Part I

Mao's World

1 Mao, Revolution, and Memory

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> *I think my first impression – dominantly one of native shrewdness – was probably correct. And yet Mao was an accomplished scholar of Classical Chinese, an omnivorous reader, a deep student of philosophy and history, a good speaker, a man with an unusual memory and extraordinary powers of concentration, an able writer, careless in his personal habits and appearance but astonishingly meticulous about details of duty, a man of tireless energy, and military and political strategist of considerable genius.*
>
> Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (1937)[1]

> *Psychologists of mass behavior might have an explanation for what went wrong in China in the late summer of 1958. China was struck with a mass hysteria fed by Mao, who then fell victim himself.... Mao's earlier skepticism had vanished. Common sense escaped him. He acted as though he believed the outrageous figures for agricultural production. The excitement was contagious. I was infected, too.*
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> Li Zhishi, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (1994)[2]

> *Beijing relies on the [Party] Center,*
> *Shanghai on its connections,*
> *Guangzhou leans on Hong Kong,*
> *The drifting population lives by Mao Zedong Thought.*
>
> Popular ditty in China among working poor, 1990s[3]

Mao Zedong has always come to us through stories. Some reflect fragments of personal experience, some seek to weave a sensible historical narrative, and some promote a myth that serves other interests. The stories began in the 1930s, and they keep coming today. The stories do not match generally because different authors seek to demonstrate different

[1] Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, reprint, 1968), p. 92.
[2] Zhisui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 276–277.
[3] "Musical Chairman," from Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 283–284.

conclusions. Just as often, the teller has experienced or researched the story of only a small part of Mao's life. Yet each story has value for the person who would like a comprehensive sense of Mao – Who was he? Why is he so famous? Was he as wonderful as earlier reports painted him or as evil as many books claim today? What, in the end, is significant about Mao? The purpose of this book is to provide the general reader an opportunity to make sense of Mao and his role in modern Chinese history and the "socialist moment" in twentieth-century world history, as well as his continuing significance both in China and beyond. We bring the tools of academic research and scholarly discipline to bear on the events, experiences, and stories that swirl around Mao to offer a historical account.[4] We are more than a dozen scholars, old and young, Western and Chinese, male and female, representing a range of academic disciplines, and we do not tell a uniform history. In post-Mao China, one of the enduring political developments has been "pluralization" (*duoyuanhua*), and the stories in this book reflect the multiple meanings of Mao in the past and present. Indeed, it is our theme: There are multiple Maos, and to settle on one dominant image is to distort the whole.

Mao Zedong lived from 1893 to 1976. He is the most famous Chinese of the twentieth century and certainly China's most influential political leader. He is remembered as China's paramount Marxist-Leninist leader and theorist. A junior Communist Party member in the 1920s and controversial regional leader in the countryside in the late 1920s and early 1930s, by the mid-1940s Mao had become the supreme leader of China's communist movement and, in 1949, of the new People's Republic of China (PRC). The personality cult around Chairman Mao culminated in outrageous popular veneration in the turbulent Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, and his memory remains vibrant in China today. His writings continue to serve as the official doctrine of the still-ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and his memory elicits strong feelings (both positive and negative) among China's diverse population, as well as students of Marxism and revolution worldwide. In the international history of communism, Mao Zedong played a key role in leading the largest communist revolution in the world outside of Russia and in his "creative developments" or "Sinification" of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy to suit Chinese conditions, adaptations that have influenced revolutions in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In all, Mao remains the preeminent representative of the successes and failures of Chinese revolutionary ideology and praxis.

[4] This useful parsing of historiography into experience, history, and myth is explored in Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Mao is remembered by all as a revolutionary leader. He has been presented by his faithful followers in the CCP as the embodiment of the socialist revolution that reunited China and restored national dignity after decades of war, division, and semicolonial subjugation. It also brought the Communists to power in the new PRC in 1949. That "story" was extremely compelling – not only to a majority of Chinese over several decades at mid-century but also to non-Chinese academics trying to explain China's many social and political changes.[5] Meanwhile, Mao's competitors and enemies depicted him and the revolution he came to lead as evil and bad for China.[6] Today, more than three decades after Mao's death, it is not so simple. Even inside China, Mao's faults, the achievements of other CCP leaders, and the contributions of talented Chinese in other areas are all part of the story of China's modern revolutions.[7] In private, around China and in the Western press, even Mao's former followers reflect critically and sometimes with the outrage of the apostate on Mao and the revolution they served.[8] Meanwhile, Mao's portrait continues to overlook Tiananmen Square, taxi drivers sport Mao medallions like St. Christopher medals, and temples across China include Mao as a tutelary god in China's irrepressible popular religions.

Mao remains a very controversial and much distorted figure – not least by the infamous personality cult that climaxed in the turbulent 1960s. Mao's memory and legacy in China are still vivid for many: hated as a despot, grudgingly respected as an effective national unifier, and revered for what he is remembered as doing for China's dispossessed, particularly in contrast with the declining fortunes of many working poor in China today. This ambivalence is reflected in the opening quote from Li Zhisui, one of Mao's doctors from the late 1950s. Similarly, readers of our book do not come to Mao without assumptions. Popular and scholarly writing on Mao in English since Edgar Snow's glowing account

[5] Mark Selden, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). Even those critical of Mao put him at the center of a single Chinese Revolution. See Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), and Simon Leys, *Chinese Shadows* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

[6] Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study in Total Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957); Warren Kuo, *Analytical History of the Chinese Communist Party*, 2nd ed. (Taipei: Institute for International Relations, 1968); George Paloczi-Horvath, *Mao Tse-tung: Emperor of the Blue Ants* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962); Robert North, *Chinese Communism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

[7] This is covered in the review of Chinese and Western literature later in this chapter.

[8] There is a growing literature of reckoning from Mao's surviving followers from Yue Daiyun and Carolyn Wakeman's account of Yue's life, *To the Storm*, in the 1980s to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's denunciation, *Mao: The Untold Story*, in 2005.

in *Red Star Over China* in 1937 has ranged from cold war denunciations to anti–Vietnam War adulation to sober assessments of contributions and failings. However, the "God Mao" and "Devil Mao" sell many more newspapers and pop books than ponderous academic tomes on the "Complicated Mao." *A Critical Introduction to Mao* taps that academic knowledge and many of the leading scholars of our day to provide a more engaging entry into the scholarly contributions to understanding Mao and his historical significance.

This introduction is intended to prepare readers to make the most of this book by doing three things. It gives an outline of Mao's life and contributions to China's modern revolutions and the historical significance of his ideology, "Mao Zedong Thought." Second, it reviews the major points of controversy concerning Mao, his role in China's twentieth-century revolutions, and the meanings attached to Mao during his life and today. Finally, it will prepare readers both to assess the competing interpretations of Mao and to make their own reading of Mao's biography and writings by reviewing how we approach Mao and his role in modern Chinese history, how we know what we know about Mao, and what critical assessment of texts on or by Mao can tell us. It concludes with some notes on strategies for reading Mao and writings on Mao (including those in this book) as an independent thinker.

MAO'S LIFE OF REVOLUTION

Mao Zedong's life of revolution is a significant representative of both Marxist and state socialist practice in twentieth-century China and of the contributions of Chinese experience to socialist ideology and practice worldwide. Inside China, Mao is widely viewed as filling the roles of both Lenin – generator and theorist of the revolution – and Stalin – the harsh but effective implementer of the socialist revolution in a national context. Since the late 1940s, Chinese in the PRC have been taught that the Chinese Revolution found its fruition in the life, work, and writings of Chairman Mao. The post-Mao period has brought a diversification of the history of China's Revolution and of the contributions of many, many Chinese to both Marxist thought and revolutionary praxis. The story is no longer all about Mao.[9] Names such as Li Da, key theorist in the 1920s; Liu Shaoqi, long the number two leader and key organizational figure; Chen Boda, Mao's ideological secretary; Ai Siqi, popularizer of

[9] Tony Saich, *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996); Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Mao Matters: A Review Essay," *China Review International* 3:1 (1996), pp. 1–21.

dialectical materialist philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s; and numerous generals who developed and implemented the "people's war" have returned to history books in China and Western societies.

Making Revolution in China

Mao is but the foremost of a generation of Chinese intellectuals and activists known as the *May Fourth Generation* (for the patriotic anti-imperialist movement centering on the demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, that protested the transfer of Chinese territory to the Japanese in the Treaty of Versailles). This generation wrestled with a confusing array of Western ideas – from anarchism to pragmatism to social Darwinism, and finally, after 1917, Marxism – as a way to explain the failures of the Chinese government to resist the inroads of European and Japanese imperialism. In Chapter 2, Joseph Esherick gives a vivid social history of this generation. May Fourth intellectuals were vigorously iconoclastic, crying, "Down with the House of Confucius." They promoted major social reforms, including free marriage (as opposed to arranged), labor unions, and the adoption of the vernacular language in books and periodicals. This was their "ideological moment" in China. It was a diverse generation that sought answers to social crisis in ideology. In the 1920s, this generation divided across the political spectrum from neoconservatives seeking a Confucian revival, to political liberals hoping for democracy, to militarists seeking order, to revolutionaries seeking a new society.

Mao entered this May Fourth world from a rural community in central China. He was born and raised in Shaoshan, Xingtan County, in Hunan Province. His father was a prosperous farmer and was able to pay to send Mao to school. Thus Mao was not a peasant in the simple sense but was most emphatically a rural person who came to believe that the heart of China lay in the villages, not the cities. Mao soaked up the rich array of May Fourth translations from European and Japanese sources, including socialist and soon Russian Marxist writings. (Mao never learned a foreign language.) He chose to be a revolutionary and set off – first to Changsha (the capital of Hunan) and then to Beijing and Shanghai – to find that revolution.

Mao's career and writings can be viewed in three major stages: as a junior member of the new CCP who led the shift from an urban to a rural revolutionary strategy (1920s–mid-1930s), as the primary leader of the revolutionary party and army from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, and as the undisputed charismatic supreme leader of the CCP and PRC from the 1950s until his death in 1976. These three periods broadly correspond to the three chronologic chapters in this book: Chapter 3 by

Brantly Womack on Mao's move from urban radical to rural revolutionary; Chapter 4 by Hans J. van de Ven on war, revolution, and state building; and Chapter 5 by Michael Schoenhals on Mao's ruinous continuous revolutions from the mid-1950s. The CCP was officially founded in Shanghai in July 1921, and Mao attended the first congress as a regional delegate from Hunan. The new party was small and under the strong influence of Comintern advisors sent from Moscow. The tiny CCP grew by joining forces with the Nationalist Party [Guomindang (GMD)] under Sun Yat-sen in 1923. After the counterrevolution of April 1927, in which GMD forces under General Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) decimated union and Communist ranks in Shanghai and other major cities, Mao and colleagues repaired to the countryside, setting up rural soviets in southeast China. This lasted until 1934, when GMD military forces crushed the Communists and forced them on the retreat that came to be known as the Long March.

Mao had not only not been a top leader during this period but also had fallen out of favor with the Moscow-appointed Chinese leadership of the CCP. In fact, his highest party positions in the mid-1920s were in the GMD – at the Whampoa Military Academy – before the 1927 split. However, the debacle of the 1927 GMD White Terror and then the collapse of the Jiangxi Soviet in 1934 – in which urban orientation and positional warfare were shown to fail while rural orientation and guerrilla warfare at least provided survival – provided the opportunity for Mao to gain some top positions. Over the next few years, he skillfully built a coalition of colleagues, sensible military and social policies, and a persuasive ideological corpus that confirmed him as the leader of the Chinese Revolution.

These policies were implemented in the 1940s when the CCP's capital was in the dusty Shaanxi Province market town of Yan'an in northwest China. Mao's "Introducing the Communist" (1939) named the "three magic weapons" for defeating the enemy in China's Revolution: the United Front, armed struggle, and party building. This was the beginning of Mao's application of the Bolshevik model to China, or the "Sinification of Marxism." It produced effective policies that catapulted the CCP to national leadership in a decade.

Internally, Mao ruthlessly eliminated his rivals for leadership and effectively streamlined and energized the party rank and file. This was accomplished most clearly in the 1942–44 Rectification Movement. Here, Mao's writings from 1936 to 1942 became the core of the CCP's "Sinification of Marxism" – the application of general Marxist-Leninist theory (in its Stalinist form) to the realities of Chinese politics and

culture. At the heart of Mao's approach was the "mass line" (*qunzhong luxian*) – a broadly participatory mode of political administration that brought in the views, interests, and experiences of common working people in a fashion never stressed by Lenin or Stalin. This was not democracy. Indeed, Mao and the CCP stressed "democratic centralism" (*minzhu jizhong*) and were ruthless in suppressing dissidents, such as the left-wing intellectuals associated with the writer Ding Ling and theorist Wang Shiwei who dared to question Mao and CCP practice from an independent Marxist (and feminist) stand in 1942.

Yet this repression of dissent inside the CCP – which foreshadowed disastrously expanded versions of this tyranny in 1957 and 1966 – paralleled effective organizational and public-policy reforms, including simplified administration, armies that not only did not rape and pillage but actually paid for the food they used, and a powerful ideology that mobilized a generation of cadres to "serve the people." The lessons of this coordinated but flexible organizing have been applied to social movements elsewhere, from the Vietcong in Vietnam, to Che Guevara in Latin America, to Naxalite activists in Nepal (see Chapter 12).

Externally, Mao led his colleagues in making the CCP and their program for China look better than the only likely alternative: the increasingly corrupt Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek. By 1939, the GMD government presented Chiang Kai-shek as the hero of war-torn China, and the GMD began a leadership cult to establish Chiang as China's charismatic revolutionary leader. The publication of his book, *China's Destiny*, in 1943 brought Chiang's leadership cult to a crescendo. Thus the Mao cult of the 1940s was a response to this practical challenge, as well as drawing from the example of Stalin.[10]

Mao adroitly cast his public utterances in moderate terms. His 1940 essay, "On New Democracy," became widely popular among urban readers, especially youth. Although clearly a Marxist-Leninist document, Mao's program promised a long period of democratic transition on the road to eventual socialism and communism. In addition, he provided a public history of China's humiliating confrontation with European and Japanese imperialism that, using Lenin's ideas on imperialism as the highest form of capitalism, made sense of China's history and, more important, gave Chinese readers a sense of purpose, hope, and meaning.[11] In the face of

[10] Lyman Van Slyke, in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 13: *Republican China, 1912–1949*, Part II (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 692.

[11] "On New Democracy," in Stuart R. Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), Vol. 7, pp. 330–369; the official version in his *Selected Works* was revised in many parts.

rampant corruption in GMD-administered areas and the continued misery of working and rural peoples, Mao's "On New Democracy" combined with the impressive track record of the armies and administrations under CCP rule in the 1940s to create a very appealing political platform and ideology of public service along with an organization that appeared able to deliver on these promises.

His peers certified Mao Zedong as the charismatic supreme leader at the Seventh Congress of the CCP in Yan'an in April 1945. From that time on, he was known as Chairman Mao. In the ranks of the party leadership he was, at first, restrained and practical, but all deferred to him. Externally, he was the great Father of the Revolution who could publicly proclaim in September 1949, "The Chinese People Have Stood Up!"[12] Mao's work in the new People's Republic was largely practical in the early 1950s, as this rural movement adjusted to the profound tasks of administering not only major cities but also a territory the size of Europe. The new socialist government "leant to one side" – taking on the Soviet model of a centralized command economy and joining the Soviet Union in the emerging cold war. Russian advisors guided the modern sector, and Stalin lent (but did not give) funds to help rebuild the war-torn nation. The Korean War came upon the new government almost immediately – in June 1950. This confrontation with the United States heightened the already brutal land reform and anti-intellectual political movements, as well as anticorruption campaigns, during the early 1950s.[13] Yet, life for most Chinese was better than it had been in living memory.

By 1956, the new PRC government was feeling the pains of office.[14] Wasteful bureaucratism, the limits of the Stalinist economic model, and restiveness among the working peoples and, of course, a critical intelligentsia bedeviled the CCP leadership. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin – communism's revered leader – in his 1956 secret speech scandalized CCP leaders. Mao at first sought to moderate application of his revolutionary approach. In 1956, he revived the Rectification Movement approach of self- and mutual criticism but extended it beyond the CCP to the educated public, inviting intellectuals and professionals to "let

[12] Mao Zedong, "Zhongguo ren congci zhan liqilaide," *Mao Zedong wenji* (Writings of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), Vol. 5, pp. 342–346.

[13] Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[14] While some still view the early 1950s as a "golden age" of CCP rule, there were profound tensions from the early mass campaigns (the Three Antis and Five Antis), war in Korea against the United States, the violent side of land reform, and intellectual repression. The current view is a more balanced one of successes and tensions. See Brown and Pickowicz, *Dilemmas of Victory*.

a hundred flowers bloom" and to criticize the ruling CCP. This was an unprecedented act for a ruling Communist Party and was vigorously opposed by Mao's senior colleagues.

This was Mao's last great public ideological effort that had some promise of success. Because of his profound authority among his followers (see Chapter 6), only Mao could have enforced the toleration of critical public debate in a socialist state. In "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" (original text, February 1957), Mao sought to lay the theoretical basis for limited – but real – public criticism and dissent under a ruling Communist Party.[15] By defending loyal opposition to party bureaucratism and abuses of power as "contradictions among the people" in contrast to "contradictions with the enemy," Mao went further than even the most daring of the Eastern European regimes in the de-Stalinization of 1956. This promising opening to socialism with a human face was ruined by Mao's own dictatorial style and petulance. When the invited criticisms arrived in the spring of 1957, they were not to Mao's liking, so he declared the critics to be counterrevolutionary Rightists. The text of "Correct Handling" was significantly rewritten before official publication in June 1957 to make Mao look good and to ratchet back permissible discussion to the restricted scope familiar to other state socialist societies. It was a failed experiment that cost the lives and careers of half a million intellectuals and party members.

The next decade was a grim one for China and for Mao's legacy. The "Hundred Flowers" rectification of 1957 was followed by a harsh nationwide purge, the Anti-Rightist Movement. Next, Mao promoted an ambitious economic development strategy, the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), that was disastrously flawed and ruthlessly implemented. It contributed to at least 15–46 million deaths – mostly attributable to the famine – by 1961. This has to be the single greatest crime during Mao's rule of China. After a retrenchment in the early 1960s (administered by his number two, Liu Shaoqi) brought an end to the famine and began the economic recovery, Mao initiated a final effort at total revolution: the Cultural Revolution. It was designed to protect China from the dire threat of revisionism that Mao saw in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, and China and the Soviet Union fell into an ideological split that culminated in national confrontation and fighting on the Manchurian border in 1969. Now, at Mao's behest, the CCP revived the thought reform and rural orientation of the Yan'an period but, alas, not as comedy but as a horror

[15] See Mao's "Speaking Notes (*Jianghua Gao*)" translated in Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1989), pp. 131–189.