

INTRODUCTION

This book is about revolution in China in the twentieth century, and Mao Tse-tung's role in shaping that revolution. Mao's influence was exerted in various guises, including the taking of decisions which determined the course of events, and also the cultivation of myths centred on his own person, especially in his later years. The most general, and probably the most lasting expression of his contribution to the Chinese revolution was, however, Mao Tse-tung's thought. My purpose is to elucidate the development of that thought, and in so doing to shed light on other aspects of Mao and of his times.

'Ideas grow out of history; they also shape history,' I wrote at the beginning of my first attempt at an overview of the thought of Mao Tse-tung.¹ That proposition, while undoubtedly true, conveys far too simple and schematic a view of the problems with which we are dealing. It suggests (especially as I elaborated it two decades ago) that ideas are put together by drawing on a variety of sources, and that, having been formulated, they are then applied in order to achieve certain goals. In reality, both the content of Mao's ideas and their function were constantly changing in the course of their implementation, although there were major elements of continuity, grounded both in Mao's own nature and in China's predicament.

The stages in this process, the substance of Mao's thought during each stage, and the influences which led to significant changes and innovations, form the main burden of this work as a whole. This Introduction offers some preliminary considerations on the Chinese revolution, and Mao's role in it.

Thus far, I have used the term 'revolution' without specifying what I meant by it. No precise and rigorous definition can be given except on the basis of a theory of revolution, and it is not my intention to add one more such theory or paradigm to those which have already been put forward. For present purposes, it will suffice to stipulate that by revolution, as distinguished from other forms of change, I refer to a transformation which is far-

¹ S. Schram, *The political thought of Mao Tse-tung*, hereafter *PTMT*, p. 15. (The first edition of 1963 began with the same sentence.)

reaching, rapid, and involves an element of rupture or discontinuity with the past. All three of these characteristics are, of course, somewhat ambiguous. Not only are the scope and speed of change matters of degree, but the boundary between continuity and discontinuity implies a judgement as to which aspects of reality are decisive in determining the nature or quality of the thing in question. Taken together, however, these three indications should suffice to evoke the type of phenomenon under discussion.

Can one speak of *the* Chinese revolution of the twentieth century? Has there been a continuous revolutionary process since the beginning of the century, or even since the early nineteenth century, a process in which each phase was the logical and ineluctable sequel to what preceded it? Or have there been a series of discrete revolutionary changes, not necessarily linked together by some inexorable chain of causality?

It is useful in examining this question to distinguish not only between successive phases, but also between various dimensions or aspects of revolution: political revolution, national revolution, cultural revolution, social revolution, economic revolution, technological revolution. Mao himself referred many times over the years to all six of these types of revolution. Like Lenin, he regarded politics as the 'leading thread', and the conquest of political power as the key to all other dimensions of change. At the same time, he saw national, cultural and social revolution as the indispensable complement of political revolution if it were to be carried to completion.

A first political revolution (regarded in China as 'bourgeois' in nature) had already taken place before Mao began to play even a minor role in Chinese history. The 1911 revolution was, to be sure, a diffuse and inconclusive event. It was not organized, controlled and carried through by a clearly defined political force, like the victory of 1949, or even Chiang Kai-shek's establishment of a National government in 1927. Sun Yat-sen, Huang Hsing, and the organizations they led had contributed to creating the conditions for the overthrow of the monarchy, but they had neither brought about the uprising of 10 October 1911, nor succeeded in determining its consequences. None the less, by discrediting once and for all the imperial idea, the 1911 Revolution opened the door not only to further political change, but to other forms of revolution as well.

However significant the change of regime which took place in 1911, the collapse of the Ch'ing dynasty was the culmination of a process which had been under way since early in the nineteenth century. Nor was it simply the result of the Western impact, in the period following the Opium War. The root causes were in large measure internal: the population explosion of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the emergence of other

economic and social forces with which the old order was unable to cope. The foreigners did, all the same, hasten the end of the dynasty even as they supported it, as well as adding by their presence new elements to the revolutionary equation.

Nationalist ferment was increasingly in evidence in China from 1840 onwards. Foreign penetration and encroachment on Chinese rights, on the part of the Europeans, the Americans and the Japanese, soon reached a level which aroused not only xenophobic reactions among the peasantry, but the sentiment, in nearly all categories of the Chinese political and intellectual elite, that the situation must be redressed. In the 1850s, Marx and Engels had referred to the Taiping Rebellion as a 'formidable revolution', and as a 'popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality' (today we would say a 'war of national liberation').² There was, in any case, an impulse to national revolution, which soon took more modern forms than had been the case with the Taipings, or with the Boxers.

This nationalist sentiment had, of course, contributed to the political revolution of 1911 because, quite apart from hostility to the Manchu rulers of the Ch'ing dynasty as an alien race, they appeared to be doing their job badly, and hence, in traditional terms, to have lost the Mandate. Anguish before the prospect of *wang kuo mieh chung* – the loss of the state (or nation) and the extinction of the race – led increasing numbers of Chinese to move from the camp of reform to the camp of revolution.

Such a rejection of the imperial idea constituted a revolution in Chinese political culture, but it was also the consequence of the cultural changes which had been under way since the middle of the nineteenth century. First the piecemeal, and then the wholesale introduction of Western ideas, and the drastic re-shaping of China's own tradition under these influences, had led to new trends in thought which can only be called revolutionary, even before the advent of the May Fourth movement. Thus national revolution and cultural revolution nourished one another.

In the political revolution which followed the Wuhan uprising, Mao Tse-tung, as a soldier in the revolutionary army, had been only a bit player. In the accelerating cultural revolution of the May Fourth period, and the increasingly forceful and organized manifestations of nationalism, from the aftermath of the Twenty-one Demands of 1915 to the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 and the events of 1926–7, he was a significant, though not yet a dominant actor. Of the social revolution which emerged in the 1920s in the form of peasant militancy in the countryside, Mao was, if not the initiator (that honour belongs to P'eng P'ai), the most successful

² K. Marx, 'Revolution in China and in Europe', 20 May 1853; F. Engels, 'Persia and China', 22 May 1857. For extracts, see H. Carrère d'Encausse and S. Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, pp. 119–21, 123–4.

exponent, and the one who channelled it in the form of guerrilla warfare from rural bases.

Does this mean that Mao Tse-tung was, as many writers have claimed over the decades, a ‘peasant revolutionary’? Some have argued this view simply on the grounds that he perceived the revolutionary potential inherent in the peasantry, and made revolution in the countryside. Others have gone much farther, insisting that, in 1927, Mao did not merely turn his back on the cities for the time being, but utterly rejected all notions of working-class leadership or of any role for the urban intellectual elite, and made himself the servant of utopian aspirations immanent among the peasantry.

That Mao Tse-tung mobilized the peasants to make revolution is indisputably true; that he blindly followed the ideas of the peasants instead of leading them is patently absurd. The evidence for his commitment to the Leninist conception of the vanguard party, in theory and in practice, is overwhelming. The thesis of a total rupture between the Chinese revolution before 1927, dominated by the urban intellectual elite, and the Chinese revolution under Mao’s leadership thereafter, in which the urban elite played no part, cannot be sustained. It remains true that Mao’s awareness of the centrality of the peasants in Chinese society, and the influence of certain agrarian ideals on his mind, persisted for half a century, from the mid-1920s to 1976, and wove a complex contrapuntal pattern with the explicitly Marxist and ‘orthodox’ elements in his thought.

On the other hand, Mao’s view of revolution was remarkable for the importance he attached not only to those educated individuals who served as the theorists and organizers of the party, but to intellectuals in general. ‘The whole of the Chinese revolutionary movement found its origin in the action of young students and intellectuals who had been awakened,’ Mao declared in 1939 in a passage subsequently removed from his speech on the anniversary of the May Fourth movement.³ He added, to be sure, that this movement, launched by the intellectuals, could achieve its goal of defeating ‘imperialism’ and ‘feudalism’ only if it united with the ‘main force’, made up of the workers and peasants. The categorical statement that the initial impetus came from young students and intellectuals none the less reflects one facet of Mao’s Tse-tung’s own personal vision of the Chinese revolution of the twentieth century.

It was a vision which remained remarkably consistent from the time of the May Fourth movement onwards. ‘The world is ours, the nation is ours, society is ours,’ he wrote in August 1919. ‘If we do not speak, who will speak? If we do not act, who will act?’⁴ There is implied here, not merely the

³ Schram, *PTMT* 354–5; *Mao Tse-tung chi*, hereafter *MTTC*, 6.332.

⁴ Mao Tse-tung, ‘The great union of the popular masses’, tr. S. Schram, *The China Quarterly*, hereafter *CQ*, 49 (Jan.–March 1972) 84.

claim that the destinies of China are in the hands of his generation, but a certain view, expressed more clearly in the text of 1939 just quoted, about the relation between the various aspects of the revolutionary process which I have been discussing. Many years later, in his reading notes of 1959–60 on a Soviet textbook of political economy, he was to put these insights together in an explicitly-formulated theory of historical causality:

All revolutionary history shows that the full development of new productive forces is not the prerequisite for the transformation of backward production relations. Our revolution began with Marxist-Leninist propaganda, which served to create new public opinion in society, and thereby to push forward the revolution. Only after the backward superstructure had been overthrown in the course of revolution was it possible to destroy the old production relations. After the old production relations had been destroyed, and new ones established, the way was cleared for the development of new social productive forces . . .

It is a general rule that you cannot solve the problem of ownership, and go on to develop the productive forces in a big way, until you have created public opinion and seized political power.⁵

Manifestly, the view expressed here that, while change may be triggered off by an incremental development of the productive forces, fundamental changes can only follow political revolution, itself prepared and made possible by the mobilization of public opinion, is in harmony with Mao's consistent stress on the importance of conscious activity, subjective forces and the superstructure. It should be noted also, however, that the schema outlined in this passage fits both the pattern of Mao's own life, and the broader context of Chinese history and culture.

The industrialization launched by Chang Chih-tung (which he more than once designated as the starting point for the Chinese revolution as a whole)⁶ having initiated a process of change, Mao Tse-tung and other, at the time more eminent participants in the May Fourth movement were able to carry through the cultural revolution which ultimately opened the door to political revolution, and then to socialist transformation after 1949. That is how Mao saw it, and that is how it was. But in forging a general theory of revolution from this experience, Mao was also following a deeply-ingrained Chinese bent. Not only had intellectuals played a crucial role in the Chinese political system for more than two thousand years, but in a society ruled in accordance with the written word, 'creating public opinion' necessarily required the participation of the wielders of brush and pen, as was the case in 1919. Mao Tse-tung regarded this as a matter of course; it is doubtful if he was even aware of the differences between China and other cultures, not based on a written tradition, in this respect. In other words, he was not so

⁵ *Mao Tse-tung ssu-siang wan-sui* (1969), 334, 347; Mao Tsetung, *A critique of Soviet economics* (tr. Moss Roberts), 51, 66–7. ⁶ See below, p. 131.

much a 'peasant revolutionary' as an intellectual of peasant origins engaged in revolution, as he might, in a different age, have practised the art of government.

I said above that the May Fourth movement had contributed to the victory of 1949, and it is widely accepted that this was the case. The relative importance of these two events is, however, a more controversial issue. Until recently, the official Chinese view has been that the May Fourth movement constituted the dividing line between 'modern' and 'contemporary' history, and thus, by implication, marked a more fundamental change than 1949. In the early 1980s, preference was given to the view that contemporary history begins, in fact, with the conquest of power in 1949, because it is this which opened the way to a change in the mode of production, from capitalism to socialism. In an authoritative article on this subject, Li Hsin reveals that in 1956, when 1919 was officially adopted as the starting point for contemporary history, he had argued in favour of 1949, on the grounds that the mode of production was the proper criterion for a Marxist periodization of history, but that the majority disagreed.⁷ It seems safe to assume that this majority, which saw the May Fourth movement as the beginning of the contemporary era, enjoyed Mao's support.

Li Hsin accepted that 1919 marked, as Mao had proclaimed in 1939, the beginning of the 'new democratic' phase of the bourgeois revolution, but underscored that, concretely, there was no change in the political system, which continued to be dominated by warlord power.⁸ Mao Tse-tung was naturally aware of the importance of socialist transformation and the creation of a new mode of production. But, at the same time, Mao plainly regarded the May Fourth movement, in which he had himself participated, as an epoch-making event.⁹

Whatever the relative symbolic importance attributed to 1919 and 1949, the three decades which separate these dates saw the emergence, development and ultimate triumph of the Chinese Communist Party. It can be argued that the Communists achieved victory because, in vigorously promoting social as well as national revolution, they responded to the felt needs of the Chinese people, and to the structural requirements of China's national and international situation. Given the extremes of wealth and poverty within Chinese rural society, and the progressive breakdown of the old Confucian moral order and its replacement by relations of naked exploitation, the partisans of social revolution must, at the very least, have had a distinct tactical advantage over its adversaries.

⁷ Li Hsin, 'Kuan-yü Chung-kuo chin-hsien-tai li-shih fen-ch'i wen-t'i' (On problems of periodization of Chinese modern and contemporary history), *Li-shih yen-chiu* 4 (1983) 3–6.

⁸ Li Hsin, p. 4. ⁹ See below, pp. 77–9.

And yet, however favourable the objective circumstances, both the fact that the Communists triumphed in 1949, and the use which they made of their victory, were not simply phenomena of 'the Chinese revolution' in general. They reflected the peculiar circumstances of the struggle for power, and they also reflected, in no small measure, the influence of one man. For better or for worse, Mao Tse-tung placed his stamp on the Chinese revolution of the twentieth century. At no point was he able to impose his own position absolutely, and since his death many of his ideas have been criticized or qualified, and some repudiated altogether. The fact remains that the influence of his thought and his leadership was so deep and all-embracing as to justify characterizing the People's Republic of China as 'the China of Mao Tse-tung'. Though his imprint has crumbled or been effaced here and there since his death, it is still unmistakably present.

Why was Mao able to dominate the scene to such a degree, for the better part of four decades? In a word, I would argue, because he was in so many ways representative of China in his day, and yet in certain crucial ways exceptional. He was born a peasant, and therefore knew (even though he forgot it for a time, during his school days) that the centre of gravity of Chinese society was in the countryside. During Mao's childhood and adolescence, his father made the transition from poor peasant to rich peasant and grain merchant, thus giving Mao a view of the inequalities of Chinese rural society from both ends of the scale. Geographically, too, he came from an intermediate position. He was not a native of the great coastal cities which, however important, were in some degree alien to rural China. But neither did he come from the remote hinterland, insulated from foreign influences and political ferment. From the time when T'an Ssu-t'ung founded the Southern Study Society there in 1897, Mao's native province of Hunan was aware of, and responsive to, new intellectual and political trends.

There were, however, millions of young Chinese of Mao's generation who likewise came from the country's geographical and social centre of gravity. What were the personal traits that set Mao apart from the others? One which should be noted at the outset is his overwhelming confidence in his own capacity for leadership. Not only did he admire strong rulers East and West, from the founders of the Ch'in and Han dynasties to Peter the Great and Napoleon, but he was plainly convinced, from early manhood, of his ability to emulate them. Such supreme self-confidence does not in itself guarantee that the possessor will play a significant political role, but it is very difficult to be an effective political leader without it.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of Mao Tse-tung's leadership qualities and leadership role, see my article 'Party leader or true ruler? Foundations and significance of Mao Zedong's personal power', in S. Schram, *Foundations and limits of state power in China*, 203–56.

Another point, closely linked to this one, is Mao Tse-tung's very strong sense of identification with China and her fate. This gave rise, not only to a fierce and uncompromising nationalism, but to an insistence on the need to adapt theories of foreign origin, including Marxism, to Chinese conditions and to Chinese culture. Indeed, two of Mao's best-known theoretical contributions, contained respectively in the essays 'On practice' and 'On contradiction', can be traced back, before they were developed in Marxist terms, to very ancient Chinese ideas: that of 'seeking the truth from facts' (*shih-shih ch'iu-shih*), and the old *yin-yang* dialectics.

Peasant virtue and the vocation of the intellectuals, revolutionary theory and Chinese tradition – no doubt it was because Mao Tse-tung resonated with, and incarnated so well, *all* of these elements that he was able to play the role he did in the history of China in the twentieth century. The form in which these dispositions manifested themselves changed and developed with the years, under the influence of various historical circumstances, including the cumulative effects of his own actions. The stages in Mao Tse-tung's life and thought, and the reasons for the emergence of new ideas at particular times, are discussed one after the other in the body of this book. Here it seems appropriate to look in broad outline at the pattern as a whole.

Considering the matter from the inside, as it were, from the standpoint of Mao Tse-tung's personality and motivation, one might suggest that his attitude towards his own thought changed over the years. In his youth, Mao was primarily concerned to find a way out of China's problems, and to persuade others of the correctness of his analysis. In middle age, while continuing to seek understanding, he became concerned also with laying down a doctrine, which would be binding on his followers. In his later years, with the further unfolding of this trend, doctrine became dogma, or even ritual incantation. And yet, to the very end, he sought as well to mobilize knowledge of the past in order to chart a course to the future.

For Chinese intellectuals and political leaders, the context of the revolutionary struggle is naturally the first factor taken into consideration in interpreting Mao's thought. At the same time, they recognize that the decisive break points may be different for different dimensions of reality. Thus, in a conversation of May 1982, Liao Kai-lung suggested a separate periodization for Mao Tse-tung's life and thought, against the background of the periodization of the Chinese revolution as a whole.¹¹ Other authors have proposed not only a periodization for the development of Mao's thought, different from that for the history of the party, but even a separate

¹¹ Liao Kai-lung, 'Kuan-yü Mao Tse-tung kung-kuo p'ing-chia ho she-hui-chu-i kao-tu min-chu – tu Shih-la-mu chiao-shou lun Mao Tse-tung ti chi p'ien wen-chang ti p'ing-shu' (Regarding the evaluation of Mao Tse-tung's merits and faults, and high-level socialist democracy – a commentary and evaluation on several articles by Professor Schram on Mao Tse-tung), in Liao Kai-lung, *Ch'üan-mien chien-she she-hui-chu-i ti tao-lu* (The road to building socialism in an all-round way), 321.

framework for a particular aspect of his thought, such as his doctrine of party-building, while stressing that all of these domains are interrelated.¹²

To distinguish periods or phases in Mao's life and thought, and the crucial turning points that led from one to another, is not for us, as it is for the Chinese, a delicate and weighty political task. It may, however, prove a useful analytical device. In broad outline, the development of Mao's thought falls into six periods of approximately a decade:

1917–1927: Mao goes through a variety of learning experiences, both in his final years at school and in revolutionary organizations, from the New People's Study Society to trade unions, the Chinese Communist Party, and the Socialist Youth League. His itinerary leads from liberalism and pragmatism to Leninism, and from an urban-centred to a rural-centred perspective, culminating in his work with the peasant associations from 1925 to 1927.

1927–1936: This period opens with Mao's enunciation, at the 7 August Emergency Meeting, of the axiom 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'. It is marked by wide swings in Mao's place in the Chinese Communist Party, from a side-current, to one line (and perhaps one faction) in the leadership struggles of the Kiangsi Soviet period, and then, following the Tsun-yi Conference of January 1935, to the early stages in his rise to supreme and unchallenged power in the party. Throughout, however, the military dimension of the revolution remains central. During these years, the strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside gradually takes shape, both in theory and in practice, though the formula of a 'protracted war' is enunciated only in 1938. Similarly, the ideas and methods corresponding to the 'mass line' begin to make their appearance, though this concept is formulated systematically only during the ensuing decade.

1936–1947: During this period, Mao writes all his principal theoretical works of the pre-1949 era, beginning in late 1936 with *Problems of strategy in China's revolutionary war*, and continuing in 1937 with the lecture notes on dialectical materialism from which 'On practice' and 'On contradiction' were later extracted. He also makes his entry on the international stage in a big way, with the publication of Edgar Snow's *Red star over China*, containing his autobiography as recounted to Snow in July 1936. Mao launches the idea of the 'sinification of Marxism', and carries through the rectification campaign of 1942–3, which both promotes this goal, and enhances his own standing in the party. In March 1943, he becomes chairman of the Politburo and of the Secretariat, and is formally set above all his peers in the leadership. At the Seventh Congress in April 1945 his thought becomes the guide to all the party's work. Finally, after the collapse of attempts at

¹² Cheng Chih-piao, 'Mao Tse-tung chien-tang hsüeh-shuo ti li-shih fen-ch'i' (The historical periodization of Mao Tse-tung's doctrine of party-building), *Mao Tse-tung ssu-hsiang yen-chiu* (Chengtu), 2 (1985) 72–6, 93.

mediation by Marshall and others, Mao turns his attention to the prosecution of the civil war, and to a new upsurge in land reform. By the end of 1947, both of these matters are well in hand, and victory is in sight.

1947–1957: While playing an important role in leading the civil war to a victorious conclusion, Mao begins, in 1947–9, to think also of the tasks awaiting the Chinese Communist Party after the conquest of power. At the outset, he stresses the need to follow the Leninist and Soviet model, giving primacy to the role of the cities and of heavy industry. He also advocates gradualism and moderation, especially in the countryside, where the rich peasants are to be left alone in order to foster the restoration of agricultural production. And while economic policies suddenly become much more radical in 1955, with the big push toward the collectivization of agriculture launched by Mao in July, Mao advocates in early 1956 an extremely conciliatory set of policies toward the intellectuals. His speech ‘On the ten great relationships’, which he later viewed as the first attempt at a systematic formulation of a road to socialism different from that of the Soviets, comprises in particular, as revised on 2 May 1956 for delivery to a non-party audience, a section advocating the slogan: ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend!’ In the original version of his speech of 27 February 1957 on the handling of contradictions among the people, Mao denounces Stalin’s leftist errors and his propensity to liquidate anyone who disagreed with him, and declares that class struggle in China has ‘basically’ come to an end. Then, in one of the most celebrated, dramatic and decisive turning points in the history of the Chinese People’s Republic, this phase of relative pluralism is succeeded by a new upsurge of leftism, both in Mao’s thinking and in the political climate.

1957–1966: The ‘Anti-Rightist Campaign’ of autumn 1957 leads to the first of Mao Tse-tung’s great radical inventions, the Great Leap Forward of 1958–60. When this experiment results in chaos and mass starvation, Mao retires to the ‘second line’ and lets Liu Shao-ch’i, Chou En-lai, Teng Hsiao-p’ing and others take the lead in devising policies of retrenchment and rationalization, but he becomes more and more exasperated at the abandonment of the utopian and egalitarian vision of the Great Leap. This reaction incites him to put forward, at the tenth plenum in the autumn of 1962, the slogan ‘Never forget the class struggle!’, and from that time onward he prepares the ground for the counter-offensive against the so-called ‘capitalist roaders’ in the party known as the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’.¹³

¹³ On the inexorable chain of causality leading from the radical policies of 1957–8 to the ‘Cultural Revolution’, see (apart from the relevant section of this book) my article ‘The limits of cataclysmic change: reflections on the place of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in the political development of the People’s Republic of China’, *CQ* 108 (Dec. 1986) 613–24.