, members were allowed to cultivate a private lot and engage in spare-time occupations
- Favoured foreign technology transfer where China purchased entire industrial plants
- These were appreciated by many CCP and PLA members as they gave them respite from the attacks of the Revolution against their power structures
- Furthermore, many members saw the necessity of these policies in allowing China to rebuild after the chaos of the Revolution
 - E.g. by 1975 the economy of China was growing rapidly at 11.9%
- The Gang's attacks on such pragmatic policies only decreased their popularity among the CCP and PLA members, which contributed to their downfall later on
 - The Gang launched an offense against Zhou, a pragmatist and promoter of the Four Modernisations, with "Oppose Confucius, Oppose Lin Biao"
 - The Gang condemned Deng's empiricism in February 1976, which meant that he downplayed ideology in favour of practical issues
- As a result, pragmatic leaders such as Deng came to be favoured
- As such, the rising tide of pragmatism within the CCP in the wake of the Cultural Revolution paved the way for Deng's rise to the Party leadership

However, there is a fundamental factor from which all the above factors arise: the Cultural Revolution

- The Gang's unpopularity was due to their involvement in promoting the Revolution which attacked CCP and PLA members
- Hua's main mistake was his reassertion of Maoism, which had already become unpopular because the Maoist-based Cultural Revolution had made life difficult for many of the CCP and PLA members
- Deng's political acumen only came into play after he was led to prominence by the rising tide of pragmatism within the CCP, which happened because of Mao's reaction to the threat to his and the Party's control released by his own Revolution
- Thus, the Cultural Revolution laid the foundations for Deng, someone who was pragmatic and not associated with the planning and execution of the Revolution (this identity gained him supporters within the CCP and PLA), to rise to paramount leadership