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Edited by Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

MAO TSE-TUNG'S THOUGHT FROM 1949 TO 1976

Like Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, on coming to power, continued to develop his ideas in a context different from that within which he had operated while in opposition. In so doing, he modified, adapted, and elaborated positions he had adopted earlier. In many respects there was substantial continuity, but there were also startling ruptures and reversals, and in addition, Mao struck out in new directions he had never previously had the occasion to explore.

One important constant in the development of Mao Tse-tung's thought was his concern to adapt Marxism, or Marxism-Leninism, to the economic and social reality of a backward agrarian country, and to the heritage of the Chinese past, which for Mao was no less real. Before the conquest of power, the first aspect of this project involved devising theoretical justifications for attributing to the peasantry a political role greater than that implied by the model of the October Revolution, and more specifically for the strategy of surrounding the cities from the countryside. In this respect, it might have been assumed, and probably was assumed by Mao himself in 1949, that Chinese practice, and Chinese theory, would move closer to that of the Soviet Union. Having taken power in the cities as well as in the countryside, the Chinese Communist Party was effectively in a position to develop modern industry, and thus to create its own supposed class basis as the "vanguard of the proletariat," and to open a road to convergence with more advanced countries under communist rule.

During the first few years of the People's Republic, such a trend appeared to be emerging, but it was rapidly reversed, and a decade after 1949 China and the Soviet Union were moving farther apart than they had ever been before. In *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 14, these events are chronicled, and their causes analyzed. What interests us in this chapter is, of course, the role played by Mao Tse-tung and his ideas in these changes of direction. It will be argued here that the explanation lies partly in the continuing weight of the peasantry in Chinese society, as well as the influence on Mao himself of ideas current among the peas-

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antry. But that is by no means the whole answer. The influence of the Yen'an matrix, both in terms of an ethos of struggle and sacrifice and in terms of decentralized and self-reliant methods of economic work, must also be taken into account. Yet another factor manifestly important but difficult to assess, is Mao's goal, already mentioned, of adapting Marxism to China. Although the term he had put forward in 1938 to evoke this process, "the Sinification of Marxism," had gone out of use by the early 1950s, largely because Stalin resented the suggestion that there might be other theoretical authorities in the world communist movement apart from himself, the impulse it expressed remained very much part of Mao's thinking.

Mao's conviction that Chinese culture was a great, perhaps a unique, historical achievement strengthened his sentiments of national pride. On the other hand, his explicit aim was to enrich Marxism with ideas and values drawn from the national past, and thereby render it more potent as an agent of revolutionary transformation, and ultimately of Westernization, not to replace it with some kind of neotraditionalism in Marxist dress. Nonetheless, it became increasingly hard, especially in his later years, to determine whether the basic structure of "Mao Tse-tung Thought" was Chinese or Western.

This is particularly true of his theory of contradictions, although it can legitimately be asked whether Mao, during his last decade and a half, was as interested in such intellectual issues as he had been in the past, or whether he was above all preoccupied with achieving his own goals, which he regarded as by definition revolutionary. Another ambiguous element in Mao's thought is the stress on the role of subjective forces, "conscious activity," and the superstructure that runs through the whole of his career, from beginning to end. To the extent that this reflects a Promethean impulse, which was not prominent in premodern Chinese culture, or in other non-European civilizations, it cannot be seen as a traditionalistic element in Mao's thought. On the other hand, to the extent that the display of virtue by the ruler came to be seen as the chief guarantee of happiness, and the emulation of virtue became a key instrument of social control, the parallels with imperial China are obvious.

In Mao's final years, he was, of course, explicitly likened to the first Ch'in emperor, presented as a great revolutionary precursor and a master in the use of revolutionary violence. And yet, at the very same time, the idea of mass participation, and of relying on the masses, which was a real (though often misunderstood) element in the Yen'an heritage, was also trumpeted more loudly than ever.

Proletarian party and peasant constituency, the logic of modernization

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PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY TO CONTRADICTIONS

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and the ethos of revolutionary war, Marxism and the Chinese tradition, determinism and voluntarism, salvation through virtue and salvation through technology, autocracy and mass democracy – these are some of the contradictions with which Mao wrestled during the years from 1949 to 1976.

In discussing the complex record of his efforts to deal with these and other issues, an approach partly thematic and partly chronological has been adopted. In many important respects, the second half of 1957 constituted a great climacteric in Mao's life, marked by changes in outlook and personality that were to cast their shadow over the whole of his last nineteen years. The account of many aspects of Mao Tse-tung's thought will therefore be divided into two halves, before and after 1957. This pattern will not, however, be applied rigidly, especially as some key ideas of Mao's later years did not even emerge until well after 1957.

FROM PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY TO
CONTRADICTIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE*Patterns of rule*

This first theme is one for which, precisely, 1957 does not appear to have seen a decisive change in Mao's thinking, but there was very great continuity from the Ching-kang-shan and Yen-an to the early 1960s. Throughout this period, his thought was strongly marked by an insistence on the need for firm leadership by a political elite.

This trait is, in fact, an integral part of the "mass line" itself, so often romanticized, or sentimentalized, during the Cultural Revolution to signify a project for allowing the people to liberate themselves and to run things in their own spontaneous way. In fact, while Mao Tse-tung saw the process of government as in part an educative process, he had no Spockian notions to the effect that the "students" should be entirely free to decide what they should learn. On the contrary, the "mass line," correctly understood, must be seen not as the negation or polar opposite of Lenin's conception of "democratic centralism," but as a complementary idea, emphasizing a particular dimension of the relation between leaders and led.¹

At the same time, it must be recognized that the concept of the "mass

¹ For a discussion of the complex and ambiguous relation between "traditional" and "modern" elements in Mao's thought and behavior, see Stuart R. Schram, "Party leader or true ruler?: Foundations and significance of Mao Zedong's personal power" in S. Schram, ed., *Foundations and limits of state power in China*.

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line” does evoke a real and significant aspect of the theory and leadership methods of the Chinese Communist Party, rooted in that Party’s experience. The emphasis on close links with the masses emerged during the Kiangsi period, for the obvious reason that without such links the fragile bases could not possibly have survived.² The term “mass line” was not first used by Mao Tse-tung; it has been variously credited to Chou En-lai and to Ch’ên I.³ These ideas were, however, at the center of Mao’s own thinking, as expressed in particular in the Ku-t’ien Resolution of December 1929, and it was Mao who gave the concept its definitive formulation.

His classic definition, put forward in Yen-an in 1943 at a time when so many aspects of the experience of the Chinese Communist Party were being drawn together and systematically formulated for the first time, reads in part as follows:

... all correct leadership is necessarily from the masses, to the masses. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas *until the masses embrace them as their own*, hold fast to them and translate them into action.⁴

As the italicized words make plain, the people, though taken into the confidence of the leaders of the revolutionary movement, were in the end to be made to embrace, and to interiorize, ideas that, if left to themselves, they were quite incapable of elaborating in systematic form. There is an obvious parallel here with Lenin’s thinking, and it is therefore not surprising that, about the same time as he put forward this formulation of the “mass line,” Mao should have reaffirmed in its full Leninist rigor the principle of centralized guidance by a revolutionary elite. “Some comrades,” he complained in his speech of 1 February 1942,

... do not understand the Party’s system of democratic centralism; they do not know that the Communist Party not only needs democracy, but needs centralization even more. They forget the system of democratic centralism, in which the minority is subordinate to the majority, the lower level to the higher level, the part to the whole, and the entire membership to the Central Committee.⁵

Within the broad limits defined by Mao’s insistence both on a measure of initiative and involvement from below and on firm centralized guid-

2 See Stuart R. Schram’s chapter in *CHOC*, 13, 820–22 and 826–66.

3 See, for example, Ting Wei-chih and Shih Chung-ch’üan, “Ch’ün-chung lu-hsien shih wo-men tang ti li-shih ching-yen ti tsung-chieh” (The mass line is the summation of the historical experience of our Party), *Wen-hsien ho yen-chiu*, 1983, 420–28, esp. 421–22.

4 Mao, *SW*, 3, 119. 5 Ibid., 3, 43–44.

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ance from above, there is room for an infinite variety of formulations and shades of emphasis. From Yenan days onward, Mao Tse-tung rang the changes on these themes. Consistently, however, at least until the Cultural Revolution, he regarded centralized leadership as in the last analysis even more important than democracy.

And yet, although Mao was in no sense a partisan of what Lenin stigmatized as “tailism” (more accurately translated “backsideism”), that is, of following the rank and file rather than leading them, he was prepared, to a greater degree than Lenin, not to mention Stalin, to listen to the people and take account of their views. Such was the case, at least, until the 1960s. Another dimension of the problem of the “mass line” must also be noted, however. At issue was not merely the relation between the leaders and the led, but the nature, and in particular the social composition, of the Party's members and supporters.

A Communist Party was, for Lenin as for Marx, the party of the proletariat, even though Lenin expanded the social basis of the movement to make a somewhat larger place for the peasants. Mao, however, while continuing to talk about proletarian hegemony, had recruited, from 1927 onward, among a much wider range of social categories: rural vagabonds or *éléments déclassés* (*yu-min*), shopkeepers, office workers, minor civil servants, and intellectuals of all descriptions, as well as “national capitalists,” “patriotic gentry,” and others. Most of these categories were relatively low on the scale of social privilege, and in this sense belonged to the “people” rather than the “elite.” All the same, whereas “masses” (or “toiling masses”) was in the Soviet context essentially a synonym for the workers plus reliable elements among the peasantry, used instead of more precise class labels to stress the inchoate character of the followers, and therefore their need for leadership, for Mao it signified rather the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people who could, in the end, be made to rally to the revolution.⁶

The precise role of the various classes in Mao's pattern of socialist development will be considered in subsequent sections. The simple fact of the heterogeneity of the “masses” with which he had to deal carries, however, certain implications about the nature and function of leadership in the political order he sought to create.

When the prospect of a “coalition government” with the Kuomintang, which Mao had envisaged as a useful tactical expedient in 1944–45, finally evaporated and was replaced by open civil war, there was no longer any

6 For a discussion of these issues from a somewhat different methodological perspective, see Tang Tsou, “Marxism, the Leninist Party, the masses, and the citizens in the formation and the structure of the Communist Party-state in China,” in Schram, *Foundations of state power*.

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reason for maintaining the slightest ambiguity about the Party's immediate political goals. Mao therefore spelled out, on 30 June 1949, in an article written to commemorate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, the precise nature of the "people's democratic dictatorship" that he proposed to establish three months later.

The term "people's democracy" had, in fact been introduced by Mao as early as May 1939, in his speech on the twentieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. "The present stage," he said then, "is not socialism, but destroying imperialism and the feudal forces, transforming this [present] semi-colonial and semi-feudal position, and establishing a people's democratic system (*jen-min min-chu chu-i ti chih-tu*)."⁷ Now, in 1949, characterizing the new people's democratic regime, Mao made use of a distinction he had employed in "On New Democracy" between the "state system" (*kuo-t'i*) and the "system of government" (*cheng-t'i*).⁸ Not surprisingly, since they viewed the matter in a Marxist framework, Mao and other writers in the early years of the Chinese People's Republic defined the state system primarily in class terms. Thus, one reference work for political study by basic-level cadres, first published in 1952, said in part:

The state system is the class essence of the state. The question of the state system is the question of the place of the various social classes in the state, i.e., it is the question of which class controls the political power of the state. For the most part, the state system of the various countries of the world at the present time can be divided into three types: (1) the capitalist state system, marked by the dictatorship of the reactionary bourgeoisie; (2) the socialist state system, marked by the dictatorship of the working class; and (3) the new-democratic state system, marked by the joint dictatorship of the various revolutionary classes, led by the working class and with the worker-peasant alliance as the foundation.⁹

This had been the classification laid down by Mao in 1939–40. The state established in 1949 was called a people's dictatorship rather than a proletarian dictatorship, because it was seen as a hybrid form adapted to the circumstances prevailing during the "period of transition" from post-war reconstruction to the building of socialism. Although it was an axiom of Marxism that power in a society where capitalism had begun to develop could be exercised only by the proletariat or by the bourgeoisie, and not by any intermediate class or combination of classes, Lenin had

7 Takeuchi Minoru, ed., *Mao Tse-tung chi*, 6.238. (Hereafter *MTTC*.) Apart from variations resulting from changes in the Chinese text, the translation in Mao, *SW*, 2.243 is so imprecise that "people's democratic system" becomes simply "people's democracy."

8 Mao, *SW*, 2.351–52.

9 Ch'en Pei-ou, *Jen-min hsueh-hsi tz'u-tien* (People's study dictionary). (2nd. ed.), 288–89.

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put forward, in 1905, the formula of the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the workers and the peasants” to characterize the political system under which certain reforms could be carried out in Russia before the establishment of a full-blooded proletarian dictatorship. Mao’s “people’s democratic dictatorship” was a lineal descendant of this Leninist concept, which had been applied to China and other Asian countries by the Comintern in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰

In 1949, Mao defined the locus of sovereignty in such a state in terms of concentric circles, or of an atom or onion metaphor. The hard or heavy center was made up of the working class, which was to exercise hegemony through the Party presumed to represent it. Next to the center were the peasants, said to constitute the most reliable allies of the proletariat. Then came the petty bourgeoisie, who were to be largely followers. As for the national bourgeoisie, they had a dual nature; they were patriotic, but they were also exploiters. They therefore dwelt on the outer fringes of the “people,” perpetually in danger of flying off into the camp of the “non-people” hostile to the revolution.

These four classes (corresponding, of course, to Stalin’s “four-class bloc” of the 1920s) were to exercise the “people’s democratic dictatorship.” Since the “state system” was thus made to include not only the class nature of the state but also the mode of rule (dictatorship), what realm of meaning was left to be covered by “system of government”? Most definitions of the *cheng-t’i* of the Chinese People’s Republic in its earliest years¹¹ refer back to Mao’s formulation in “On New Democracy,” where he wrote in part:

As for the question of the “system of government,”¹² this is a matter of how political power is organized, the form in which one social class or another chooses to arrange its apparatus of political power to oppose its enemies and protect itself... China may now adopt a system of people’s congresses, from the national people’s congress down to the provincial, county, district and township people’s congresses, with all levels electing their respective governmental bodies. But if there is to be a proper representation for each revolutionary class according to its status in the state, a proper expression of the people’s will... then a system of really universal and equal suffrage, irrespective of sex, creed, property or education, must be introduced. Such is the system of democratic centralism...

10 On Mao’s evolving ideas regarding the role of various classes in the Chinese revolution and the hegemony of the proletariat, see *CHOC*, 13.851–58.

11 See, for example, *Jen-min ta hsien-chang hsueh-hsi shou-ts’u* (Handbook for the study of the people’s constitution), 135, and *Jen-min ta hsien-chang hsueh-hsi tzu-liao* (Materials for the study of the people’s constitution), 31.

12 In the original version, this reads “political power” (*cheng-ch’üan*), rather than “system of government” (*cheng-t’i*), but the latter term is used in the first sentence of the ensuing paragraph, so the overall sense of the passage is not substantially affected. (See *MTTC*, 7.165–66.)

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The state system, a joint dictatorship of all the revolutionary classes and the system of government, democratic centralism – these constitute the politics of New Democracy.¹³

This passage was, of course, written in 1940, when Mao was still operating within the context of the United Front with the Kuomintang and the position of the Chinese Communist Party was relatively weak. By 1949, his idea of a “republic of New Democracy” stressed rather the need for dictatorship over the “reactionary” classes than direct elections based on universal suffrage as the key to genuine democracy. The affirmation of “democratic centralism” as the basic organizational principle of the new state remained, on the other hand, intact.

But while he showed his debt to the Soviet example by maintaining key Leninist slogans such as democratic centralism, Mao also used, in his article of 30 June 1949, terms and concepts pointing in a different direction. Thus he employed the old-fashioned word *tu-ts'ai*, or “autocracy,” as a synonym for dictatorship (*chuan-cheng*). To be sure, this compound had sometimes been employed in years past, when Marxist expressions did not all have standard equivalents in Chinese, as a translation for “dictatorship.” Mao cannot, however, have been unaware of the traditional overtones *tu-ts'ai* would have for his readers, any more than he was unaware of the connotations of the ancient term *ta-t'ung*, or “Great Harmony,” which had been refurbished half a century earlier by K'ang Yu-wei, and which he employed as a synonym for “communism.”

In 1953, when a committee headed by Mao was engaged in drafting a constitution for the People's Republic of China, an eight-line rhyme was coined to sum up the criteria for the proper functioning of the political system:

Great power is monopolized,
Small power is dispersed.
The Party committee takes decisions,
All quarters carry them out.
Implementation also involves decisions,
But they must not depart from principles.
Checking on the work
Is the responsibility of the Party committee.¹⁴

In other words, there should be participation, by the citizens and by lower-level cadres, but it must be kept firmly under centralized control.

Mao's speech of 25 April 1956 to the Politburo, entitled “On the ten

¹³ Mao, *SW*, 2.352

¹⁴ “Sixty articles on work methods,” *Wan-sui* (supplement), 34. (S. Schram's translation; see also the version in Jerome Ch'en, ed., *Mao papers: anthology and bibliography*, 68–69.)

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great relationships,” is unquestionably one of his half-dozen most important utterances after 1949, and one of the two or three most authoritative statements of his administrative philosophy. This remains true, in my view, even though the economic ideas Mao expounded on this occasion were in large part derived, as will be noted, from reports by the planners.

Section V of the speech, on the relationship between the Center and the localities, must be interpreted in the context of the speech as a whole, which tended above all to argue that the one-sided and doctrinaire pursuit of any policy goal was self-defeating. Thus, if you really want to develop heavy industry, you must not neglect light industry and agriculture; and in order to build up new industrial centers in the hinterland, you should make proper use of the existing industry in the coastal areas. Reasoning in similarly dialectical fashion, Mao said, on the question that concerns us here:

The relationship between the Centre and the localities is also ... a contradiction. In order to resolve this contradiction, what we now need to consider is how to arouse the enthusiasm of the localities by allowing them to run more projects under the unified plan of the Centre.

As things look now, I think that we need a further extension of local power. At present it is too limited, and this is not favourable to building socialism.¹⁵

In the last analysis, Mao continued to attach supreme importance to the cohesion and efficiency of the state as a whole, and he valued decentralization and grass-roots initiative within the limits thus set. Summing up his discussion in Section V of “On the ten great relationships,” he declared:

There must be proper enthusiasm and proper independence.... Naturally we must at the same time tell the comrades at the lower levels that they should not act wildly, that they must exercise caution. Where they can conform, they ought to conform.... Where they cannot conform ... then conformity should not be sought at all costs. Two enthusiasms are much better than just one.... In short, the localities should have an appropriate degree of power. This would be beneficial to the building of a strong socialist state.¹⁶

The emphasis on centralism is even stronger in the official version than in the unofficial text from which I have been quoting. The new text adds, at this point: “In order to build a powerful socialist state, we must have strong and united leadership by the Centre, we must have unified plan-

¹⁵ This quotation is taken from the version of Mao's speech reproduced by the Red Guards in 1967–69, as translated in S. Schram, *Mao Tse-tung unrehearsed: talks and letters, 1956–71*, 71–72.

¹⁶ Schram, *Mao unrehearsed*, 73.

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ning and discipline throughout the whole country; disruption of this necessary unity is impermissible.”¹⁷

Although these differences of emphasis were clearly evident at the time when the official version of “On the ten great relationships” was published three months after Mao’s death, it was impossible at that time to assess their significance for lack of information about the sources, and the course of editorial work on this key text. Indeed, some observers regarded the new passages added at that time as forgeries. Information subsequently published enables us to clarify these issues.

This talk, while it dealt at length with the problems of patterns of rule that concern us here, was in the first instance an attempt to define an overall strategy for economic development. For a month and a half, in February and March 1956, Mao Tse-tung had listened, in the company of some leading members of the Party and of the government, to reports from a large number of economic departments. On 25 April 1956, he summed up his own understanding of the conclusions that flowed from these discussions at an enlarged session of the Politburo; on 2 May, he repeated substantial portions of this talk, in revised form, before the Supreme State Conference. The official version is a marriage of the two.¹⁸

Despite his abiding emphasis on a strong centralized state, Mao’s immediate concern in 1956 was with widening the scope of local authority, since he regarded the existing degree of centralization as self-

¹⁷ Mao, *SW*, 5.294.

¹⁸ The 25 April version was disseminated only to upper-level Party cadres at the time; in December 1965, “On the ten great relationships” was circulated down to the *hsien* and equivalent levels, but this text, though dated 25 April, was in fact an edited version of the 2 May 1956 talk. The latter, because it was delivered before a non-Party audience, was understandably less explicit and forceful in dealing with various issues such as relations with the Soviets. (On one point, the proclamation of the “Hundred Flowers” slogan, Mao had in fact gone well beyond his April position on 2 May, but that passage, discussed later in the chapter, was not included in the December 1965 text.) It was such a truncated version of Mao’s 2 May talk that the Red Guards reproduced under the title “On the ten great relationships” and that was translated in the West in the 1970s. Only in July 1975 were the two speeches combined, at the suggestion of Teng Hsiao-p’ing, into what was to become the official version. The editorial work was done by Hu Ch’iao-mu, under Teng’s authority. Approved by Mao at the time for inner-Party distribution, it was published only in December 1976. In the light of these facts, the title of an article written immediately after its appearance (Stuart Schram, “Chairman Hua edits Mao’s literary heritage: ‘On the ten great relationships,’” *CQ*, 69 [March 1977]) now appears slightly ironic.

All of the information in the above note is taken from *Kuan-yü chien-kuo-i-lai tang-ti jo-kan li-shih wen-t’i ti chueh-i chu-shih pen (hsiu-t’ing)* (Revised annotated edition of the Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the PRC, 243–45.) (Hereafter, “1981 resolution, annotated edition.”) This volume, compiled by the “Research Center on Party Literature under the Central Committee (Chung-kung chung-yang wen-hsien yen-chiu-shih), the organ responsible for the publication of all writings by Mao Tse-tung (as well as other leaders including Liu Shao-ch’i, Chou En-lai, and Teng Hsiao-p’ing) is unquestionably authoritative. The openly published, revised edition of this work is slightly fuller than the original *nei-pu* version that appeared in 1983, and is therefore to be preferred. In the case of “On the ten great relationships,” the relevant passage is virtually identical.