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INTRODUCTION THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Stuart R. Schram

This volume, like the study group out of which it grew, seeks answers to the question: 'What has happened to China as a result of the Cultural Revolution?' Such an enterprise must, of course, take the current situation as one of its essential points of reference. The essays which follow accordingly look at aspects of Chinese reality as they appeared at the end of 1972. Since our object is not to present a tableau of China today, but to grasp the dynamics of change, there has been no attempt at encyclopaedic coverage. We have concentrated rather on a series of problems intimately related to the central theme of leadership and participation in the Chinese pattern of economic development and social change.

The flow of events can be charted only by comparing conditions in the most recent past with those before and during the upheaval of 1966–9. All the chapters in this book have thus, to some extent, an historical dimension. One of them, the contribution by Jack Gray, traces the emergence of two opposing approaches to development from the 1940s to the 1960s. Limitations of space have, however, made it impossible in most instances to pursue the antecedents of current policies back to 1949 and beyond. Moreover, a revolution is more than the sum of its parts. The changes which are visible in particular domains of Chinese society take on their full significance only in the context of the Chinese revolution as a whole.

By 'Chinese revolution' I mean in the first instance the struggle carried out by Mao Tse-tung and his comrades during the past half century, first to achieve power, and then to transform their country. But I am also referring, more broadly, to the many-faceted process of change initiated in the mid-nineteenth century under the Western

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impact. This Chinese revolution grew out of the attempt, begun under the empire and continued by all those who have striven to rule China since 1911, to strengthen the nation in order to resist the political and economic penetration and domination of the foreigners. It rapidly became apparent, however, save to the most obstinate conservatives, that such a national revolution necessarily implied a cultural revolution as well. For the incursions of the West could be ended only by borrowing ideas and techniques from the West, and thus by calling into question certain aspects at least of the Chinese tradition. The republicans who emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century held that modernization, which for the most part they equated with Westernization, was impossible without political revolution; and the overthrow of the imperial system in 1911, though at first it did not appear to have initiated any very deep changes, did in effect deal a blow to Confucian values which ultimately hastened their demise. Meanwhile, a majority of the generation which came to the fore with the May 4th Movement of 1919 drew the more sweeping conclusion that the changes in attitudes and customs necessary to China's resurgence could be carried forward only in conjunction with a fundamental reordering of the economic and political system – in other words, through a social revolution inspired by Marxism or some other radical ideology.

Thus, both in fact and in the eyes of those who have participated in it, the Chinese revolution of the twentieth century has been made up of many strands: national revolution, cultural revolution, political revolution, economic revolution, social revolution. By baptizing 'Cultural Revolution' the movement which he launched in 1966, thus refurbishing a term current during the May 4th era, and which he himself had used extensively in Yenan days,¹ Mao Tse-tung chose to emphasize rather the unity and continuity of the Chinese revolution as a whole, despite the sharp differences between its successive phases. By so doing, he did not, of course, mean to reduce reality to its cultural dimension (though the cultural struggle in the narrow sense was much in the foreground in the early stages of the movement), but rather to suggest that we should take cultural change as

¹ See, in particular, 'On New Democracy', *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1961–5), vol. II, pp. 369–82. (Hereafter *Selected Works*, followed by the volume number.)

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the guiding thread for interpreting the process as a whole. Such an approach is in harmony with the traditional Chinese way of looking at things, with its overwhelming emphasis on patterns of thought (especially on moral and political philosophy) as that which both defines and gives meaning to a society. It is also in keeping with the Leninist and Stalinist interpretation of Marxism, which affirms the decisive importance of ideology in social change. It is therefore not surprising that it should be adopted by Mao, who is the heir to both these outlooks.

These recent developments are, in any case, part of the ongoing effort of the Chinese people to come to terms with the modern world without sacrificing their own identity. For Mao, both aspects of this process are equally important. The Chinese must master science and technology, and develop their economy, but they must do so by carrying out a revolution of a new and distinctive type, adapted to their circumstances and traditions. In a sense, it is hardly legitimate to separate these two strands, for a firm grasp of the organic linkage between social change and cultural change is one of the hallmarks of Mao Tse-tung's approach to revolution, and of the Chinese experience in general. Nevertheless, it will perhaps serve to clarify the issues if we look first at the cultural dimension of the problem, before turning to such matters as development strategies and levels of decision-making.

I. MAO TSE-TUNG AND CHANG CHIH-TUNG:

METAMORPHOSES OF THE 'T'I-YUNG' RATIONALIZATION

It may appear paradoxical to begin a discussion of the Cultural Revolution with a reference to the so-called *t'i-yung* formula – the classical, pre-revolutionary expression of the view that China should borrow only techniques from the West, while preserving the substance of her own tradition. Did not the advent of Marxism–Leninism in China radically change the terms of the debate regarding this problem, opening the door to a new synthesis? Such was the view expounded by Mao Tse-tung himself in 1949, on the eve of the foundation of the Chinese People's Republic. Recalling that successive generations of reformers and revolutionaries, from the Taipings to Sun Yat-sen, had 'looked to the West for truth before

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the Communist Party of China was born', Mao noted that in his youth, he too had studied the 'new learning' from the West. And he continued:

For quite a long time, those who had acquired the new learning felt confident that it would save China... Only modernization could save China, only learning from foreign countries could modernize China. Among the foreign countries, only the Western capitalist countries were then progressive, as they had successfully built modern bourgeois states. The Japanese had been successful in learning from the West, and the Chinese also wished to learn from the Japanese. The Chinese in those days regarded Russia as backward, and few wanted to learn from her. That was how the Chinese tried to learn from foreign countries in the period from the 1840's to the beginning of the 20th century.

These 'dreams' about learning from the West were shattered, Mao indicated, not only by imperialist aggression, but by the ineffectiveness of Western solutions in the Chinese context. On the one hand, the 'teachers' of the European capitalist countries were 'always committing aggression against their pupil'. On the other hand, though the Chinese 'learned a great deal from the West', they 'could not make it work and were never able to realize their ideals'. The revolution of 1911 'ended in failure', and conditions in the country continually got worse. At this juncture:

Under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, the revolutionary energy of the great proletariat and labouring people of Russia... suddenly erupted like a volcano, and the Chinese and all mankind began to see the Russians in a new light. Then, and only then, did the Chinese enter an entirely new era in their thinking and their life. They found Marxism-Leninism, the universally applicable truth, and the face of China began to change.

... The October Revolution helped progressives in China, as throughout the world, to adopt the proletarian world outlook as the instrument for studying a nation's destiny and considering anew their own problems. Follow the path of the Russians - that was their conclusion.¹

It is obvious that, in Mao's view, the Chinese had entered 'an entirely new era' because they had found, in Marxism-Leninism, an instrument for working out their destiny which was free of both the defects which marred the 'new learning' borrowed from the Euro-

¹ Mao Tse-tung, 'On the People's Democratic Dictatorship', in *Selected Works*, IV, p. 413.

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pean bourgeois democracies. Russia was no longer imperialist; and this new doctrine, unlike Western liberalism, *did* work in Chinese conditions. Thus the alternative was no longer nationalism *or* Westernization. China would pursue simultaneously the objectives of modernization and national resurgence, through new, revolutionary methods. The fact that the theory underlying this revolution was ultimately of Western origin was immaterial, since it enabled China to affirm her independence in the face of the West.

With due allowance for differences in vocabulary, Mao's views just quoted have been widely shared during the past two decades by social scientists and other political observers, who have seen in Leninism a doctrine which teaches revolutionaries in the non-European countries how to assimilate Western values and techniques, but to turn these against the domination of the West. Thus, when the confrontation between Communists and Kuomintang, between revolution and neo-traditionalism ended in 1949, it was generally assumed that China had finally chosen the path of 'wholesale Westernization', though this Westernization would take the Soviet rather than the American or European form. But what if the Russians were not content to allow the Chinese to follow the path blazed by the October Revolution in their own way, but undertook to guide them, and in the process control them? What if Russian methods proved *not* to work in China – at least without drastic modification? And what if the Chinese ultimately found it wounding to their national pride to follow the Russian example even if it did work, and therefore resolved to strike out on their own? Would not the controversies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries then re-emerge in a new form, and would it not be discovered that all the crucial problems had in reality not yet been resolved?

This is, of course, exactly what did happen. In the event, wholesale Westernization in Marxist terms, like wholesale Westernization along lines inspired by John Dewey, was to prove a passing phase in China, lasting scarcely a decade. Two quotations from Mao Tse-tung, relating specifically to Chang Chih-tung's *i'-yung* formula, nicely summarize the change. In the summer of 1956, after rejecting 'complete Westernization' as 'impracticable' and not acceptable to 'the common people of China', Mao stressed the need to learn from foreign countries, especially in the domain of theory:

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Some people advocate 'Chinese learning as the substance, Western learning for practical application.' Is this idea right or wrong? It is wrong. The word 'learning' in fact refers to fundamental theory. Fundamental theory should be the same in China as in foreign countries. . . Marxism is a fundamental theory which was produced in the West. How then can we make a distinction between what is Chinese and what is Western in this respect?¹

To be sure, he added that the universally applicable 'general truth' of Marxism must be combined with the concrete practice of revolution in each country and he even declared that the purpose of studying foreign things lay in the impetus it would give to the development of Chinese things. Still, half a dozen years after coming to power, he saw the universal essence of Marxism as somehow transcending its adaptation to the conditions and culture of each nation. In 1965 he put it exactly the other way round:

At the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty, some people advocated 'Chinese learning for the substance, Western learning for practical application.' The substance was like our General Line, which cannot be changed. We cannot adopt Western learning as the substance, nor can we use the substance of the democratic republic. We cannot use the 'Natural Rights of Man', or the 'Theory of Evolution'. We can only use Western technology.²

This text should not, of course, be taken to mean that Mao had turned his back on Leninism and relapsed into the conservative nationalism of the late nineteenth century. For him, the salvation of China continued to reside not in the preservation of an immutable 'national essence', but in revolution. He was increasingly persuaded, however, that the revolution must find its primary source and inspiration in China herself. Certain lessons which he had learned from Lenin (and Stalin) he would endeavour to retain, and he continued to call himself a Marxist-Leninist. In the last analysis, however, only iconoclasm from *within* the Chinese tradition, in a form immediately

¹ 'Talk to Music Workers' (24 August 1956), as translated in *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed: Talks and Letters 1956-1971*, translations by John Chinney and Tiejun. Edited, and with an introduction by Stuart R. Schram (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974, and New York, Pantheon, 1975), Text 2. (The American edition of this book is entitled *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*.)

² 'Speech at Hangchow' (21 December 1965), *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, Text 13.

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accessible to the Chinese people, would make it possible to dissolve and transcend the Confucian heritage.

In pursuing this intuition, Mao would find himself grappling, within the intellectual and political universe of Marxism, with problems not unlike those which dogged the conservative modernizers such as Chang Chih-tung at the end of the last century. By postulating that Leninism, in order to play its proper role in China, must be transmuted to such an extent that it lost its foreign essence – and thereby perhaps its identity – Mao was proposing, in effect, to use the Leninist heritage primarily as a storehouse of techniques. But could one borrow *political* techniques from the West – any more than one could borrow techniques for making cannons – without smuggling in Western (or Soviet) values as well?

Mao, clearly, believes that this is possible. Indeed, the Cultural Revolution could be defined as one vast attempt to achieve this result – to overcome the evils inherited from the past, but to do so in original and specifically Chinese terms. This ambition is not, of course, of recent origin. Like many others of the May 4th generation, Mao has long been persuaded that the Chinese people can and must play a distinctive role in world history. Meditating, in 1919, on the contrast between China's past greatness and her present humiliation, he attributed to the Chinese people special and unique qualities, residing not only in their past achievements, but in their capacity for renewal:

Our Chinese people possesses great inherent capacities! . . . I venture to make a singular assertion: one day, the reform of the Chinese people will be more profound than that of any other people, and the society of the Chinese people will be more radiant than that of any other people. . . We must all exert ourselves! We must all advance with the utmost strength. Our golden age, our age of glory and splendour, lies before us!¹

This strand in Mao's thought can be traced straight through from that day to this. Discussing, in 1962, the history of the Chinese People's Republic up to that time, which he divided into the first eight years, when the Chinese had for the most part followed the Soviet example, and the period since the Great Leap For-

¹ Mao Tse-tung, 'The Great Union of the Popular Masses', translated in *The China Quarterly*, 49 (January–March, 1972), 87.

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ward of 1958, when they had sought to strike out on their own, he declared:

in the first few years. . . the situation was such that, since we had no experience in economic construction, we had no alternative but to copy the Soviet Union. In the field of heavy industry especially, we copied almost everything from the Soviet Union, and we had very little creativity of our own. At that time it was absolutely necessary to act thus, but at the same time it was also a weakness – a lack of creativity and a lack of ability to stand on our own feet. Naturally this could not be our long-term strategy. From 1958 we decided to make self-reliance our major policy and striving for foreign aid a secondary aim.¹

In other words, Mao saw ‘wholesale Westernization’ in Leninist or Soviet terms as a temporary crutch, which had enabled the Chinese to move forward during a limited period, but could not, in the long run, provide a substitute for walking on their own two feet. Irrespective of whether or not in fact the Great Leap Forward marked a rupture with the Soviet model, the political implications of such a stand on Mao’s part are evident. Moreover, despite Soviet attempts to explain recent developments in China solely by Mao’s ‘nationalist fanaticism’, a distaste for foreign tutelage is not the prerogative or invention of one man. The point has often been made that the Chinese communist movement did not take the form of guerrilla warfare in the countryside because Mao willed it so; it is rather because he was capable of conducting such a struggle that he rose to supreme leadership. Similarly, with reference to the issue raised here, it is not Mao alone who has turned the Chinese revolution away from primary reliance on Soviet guidance; he has remained at the helm because the vast majority of the Chinese people share his attachment to national dignity.

These attitudes, both on Mao’s part and on that of his compatriots, do not simply grow out of the legendary Chinese ‘ethnocentrism’ – though the influence of centuries of splendid cultural isolation cannot be ignored. They are also the product of more recent historical experience. There is, first of all, the impact of a century of semi-colonial humiliation at the hands of the West – the carving out of spheres of influence, the unequal economic relations, the smug

¹ Speech of January 1962 to an enlarged central work conference known as the ‘7,000-Cadres Conference’, in *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, Text 8.

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missionaries, the insolent foreigners of the treaty ports. The bitterness engendered by these memories is deep, but it is less important, in explaining the genesis of the Cultural Revolution, than the fruits of half a century of unequal relations between 'fraternal parties' within what used to be called the 'World Communist Movement'. Moreover, the problem of the 'Sinification of Marxism', and of the search for an original pattern of revolution in China, is inextricably linked to the struggle for power, in the 1930s and 1940s, between Mao Tse-tung and the Moscow-oriented faction in the Chinese Communist Party.

Stalin had rapidly come to accept the tactics of guerrilla warfare in the countryside which Mao Tse-tung and Chu Te were developing in the Ching kangshan, in the years 1928-9, as the most important, or in any case the most effective, form of struggle in China for the time being. He continued to regard these activities, however, as in the last analysis a holding operation until the urban working class could recover from the bloody repression of 1927 and once more play an active role in the revolutionary struggle. As the time scale lengthened, and the eagerly-awaited 'high tide' of revolutionary activity failed to materialize, Mao's 'holding operation' in the countryside assumed greater and greater importance in the eyes of the Comintern, which devoted extensive passages in its directives to the problems of enlarging the Red Army and the base areas it controlled, setting up Soviets, carrying out agrarian reform, and so on. Nevertheless, 'working-class hegemony' remained for Moscow not merely an article of faith, but a basic operational principle, and a decisive advance in the Chinese revolution was regarded by the Comintern as inconceivable without the participation of at least some of the 'large proletarian centres'. A whole series of directives of the period 1928-31 made this crystal clear.¹

Li Li-san, who dominated the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in the years 1928-30, laid even heavier emphasis than Stalin on the importance of the cities and of the working class. On doctrinal grounds, and also, no doubt, because he looked on Mao as a

¹ See the extracts in H. Carrère d'Encausse and S. Schram, *Marxism and Asia* (London, Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1969), pp. 242-7; also the letter of 7 June 1929, in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943. Documents*, vol. III (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 31-6.

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rival, he adopted at first a sceptical and even contemptuous attitude toward the activities of the Red Army in the countryside. Early in 1930, he suddenly reversed his tactical position and began elaborating plans for a great revolutionary offensive combining attacks by the Red Army on key cities with a general strike by the workers culminating in an armed uprising. Until recently, the predominant view among Western scholars has been that Li was encouraged to make this move by the Comintern, which had sent to the Chinese Communist Party, in December 1929, a letter hailing the emergence of a 'revolutionary upsurge' in China and calling simultaneously for the development of the guerrilla movement in the countryside and for general strikes in the cities.¹

Those who saw the Li Li-san line as made in Moscow have commonly assumed that Mao Tse-tung opposed from the outset Li's plan to hurl the Red Army against the cities because it not only jeopardized the basis of his own power, but threatened to destroy the instrument on which the future development of China's rural revolution depended.² An alternative interpretation first put forward a decade ago stands the earlier view completely on its head, making it appear not only that Li Li-san really *was* a leftist heretic (as both Moscow and the official Chinese historiography had long claimed), but that Mao was Moscow's man.³ The fullest and most recent statement of this position relies extensively on Russian sources, but while it was in the process of publication, the Soviets themselves had begun to draw from their archives still another view,

¹ The full text of this crucial message, as originally published in *Pravda* on 29 December 1929, is reprinted in *Strategiya i Taktika Kominternu v Natsional'no-Kolonial'noi Revoliutsii, na primere Kitaya* (*Strategy and Tactics of the Comintern in the National-Colonial Revolution, on the Basis of the Chinese Example*) (ed. Pavel Mif), (Moscow, Izdanie Instituta MKh i MP, 1934), pp. 252–8. A partial English translation appears in Degras, *op. cit.* pp. 84–9. The view that the Li Li-san line was basically similar to that of the Comintern, and that Li was only discovered to be a heretic after it had failed, was first put forward by Harold Isaacs in 1938; it was espoused in the 1950s by writers of widely differing outlooks. (For a list, see Tso-liang Hsiao, *Power Relations within the Chinese Communist Movement, 1930–1934* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1961), pp. 23–4.)

² John E. Rue, who has advanced the novel view that the Li Li-san line was the result of a 'trap' laid for Li by the Comintern representative Pavel Mif (*Mao Tse-tung in Opposition* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 189), likewise holds that Mao was opposed from beginning to end to the attacks on the cities. (*Ibid.* pp. 213–18.)

³ This view was first stated by Tso-liang Hsiao, in his book *Power Relations*.