Nothing to Celebrate

By Jonathan Mirsky

A revolution is not a dinner party... It is an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." During the 1960s, when the quotations of Chairman Mao enjoyed a certain vogue and many "progressives" in the West owned personal copies of Mao's "Little Red Book," this 1937 aphorism was a favorite. Few considered the word "violence"; if they did, they might have felt a frisson of circui-

ous excitement.

Today, with the Communist authorities in China about to stage a huge celebration in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China—a revolution whose origins lie in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party almost 80 years ago—we have no excuse for failing to grasp the full significance of Mao Zedong's words. Having read a melange of Marxist texts, the young Mao could toss around words such as rich, middle, and poor peasants; national bourgeoisie; and big and middle landlords; and, in a godlike way, he could pronounce that some would survive and others would be "overthrown." But what Mao actually meant by "class" was a sort, a kind, a category, with no Leninist attributions. He meant his enemies. And, since this category could, as it happened, include almost anyone, the "act of violence" Mao proposed would prove to be a more or less endless series of violent acts—going back to well before that fabled day, October 1, 1949, when he came to Tiananmen Square and declared that "the Chinese people have stood up."

From the purges that began even before Mao arrived at his mountain redoubt at Yanan, to the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution, the process of political transformation Mao and his comrades set in motion is a long story of intentional crimes and disastrous ideologically driven policy mistakes. Liquidation, survival, sometimes rehabilitation, more liquidation: This is the historical rhythm of the revolution Mao's heirs invite us to commemorate today.

Should we join in the celebration nonetheless? Many in the West seem prepared to answer at least a qualified yes. From academia comes the verdict of historian Maurice Meisner of the University of Wisconsin, who, in a recent lecture in London, justified the Chinese Revolution on the grounds of historical necessity. Meisner maintains that the Chinese Revolution did more for "people than any other single political event in world history." He concedes that the revolution was accompanied by "horrors and crimes," in-

cluding the gulag, purges, famine, and "the denial of basic rights of free expression and association." But, given the cor-

ruption of Chiang Kai-shek, the brutality of Japanese occu-

pation and the effectiveness of Mao's army in combating it, and the seemingly incurable chaos and stagnation that had enveloped China after the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1912, there "was no real alternative" to this "most heroic of revolu-
tions." What has happened in China, Meisner contends, already is plainly "the most massive and most popular revolu-
tion in world history."

To be sure, Meisner is an old enthusiast of left-wing revol-
tions, although many respectable sinologists of every ideologi-

cal stripe have shared his basic verdict for years. Yet the celeb-

eratory mood runs strong even—or perhaps espe-

cially—among the top ranks of American capitalism. Here the excitement stems not so much from an evaluation of China's history but rather from an assessment of its future—as a huge market, China's modernization under commu-

nism, especially the last 20 years of rapid growth under a more market-oriented party leadership, also impresses the world's giant corporations. Thus, *Fortune* magazine will sponsor a "Global Forum" at the end of this month titled "China: The Next 50 Years." The three-day event, to be opened with an address from President Jiang Zemin himself, will be held in Shanghai, which *Fortune* describes as "one of the world's most dynamic emerging centers of commerce." Only CEOs of "major multinational companies" are to be invited, including China booster Philip Condit of Boeing, who made headlines in 1997 by comparing China's human rights problems with America's.

It was Mao's faithful acolyte Zhou Enlai who once said that it was still too early to tell the historical significance of the French Revolution. In this sense, China's rulers and their friends around the world seem to be rushing to judgment. For there is another view of what this fiftieth anniversary is really about, a view of China's revolution that regards the awful human suffering that accompanied it as neither historically determined nor justified by the undeniable economic improvements of the past two decades, advances that have been accompanied by some loosening of the once-total grip the Communist Party maintained over every facet of daily life in China.

No one can say where China would be today if the Com-

munists had not taken over. Perhaps its economic stagnation and political chaos would have deepened. Perhaps it would have slowly developed into a modern, democratic capitalist state like South Korea or Taiwan. Or perhaps the best verdict is that China's revolution was a human catastrophe of unequalled scope—a colossal political, economic, and moral
setback from which the society is still recovering. It is, moreover, a recovery to which the Chinese Communist Party, for all the positive developments of the past 20 years, is still an obstacle.

Any view that Mao's depredations were necessitated by the war with Chiang, the Japanese occupation, China's abysmal backwardness and disorder, or, perhaps, the later hostility of Russia and the United States cannot be squared with a simple fact: the party's ugliest and most systemic violence was always reserved for those within its own ranks, and this interminable cruelty began too early to allow it to be channeled up to outside pressures or political necessity. What Harvard University's Roderick MacFarquhar calls "the mark of Cain" stained the party as early as 1950, 10 years before Mao came to power, when Mao's infant Red Army crushed a rival provincial Communist force known as the AB Corps. The party accused the corps of being counterrevolutionary and executed hundreds of its members.

At the center of this struggle was an "incident" in a town called Futian. The leading scholar of the purge, Stephen Averill, says, "There is no reason whatsoever to think there was ever an elaborate multi-tiered secret AB Corps network plotting the destruction of the revolution," as Mao had alleged. Averill quotes Xiao Ke, one of the party's earliest military leaders: "We comrades who participated in this movement, regardless of whether we were executors or victims, all remember... that aside from oral confessions there was really no evidence to prove the existence of [the AB Corps]. Today, fifty years later... we still cannot find any concrete evidence proving the existence of [the AB Corps] in the Soviet areas at that time."

Futian foreshadowed the killings at Yenan, the mountain province to which Mao dragged the tired and purged remnants of his party after the Long March of 1934-1935. For the eleven years from 1936 until 1947, the headquarters at Yenan became a scene of periodic and bloody internal killing. For their invaluable book, Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic, David Apter of Yale and Tony Saich, now at Harvard, interviewed 150 veterans of Yenan: peasants, workers, soldiers, teachers, writers, underground workers, one of Mao's secretaries, and Mao's photographers, together with "some very angry widows, survivors of those whose faction, or unit, had been on the losing side in the internal struggles for power within the [party]." Apter and Saich note: "Very few of those interviewed had been exempt from physical abuse and verbal assault... all had survived by learning how to keep their mouths shut,
except to parrot the appropriate line and use the exact words, phrases, and expressions counseled by the authorities."

After and until point out that Mao engaged in four key contests for power at Yenan. "Each of the four struggles ended in the death or exile of Mao's designated opponent. In each case his victory was complete. . . . By demolishing anyone who dared to challenge him . . . Mao was able to position himself not only as a locus of power within the party, but also as a source of power in and of himself." The leading specialist in China on the Yenan purges is the scientist and journalist Dai Qing, who has written of the heabeadings, drownings, and burying alive of "Trotskists." This was the place where Edgar Snow discovered an inspirational "red star over China" and where Foreign Service Officer John S. Service, who was stationed there for some months, found "a YMCA camp." Service told me years later that he had subsequently learned of the killing, but that even if he had known about it at the time he would have ignored it, since, in his mind, everything had to be subordinated to beating the Japanese.

O nce in power, the Chinese Communist Party continued its destructive work. Beginning in the late 1920s, having already driven the Dalai Lama into his Indian exile, Beijing set about dismantling Buddhism's works and clergy, which are the core and the rationale of Tibetan life. The Communist Chinese takeover of Tibet was an act of crude nationalismist conquest admitting of no defensible explanation in terms of Beijing's political or economic self-interest. It changed the traditionally self-sufficient economy of the region so that for at least 15 years there was mass famine. This policy has been compounded by the transplanting of tens of thousands of Chinese into Tibet, where the native people are in danger of becoming a minority. The notion that, by clinging to their unique civilization, the Tibetans are "interfering with politics and education" is the justification for the enormities that have kept the jails of Tibet well-stocked with Buddhist monks and priests.

We know from the seminal study Chinese Village, Socialist State, by Edward Friedman, Mark Selden, and Paul Pickowicz, that, even before it took power in Beijing, the party encouraged local thugs to kill its targets and in "model villages" advanced policies that it knew were catastrophic but could not admit had failed. Hundreds of thousands of landlords—rich and not so rich—were killed in the early '50s after the Maoist victory. Perhaps a half-million people were purged during the two-year anti-rightist drive that began in 1957. Many died—either through murder or inhuman treatment—in labor camps. All of this set the stage for the largest famine in human history, known as the Three Terrible Years, which lasted from 1959 to 1961.

In the third volume of his masterful The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, MacFarquhar writes that, in 1959 and 1960, in a single county—Fengyang in Anhui province—60,264 people, 17.7 percent of the population, died. In some communes, between 20 and 30 percent of the population perished. Conditions were so grim in one place, according to MacFarquhar, "that a scholar of ancient Chinese history compared this village to a neolithic site." In a normal year, 250,000 people died in Anhui. In 1960, 2,200,000 died of hunger there. In Sichuan province, China's most populous, the population sank from 70,810,000 to 64,591,000 between 1957 and 1961. During the same period, at least 13 provinces recorded negative population growth. In Beijing, the annual number of deaths rose from 320,000 in 1957 to 790,000 in 1961, the year in which Snow, who was visiting China, poured scorn on those who chided Chinese were starving. MacFarquhar quotes estimates that 30 million died. China's leading investigative journalist, Liu Bin-yan, says that, in party circles at the time, the figure was believed to be 30 million.

During the Cultural Revolution, which ran from 1966 to 1976, millions are reported to have died, again either murdered or allowed to perish in confinement. The horrors of the Cultural Revolution were legion. Twenty years ago in Beijing, I watched the televised Gang of Four trial, at which witness after witness described torture and execution. Many of the interrogations had been recorded on tape so that Madame Mao could listen to them at her convenience. She defended her actions to the judge, saying, "I was just Chairman Mao's lapdog. Whom he said I should bite, I bit." Zhou Enlai, supposedly by some to have protected potential victims during these years, in fact chaired a committee that oversaw the harsh treatment of Mao's specially selected victims, meticulously carrying out his wishes. Two years ago, I heard a Chinese scholar now at the University of California at Berkeley describe the dozens of schools that had been seized by Red Guards and Mao's "work teams," where the killing of teachers was frequent and where no one who witnessed the violence could recall a single dissenting voice raised in the victims' defense.

A nd what of China's official efforts truthfully to assess these horrendous deeds and the question of those who bear the responsibility for them? In June 1981, five years after Mao's death, the party, now in the hands of Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues, published an account of its own history since its founding. This extraordinary 32-page document was edited carefully by Deng himself. It starts off on a dishonest note, praising the pre-1949 years of the insurrectionist party. Indeed, the Deng-edited document obscures the very origins of the party, claiming almost 60 members founded it in 1921. The party was actually founded in 1921 by two or three revolutionaries who were cast out in the early years; it became necessary for party historians to record that the founding took place in 1921, when Mao was present. The report describes Mao's first great purge of intellectuals, at Yenan in 1942, as "a tremendous success," although it set the stage for intellectual purges to this day.

The cander begins, barely, with an account of 1956 in which the document concedes that after "the socialist transformation of the private ownership of the means of production . . . there had been shortcomings and errors . . . [W]hy were we far from meticulous, the changes were too fast . . . " This refers to the establishment of the agricultural cooper-
tives, forerunners to the disastrous communes of 1958, which were a key factor in the subsequent famines and a "shortcoming" not reversed until the late 70s. Regarding the anti-rightist campaign, launched in 1957 after Mao determined that the Hundred Flowers period—when intellectuals were encouraged to criticize the leadership—had gone too far, Deng's history has to this say: "A handful of bourgeois Rightists seized the opportunity to advocate what they called 'speaking out and airing views in a big way,' and to mount a wild attack against the Party... It was therefore entirely correct and necessary to launch a resolute counterattack. But the scope of this struggle was far too broad and a number of intellectuals, patriotic people, and Party cadres were unjustly labeled 'Rightists,' with unfortunate consequences." This dainty phrase refers to the vast purging of an estimated 500,000 people, including the current premier, Zhu Rongji—many of whom were detained until well after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.

The document then turns to the years 1958-1960, known as the Great Leap Forward ("mistakes of enlarging the scope of class struggle and of impetuosity and rashness in economic construction"), a period marked by arbitrary directions, thoughtlessness, and the stirring up of a "communist wind..." Comrade Mao Zedong and many leading comrades both at the center and in the localities... overestimated the role of man's subjective will and efforts." The document admits that the charges drawn up against old revolutionary comrades who dared to criticize Mao "were entirely wrong." Yet there is no mention of the tens of millions who perished of hunger during those years. To this day, that disaster is barely mentioned. When it is, it is understated, and the Soviet Union is blamed for cutting off economic aid. Creeping towards "the comprehensive, long-drawn-out, and grave blunder..." the Cultural Revolution—the document admits that, during the early 90s, "left errors... actually grew in the spheres of politics, ideology, and policies." Between 1964 and 1965, "a number of the cadres at grass-roots levels were unjustly dealt with..." (There are no details about how they were "dealt with.") The account of the Cultural Revolution fills seven pages, summed up with the following: "The cultural revolution which lasted from May 1966 to October 1976 was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic. It was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong." The document adds, "Comrade Mao Zedong must be held chiefly responsible..." (His personal arbitrariness gradually undermined democratic centralism in Party life and the personality cult grew graver and graver."

Yet, even here, there is a crucial weasel phrase. Having derived the major ideas of the decade, the document says that "these theses must be thoroughly distinguished from Mao Zedong Thought." Mao—but not his "Thought"—was responsible, the document admits, for errors long before 1966. But they were the errors of "a great proletarian revolutionary... Herein lies his tragedy... His merits are primary and his errors secondary." As for the party itself: "Without the Chinese Communist Party there would have been no new China... [It can correct its mistakes and in no case should one use the Party's mistakes as a pretext for weakening, breaking away from or even sabotaging its leadership."

Even if some of Communist China's foreign apologists can posit a radical discontinuity between the awful past and the promising present, China's own leaders know better. They know that a completely candid assessment of their performance would have to go right back to the origins of the party and would implicate Mao personally in campaign after campaign of mass murder and devastating policy errors. And, if Mao is to blame, then the party he built is to blame; and if the party is to blame, then those who inherited its revolutionary mantle have no legitimate claim to rule.

This would have been too much for Deng to admit. After all, he personally oversaw the purge of intellectuals during the Great Leap Forward (the 1981 report characterizes the purge as necessary but overzealous) and was a senior official throughout the major killing campaigns after 1949; he was also the commissar of the armies that invaded Tibet in 1950. Deng climbed the ladder through the bureaucracy during all those years and cannot question them. It is an iron that Premier Zhu, himself a victim of the anti-rightist campaign (the only such significant leader today), never condemns the Maosist years of oppression. He has, indeed, been rehabilitated.

In short, Mao's trivial "Thought" and his actual record of governance, ghastly as it is, are all China's current rulers have in the way of a claim to legitimacy. Little wonder, then, that Vice President Hu Jintao, a member of the party's powerful Politiburo, recently told students at the party school: "Party leaders at all levels should improve their study of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and particularly Deng Xiaoping theory, so as to sharpen their political consciousness."

In the years since 1976, when Mao died, the wholesale, chaotic bloodletting has more or less ceased. Also, the nature of official violence has changed. The violence of Mao's era was, indeed, revolutionary: first, it was intended to destroy any traditional sources of power that might threaten Mao or his immediate circle of the moment; second, it was intended to extinguish any potential source of opposition to Mao within the party. By contrast, post-Mao official violence has had a more controlled, conservative cast. Tiananmen, including the thousands tortured and executed around the country in the ensuing qingeju, or ferreting-out, was a classic act of repression by an established, now threatened, elite. Last year in Beijing, Jiang told President Clinton, "With regard to the political disturbances in 1989, had the Chinese government not taken the resolute measures then, we could not have enjoyed the stability we are enjoying today."

Order, then, is the party elite's post-Tianannmen claim to power. Order, prosperity, and national power. And, without question, China—a member of the U.N. Security Council whose views must be taken into account on issues from Kosovo to East Timor—has emerged as a player on the world stage. But the prosperity upon which China's newfound international salience is based is more precarious than the
country's boosters like to admit. In Shanghai, the site of the Fortune conference, 70 percent of all office space is vacant. The city is also a center for China's four main banks, nearly half of whose total loan portfolio—worth one trillion dollars—is not recoverable. Nonetheless, last year these insolvent banks were ordered by the government to lend the staggering state-owned industries $12 billion more, although, according to Moody's Investors Service, it would cost $220 billion to clear the banks' debts. That is at least twelve percent of China's gross domestic product. The party cannot deal with a restive mass of 150 million rural unemployed and millions more jobless industrial workers.

Nor will the party provide the rule of law promised by China's own constitution. Corruption, the catalytic grievance of many of the pro-democracy demonstrators at Tiananmen, remains as powerful and suffocating a force as ever. According to official figures cited in a recent Associated Press story, some $14.2 billion in government money was misused during the first half of 1989, the equivalent of one-fifth of total central government revenue last year. The AP reports that "the Ministry of Water Resources, in charge of preventing floods, illegally collected money to build luxury office buildings and also embezzled funds for other uses...Annual summer floods last year killed 4,150 people."

Perhaps even worse than the party's corruption is the fact that the Communists are presiding over a social scene marked by untrammeled abuse and neglect. The most damming charge in a recent 102-page report by Human Rights in China, a New York-based human rights research organization, is that China's one-child family policy has collided with a cultural preference for boys, resulting in 500,000 "missing" girls per year, five percent of the total expected if all infant girls were allowed to survive. After almost 20 years of such a horrific shortfall, we are left with Amartya Sen's question: Where are the more than 50 million missing Chinese females? A Human Rights Watch report on Chinese orphanages, in which many girls are regularly allowed to die, states that China "conceals a secret world of starvation, disease, and unnatural death—a world into which thousands of Chinese citizens disappear each year...The victims are not...political and religious dissidents...they are orphans and abandoned children in custodial institutions run by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs."

And yet China's boosters remain undaunted. A well-known historian of China recently told me, "You can discuss almost anything with intellectuals in Beijing these days." Some optimists say, too, that China is not really Communist or socialist anymore and that the profit motive has taken the place of ideology. These friends of the post-revolutionary era become uncomfortable or even angry when less-friendly China-watchers comment on the criminalization of millions of Christians and Buddhists who are not under the "patristic church" umbrellas of the party, not to mention the treatment meted out to "superstitions" such as the innocuous Falun Gong movement.

Seth Faison, The New York Times' respected Beijing corre-

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ON THE RIM
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The Chinese state has just issued 50 anniversary slogans. Number 36 runs: “Improve the Party’s work style, build a clean government, and serve the people heart and soul.” In that spirit, the party is linking the revolution’s birthday with yet another purge, this one built around the notion of “three stresses”—study of Mao and Deng, political awareness, and good conduct. Less violent and chaotic than the old-fashioned anti-rightist campaign or the Cultural Revolution, the latest campaign of internal party discipline will nevertheless attempt to root out false beliefs such as Falun Gong (reportedly rampant in party ranks) and generally remind the party’s 61 million members who’s boss. As Gernot Rohrmeier, an Australian China scholar, told the AP: “This is the way the party conducts its business, and it does result in a response. People know to shut up, to pull their heads in, to be careful, to play it safe.”

A few years ago, in the midst of a similar effort, the party’s newspaper, the People’s Daily, issued the following directive: “Do not lose sight of the party’s purpose.” This was actually a warning. The party’s purpose is obvious—stay in power by any and all means. In other words, as the University of Wisconsin’s Meissner might say, there is no real alternative.