MAO TSE-TUNG IN THE SCALES OF HISTORY

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THE MARXIST

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There is a double ambiguity about the title of this chapter. Is Mao's Marxism merely one facet of his thought, or does it, as some believe, define the very essence of his contribution to the theory and practice of revolution? And what "Marxism," or whose "Marxism," are we talking about?

For some of Mao's admirers in the West, as for the Soviets from their quite different position, Marxism (as they conceive it) is synonymous with both truth and virtue; it therefore becomes an article of faith either that Mao was a Marxist first, last and always, or that there was nothing Marxist about him at all. Others, who see Mao's thought as the confluence of many disparate influences, ancient and modern, Chinese and Western, may question whether there is any reason to give one of these strands primacy over all the rest. To argue that the structure and content of Mao's thought were essentially determined by Marxism, and bore no relation to the cultural environment in which they developed, is to ignore the evidence, including Mao's own repeated calls not only for the adaptation of Marxism to Chinese conditions, but for the fusion of Chinese and Western elements in a new synthesis. To treat Mao's Marxism as merely one component of his thought among many others is to make light of the fact that for half a century Mao Tse-tung strove to guide himself by the lessons he had learned from Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and to explain and justify his policies in Marxist terms.

As for the standard against which Mao's originality (which some may call "heresy," and others "creativity") should be measured, many students of his thought, myself among them, have in the past referred to "Marxist orthodoxy," meaning by that the basic axioms which, in their view, were common to Marx and Lenin, and often to Stalin and Trotsky as well. There
are, however, three disadvantages to this usage. First of all, it suggests that there is a Pope, Patriarch, or other layer-down of correct doctrine, whereas since the death of Stalin quite clearly there has not been. Secondly, there is the implication that if Mao’s stance on a given question at a given time is characterized as incompatible with Marxist orthodoxy, this amounts to saying that his thinking was wrong and his policy misguided. As a general proposition, this has never been my view, but since the term “orthodoxy” appears to have created occasion on occasion the impression that it was, the term had best be abandoned. Finally, the loose and interchangeable use of “Marxism,” “Marxism–Leninism,” “orthodoxy,” “the Marxist tradition” and other such locutions leads to confusion, for it blurs the differences between Marxism at various stages in its development, and above all, between the Marxism of Marx and that of Lenin.

The writings of Marx himself embrace almost every conceivable domain, from philosophy to sociology and economics. Lenin, though he wrote one outrageously utopian book (The State and Revolution), and expended considerable energy on now largely-forgotten controversies about the philosophy of science, is commonly considered to have narrowed the scope of Marxism to concentrate essentially on the tactics of the struggle for power. A decade or two ago, almost everyone would have said the same of Mao, whose image was primarily that of the guerrilla fighter who had devised a new pattern for revolution in the non-European countries based on encircling the cities from the countryside. Today, in the light of recently-published materials, it is abundantly clear that the mature Mao was very much a philosopher as well as a strategist.

Mao not only fought (as neither Marx nor Lenin did), and reflected on the ultimate destiny of humanity (as Marx was more inclined to do than Lenin); he also assumed the responsibilities of power, and strove (as had Lenin during the few years before his career was cut short by illness) to build a revolutionary state, and to transform society and the economy. There were significant differences between him and Lenin, both in the circumstances they faced and in the solutions they adopted, but in one respect their attitude was very much the same. Both before and after the conquest of power, politics remained for Mao, as it had

been for Lenin, the leading factor—the dimension of human activity which ultimately shaped all others.

Was this emphasis in conflict with the implications, if not with the letter, of Marx’s own thinking? While arguing that the evolution of human society was governed by objective laws, Marx had also stressed the capacity of men to understand these laws and, having understood and grasped them, to use them in order to change their own fate. The principal instrument by which men could shape their history was, in Marx’s view, class struggle, and politics, as one of the theatres in which class interests fought for the control of society, constituted a semi-independent realm. And yet, in the last analysis, Marx held that political changes must follow and grow out of developments in technology and in the economic system. Lenin’s idea of a revolution in a country where capitalism is as yet not fully developed, which goes through a “bourgeois-democratic” phase under the “hegemony of the proletariat,” has no counterpart in Marx’s writings. When Mao ultimately came to assert the primacy of politics in these terms, he was therefore following Lenin and not Marx.

In any case, however important politics was for Marx, it was not, as it is perhaps in the thought of Mao Tse-tung, the key to progress, and the most important single dimension of human freedom. Mao’s views of political power not only as the midwife of revolutionary change, but as the locus of the imagination which generates new values, and of the authority which decides what is morally right, brings him in some ways closer to traditional Chinese thought than to either Marx or Lenin.

Mao was in fact slower and more reluctant than most members of China’s May Fourth generation, to which he belonged, to move towards a Westernizing stance. His first published article, written during the winter of 1916–17, when he was 23, displays the imprint of a wide range of traditional and traditionalist influences, from the Confucian and Taoist classics to the great conservative statesman (and fellow—Hunanese) Tseng Kuo-fan. Two years later, he was as eager as anyone to “overthrow the Confucius family shop,” and to seek inspiration in the “new thought” from the West. And yet, not only for Mao but for all Chinese, there were psychological as well as intellectual ob-
stables to the assimilation of Western ideas. Mao himself evoked the problem with characteristic verve in 1958:

Ever since Chi’in Shih-huang [we Chinese] have looked down on foreigners, calling them savages and barbarians. When, at the end of the Chi’ing dynasty, the foreigners attacked us and forced their way into our country, they frightened us [to such an extent] that we became slaves, constantly feeling that we were inadequate. Formerly we were arrogant, but now we have become too humble. Let there be a negation of the negation.¹

To learn from the foreigners who had held China in semi-colonial subjection since the mid-19th century was indeed galling to a people who had long regarded themselves as the centre of the civilized world. There was also the intellectual difficulty of understanding concepts and ideas elaborated in a totally different cultural and historical setting, though this was in some ways smaller in China than in other Asian countries. In the encounter between Marxism and traditional culture, one aspect of Western thought which appears strange and alien in many non-European countries is the emphasis on the historical dimension of human experience. All the major and significant Western interpretations of history, including even such aggressively secular philosophies as Marxism, are ultimately outgrowths of a Judaic-Christian theology of history, and reflect in some guise the eschatological perspectives of the latter. Though the main schools of thought in pre-revolutionary China shared neither these apocalyptic visions, nor the idea of progress (which is a relatively recent development in the West), they did tend for the most part to take history seriously.

To take history seriously meant to take politics seriously also. However wide the gap which separated them in other respects from Confucianism, even the classic Taoist authors saw government as an essential function in the process of adaptation by humanity to a universe ultimately beyond its control.²

¹ JPRS, Miscellaneous, Part I, p. 123; Wan-sui (1969), p. 225. (In this and other instances where a reference is given both to a translation and to the Chinese text of a quotation, I have checked the English version against the original and modified it wherever appropriate in the interests of accuracy and readability.)
² As a leading Western authority has put it: “... the Tao-te-ching... advises Doing Nothing as a means of ruling, not as an absolution of ruling.” See Angus Graham, The Book of Lieh-tzu (London: John Murray, 1950), p. 10.

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If China thus presented a relatively favourable terrain for a modernizing dictatorship of a Leninist type because of the role long attributed to the state, there were sharp contradictions as well between the aims of those who undertook to make revolution in China half a century ago, and existing attitudes and patterns of organization. The most acute lay in the domain of the relations between those who worked with their brains and those who worked with their hands, and between government and society.

In an article published in July-August 1919, when he had already begun his apprenticeship in revolution, but knew as yet little of Marxism, Mao put the basic dilemma in forceful and prophetic terms:

In reality, for thousands of years the Chinese people of several hundred millions all led a life of slaves. Only one person, the “emperor,” was not a slave (or rather one could say that even he was a slave of “heaven”). When the emperor was in control of everything, we were not allowed to exercise our capacities. Whether in politics, study, society, etc. we were not allowed to have either thought, organization or practice.

Today, things are different, and in every domain we demand liberation...³

Within a year, Mao had been converted to Marxism, within a decade he had acquired a basic understanding of Leninist strategy and tactics, and within two decades, in Yanan, he had mastered the subject sufficiently to begin producing works of major theoretical significance. The problems he had to face, both in organizing his forces for the conquest of power and then in undertaking to lead China towards socialism, remained, however, those he had formulated in 1919, when he still preferred Kropotkin to Marx. What was to be the relation between the “thought” and the “practice,” both of which the Chinese people required for their renewal? How was one to conciliate the overriding need for organization, if the great undertakings of which Mao dreamed were to succeed, and the universal demand for “liberation” which he shared, and which, he predicted, would burst forth like a torrent in the wake of the oppression and

stagnation from which the Chinese people had suffered for centuries?

Prior to the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party in July 1921, Mao had acquired considerable experience in organizing urban intellectuals, both for political action and for the study of radical ideas. Thereafter, he spent two years as a trade union organizer, and then a further year or two as a bureaucrat in the Kuomintang apparatus, in Shanghai and Canton, in the context of the “First United Front.” It is, however, to the lessons he learned in leading the peasant movement during the years 1925–27 that the inspiration for a large part of his original contribution to revolutionary theory can be traced.

In a crucial article published in September 1926, entitled “The National Revolution and the Peasant Movement,” Mao began with the statement: “The peasant question is the central question in the national revolution.” This in itself was not at all remarkable, for the upsurge of revolutionary activity in the countryside, since the middle of 1925, had forced itself on the attention of even the most urban-oriented, to such an extent that a bow in the direction of the peasant movement had become a cliché automatically included in almost every speech by a Communist and/or Kuomintang spokesman. Mao’s argument demonstrating the importance of the peasantry in terms of the structure of Chinese society was, on the other, very remarkable indeed.

In essence, it can be summed up in two propositions. First of all, “the greatest adversary of revolution in an economically backward semi-colony is the feudal-patriarchal class (the landlord class) in the villages,” which constitutes the foundation of the whole reactionary order; because of this, it is in the villages that the decisive blows must be struck. “... If the peasants do not arise and fight to overthrow the privileges of the feudal landlord class the power of the warlords and of imperialism can never be hurled down root and branch.” Secondly, despite a passing reference to the leadership of the “progressive working class,” the peasants are depicted as more consistent and thoroughgoing revolutionaries than the workers. The latter are seeking, at the moment, merely limited objectives such as freedom of association, not the immediate overthrow of the bourgeoisie. In contrast, “the peasants in the countryside, ... as soon as they arise ... run into the political power of those village bullies, bad gentry, and landlords who have been crushing the peasants for several thousand years, ... and if they do not overthrow this political power which is crushing them, there can be no status for the peasants.” In other words, the workers (“at present,” but for how long?) are merely reformists; they are animated by “trade union consciousness.” The peasants, on the other hand, are aware of their central position in society, and are deliberately waging a broad struggle, political as well as economic.

Although Mao remained convinced, from this time forward, that the centre of gravity of the Chinese revolution lay in the countryside, he was never again to go so far in exalting the role of the peasants in theoretical terms. On the contrary, he constantly reiterated the Marxist axiom that the peasantry must accept the leadership of the working class. Indeed, the whole record of Mao Tse-tung’s intellectual itinerary during the ensuing decades can be read as a persistent search for ways to combine the principle of proletarian hegemony with the vision of Chinese society which had gripped him in 1926.

Mao’s efforts to integrate Marxism with Chinese reality continued for half a century, both before and after the establishment of the Chinese People’s Republic. The circumstances during the struggle for power were, of course, very different from those encountered in building socialism, but the continuity of themes across the great divide of 1949 is sufficient to justify a unified treatment of the whole period from 1926 to 1976.

If we are to endeavour to understand what the encounter between China and a revolutionary theory of Western origin meant to Mao himself, instead of merely evaluating the result from the outside, it is appropriate to begin with Mao’s view of the relation between these two entities. In 1938, in the context of the impending showdown with the “internationalist” (i.e. pro-Soviet) faction in the Chinese Communist Party, Mao discussed 4 For the text of this article, see MTC, Vol. 1, pp. 175–9; I have given a more extended analysis of it in “Mao Zedong and the role of the various classes in the Chinese revolution, 1923–1927,” in The Polity and Economy of China (The Late Professor Yuzi Muramatsu Commemoration Volume) (Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Shimposha, 1975), pp. 227–39.
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this issue in terms of the concept of the “Sinification of Marxism.” Two decades later, bent once again on throwing off Soviet tutelage and devising a distinctive “Chinese road to socialism,” Mao returned to this question again and again, though he no longer used the term “Sinification,” no doubt because it appeared to suggest that his thought was relevant only to China, and was in fact used as a term of abuse by Thorez and other European Communists. Mao’s many statements on this theme, from the 1930s to the 1960s, are by no means identical, and some of them are downright contradictory. It is possible, however, to define certain of his unvarying convictions, and to note some unresolved contradictions.

Mao’s classic statement of October 1938 calling for the “Sinification of Marxism” defined the term as “making certain that in all of its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics, using it according to Chinese peculiarities.” To imbue Marxism with Chinese characteristics meant for Mao to clothe it in “a new and vital Chinese style and manner, pleasing to the eye and to the ear of the Chinese common people.” But such Sinification of the form of Marxism was only the outward manifestation of a more fundamental enterprise, which aimed to transform the very substance of Marxism to adapt it to Chinese conditions.

In what should this transformation, in Mao’s view, consist? On the one hand, it should consist in re-shaping the ideas and methods of Marx and Lenin to fit the conditions in an economically backward, semi-colonial and largely agrarian country. This was, however, only part of what he had in mind. “Today’s China,” he said, “is an outgrowth of historic China. We are Marxist historicists; we must not mutilate history. From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen we must sum it up critically, and we must constitute ourselves the heirs to this precious legacy. Conversely, the assimilation of this legacy itself becomes a method that aids considerably in guiding the present great movement.”

Similarly, in February 1942, Mao urged his comrades to “take the standpoint, viewpoint and method of Marxism–Leninism, apply them to China, and create a theory from the conscientious study of the realities of the Chinese revolution and Chinese history.”

The “national form” which, in Mao’s view, Marxism must assume, thus involved drawing not merely rhetoric, but substance, from the Chinese past. What was the nature of the method Mao proposed to distil from the experience of “historic China,” and which elements in the past were to contribute to it? There are hints in his writings of the Yenan period that he was thinking about a domain which could be loosely defined as that of statecraft, and this was fully borne out when he returned to the problem in the 1950s. “There are some things,” Mao remarked in March 1959, “which need not have any national style, such as trains, airplanes and big guns. Politics and art should have a national style.”

Although by the mid-1950s Mao was beginning to have doubts about the value of the Soviet example, he continued to revere the heritage of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, but the emphasis gradually shifted from the “fundamental character” of their contribution to the need to modify and develop it. Thus, in 1956 Mao wrote: “Marxism is a general truth which has universal application. We must accept it. But this general truth must be combined with the concrete practice of each nation’s revolution.” In January 1961, on the other hand, replying to the criticism of the Chinese at the 1960 Moscow meeting for having “Sinified Marxism–Leninism,” Mao declared:

Marxism–Leninism is basically the same, but the leaves and branches are different, just as [trees which are all] trees, but have different leaves and branches. Conditions are different in each country. In the past we suffered from paying attention only to the universal truth [of Marxism–Leninism], without paying attention to investigation and research . . .

This is an intriguing statement, and it reflects the basic ambiguity of Mao’s position. The metaphor “leaves and branches” normally refers in Chinese to inessentials, but Mao’s

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1 Schram, Thought, pp. 172–3. (Translation slightly revised.)
2 Ibid., pp. 179–80.
3 Schram, Unprecedented, p. 88.
4 JPRS, Miscellaneous, Part II, p. 241; Wan-sui (1967), p. 262. My translation here differs from that of the JPRS in crucial respects which affect the whole sense of the passage quoted.
formulation none the less appears to leave open the possibility that the Marxist–Leninist tree, transplanted to China, has undergone a significant transmutation. In endeavouring to determine whether or not this has been the case, I shall look at three crucial dimensions of Mao’s thought and practice: patterns of leadership; the role of the workers and the peasants; and the dialectics of development and of the historical process.

Mao Tse-tung’s conception of the role of political leadership in social change, as it took shape during the Yanan period, combined two seemingly contradictory, but in fact complementary dimensions. On the one hand, he reaffirmed in rigorous terms the principles of centralized guidance by a revolutionary elite which constituted one of Lenin’s main contributions to Marxism. “Some comrades,” he complained in his speech of 1 February, 1942 launching the Rectification Campaign, “… 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.”

At the same time, he called for the implementation of the “mass line,” which he defined as follows in a celebrated passage of the directive dated 1 June, 1943:

… 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 transform 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, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again take them to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist–Leninist theory of knowledge, or methodology … 11

To suggest that ordinary people may be a source of the ideas from which correct policies are elaborated, and that they can in turn understand these policies rather than blindly applying them, marks a very great rupture with one of the central themes of traditional Chinese thought. Confucius said, according to the Analects, “The people may be made to follow a path of action, but they may not be made to understand it.” This is one of the aspects of Confucianism that Mao has sought to eradicate from the minds of his compatriots ever since the May Fourth Movement, even as he called for preserving what was still progressive and useful in the Chinese heritage. He did not, however, cast doubt in so doing on the Leninist axiom that class consciousness can only be imported into the working class from outside, and more broadly that the Communist Party, as the vanguard of the proletariat, must provide ideological guidance to society as a whole. As the words I have italicized in the above quotation from Mao’s mass-line directive make plain, the masses, although taken into the confidence of the leaders of the revolutionary movement, were in the end to be made to embrace ideas which, left to themselves, they were quite incapable of elaborating in systematic form.

The ideas put forward by Mao in Yanan, both regarding patterns of leadership and regarding the epistemological aspect of the leadership process, continued to constitute the core of his thinking until these problems down to the end of his life. As for the structure of power, Mao declared in April 1956, summing up a lengthy discussion of the relations between the central authorities and the various lower levels:

There must be proper enthusiasm and proper independence. Provinces, municipalities, regions, counties, districts and townships should all possess both … 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 regions should have an appropriate degree of power. This would be beneficial to the building of a strong socialist state. 12

The building of a “strong state” remained to the end of his life

10 Schram, Thought, p. 313.
11 Ibid., pp. 316–17 (Emphasis added).
one of Mao's central concerns. In January 1958, in a directive which constituted in effect the blueprint for the Great Leap Forward, Mao quoted with approval an eight-line rhyme coined in 1953 (for the purpose, he said, of opposing "the dispersionism which existed at that time"), presenting it as a summary of the principles which should guide the proper functioning of the political and economic 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.

Expounding the meaning of this jingle, Mao declared:

The reference in these sentences to the responsibility of the Party committee means that in major matters, a decision must first be taken by the Party committee, which must also check on things while its decision is in the course of implementation. "Great power is monopolized" [ta-ch’ien tu-lan] is a cliché which is customarily used to refer to the arbitrary decisions of an individual [ko-jen tu-lan]. We borrow this phrase to indicate that the main powers should be concentrated in collective bodies such as the Central Committee and local Party committees, we use it to oppose dispersionism. Can it possibly be argued that great power should be scattered? ... 14

What was left to the lower levels was thus innovation in the course of implementing the basic policy decisions taken by the "great power" at the Centre. But although the various bodies at the grass roots had only a limited parcel of authority, they had a crucial role to play in the leadership process in the context of Mao’s definition of the mass line as the "Marxist-Leninist theory of knowledge." Thus, in January 1962, after asserting once again that centralism and democracy must be combined "both within the Party and outside," and repeating that centralism was even more indispensable than democracy, Mao went on to say:


Without democracy, there cannot be any correct centralism because people’s ideas differ, and if their understanding of things lacks unity then centralism cannot be established. What is centralism? First of all, it is a centralization of correct ideas, on the basis of which unity of understanding, policy, planning, command and action are achieved. This is called centralized unification ... If there is no democracy we cannot possibly summarize experience correctly. If there is no democracy, if ideas are not coming from the masses, it is impossible to establish a good line, good general and specific policies and methods. Our leading organs merely play the role of a processing plant in the establishment of a good line ... Everyone knows that if a factory has no raw material, it cannot do any processing ... Without democracy, you have no understanding of what is happening down below; the general situation will be unclear; you will be unable to collect sufficient opinions from all sides; there can be no communication between top and bottom; top level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided and incorrect material to decide issues, and thus you will find it difficult to avoid being subjectivist; it will be impossible to achieve unity of understanding and unity of action, and impossible to achieve true centralism. 15

This passage stresses very heavily that the leadership must listen to the masses if it wishes to lead correctly and effectively. But at the same time Mao makes it abundantly clear that the "processing plant" which ultimately elaborates correct decisions is to be found in the Centre. In any case, for better or for worse, Mao’s approach to politics remained to the end of his life far more thoroughly impregnated with Leninism than many people (myself included) were prepared to admit a decade ago, during the high tide of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, Mao's position seemed to involve not only an onslaught on the Party, but a downgrading or even a denial of the importance or legitimacy of authority as such. It was widely believed that Chairman Mao had endorsed something like the view advocated by some ultra-leftists in the West, according to which power not only ultimately resides in, but should be effectively exercised by, the masses and their spontaneously-formed organizations at various levels.

In fact, however drastically Mao called into question during the Cultural Revolution every authority but his own, we now

know that when he was confronted explicitly, at the beginning of 1967, with a sharp choice between Leninism and anarchism, he had no doubts at all as to which of these positions was correct. In February 1967, talking to the Shanghai leftists Chang Ch'un-ch'iao and Yao Wen-yuan, he noted that the Shanghai People's Committee had demanded the abolition of "heads," and commented: "This is extreme anarchism, it is most reactionary. If instead of calling someone the 'head' of something, we call him 'orderly' or 'assistant,' this would really be only a formal change. In reality, there will still always be 'heads.'" He then proceeded to discuss the various objections to establishing Communes, like that which Chang and Yao had just set up in Shanghai, throughout the rest of the country, and ultimately changing the name of the state to "People's Commune of China," saying:

If all [of these organizations] are changed into communes, what will we do with the Party? Where will we put the Party? In the committees set up under a commune, there will be members who belong to the Party, and others who don't. Where will we put the Party committee? . . . There has to be a nucleus. It doesn't matter what it's called. It is all right to call it a Communist Party, it is all right to call it a social-democratic party, it is all right to call it a social-democratic workers' party, it is all right to call it a Kuomintang, it is all right to call it the I-kuan-tao, but in any case there has to be a party. In a commune there has to be a party; can the commune replace the Party?"17

The history of the ensuing nine years made it abundantly clear that in the chairman's view it could not.

In terms of the structure of power in society, Mao thus remained very much in the Leninist tradition. There were, however, important differences between his approach to problems of leadership and that of Lenin, not to mention Stalin. On the one hand, the emphasis on listening to and learning from the masses was generally greater than it had been in the Soviet Union. Secondly, the "masses" whose active participation Mao sought, and from whom he proposed to learn, were in the first instance China's rural masses.

When Maó was first characterized, many decades ago, as a "peasant revolutionary," the reference was, of course, to the pattern of the struggle for power, centring on guerrilla warfare from bases in the countryside. The problem of working-class leadership arose in this context, but in a different and less intractable form than it was to assume after 1949.

During the period of the Chingkangshan base and Kwangsi Soviet Republic, the Comintern frequently complained about the unorthodox character of the communist movement in China. Thus, a resolution of 26 August, 1931 declared: "The hegemony of the proletariat and the victorious development of the revolution can be guaranteed only on condition that the Chinese Communist Party becomes a proletarian party not only in its political line but in its composition and the role played by the workers in all of its leading organs."18 As the Sino-Soviet dispute became acute, Kuusinen recalled these directives of the 1930s and asserted that the Comintern's criticism had been absolutely justified.19

To this it could fairly be replied that the Chinese Communist Party had first developed among the workers of the coastal cities, that there remained some workers (though not many) among the cadres of the Chinese Communist Party and the Red Army, and that these two organizations were thus in a position to exercise proletarian leadership. And if the army was for the time being a far larger and more powerful body than the Party, this could be explained by the circumstances of the struggle. In any case, Mao had clearly laid down the principle that the Party must always command the gun.

To build socialism in an overwhelmingly agrarian country, and above all to build it in the villages at the same time as in the cities, was another matter altogether. In March 1949, with victory in sight, Mao turned his thoughts to the problems which would arise after the conquest of power, and announced his intention of doing things henceforth in the orthodox way.

14 Schram, Unrehearsed, p. 277.
17 IPRS, Miscellany, Part II, pp. 432–4; Wan-sui (1969), pp. 670–1. This passage is taken from a version of Mao's February 1967 conversations with Chang and Yao different from that translated in Schram, Unrehearsed. The I-kuan-tao was a secret society put down by the new regime in the early 1950s.

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“From 1927 to the present,” he declared, “the centre of gravity of our work has been in the villages — gathering strength in the villages, using the villages in order to surround the cities, and then taking the cities. The period for this method of work has now ended. The period of ‘from the city to the village’ and of the city leading the village, has now begun. The centre of gravity of the Party’s work has shifted from the village to the city.”

The policy of “copying from the Soviets” (as Mao put it in 1962) was, however, partly repudiated as early as mid-1955, when, in his speech of 31 July on co-operativization, Mao explicitly overturned the position of both Lenin and Stalin, according to whom mechanization was a necessary precondition for modernization and collectivization in the countryside, and declared that, because of the conditions prevailing in China, “the technological transformation [would] take longer than the social,” though the two would proceed step by step and side by side.

There were solid grounds for the shift in emphasis towards a more even balance between cities and countryside which began in 1955, both in the economic and demographic problems faced by the Chinese Government, and in the social and political consequences of allowing the transformation of the countryside to lag behind that of the cities. I cannot go into this dimension of the problem here; what is important for our purposes is that, from the moment this change in policy got under way, the whole issue of the relation between the workers and the peasants in the further development of the Chinese revolution was posed in a different context.

In December 1955, during the “High Tide” of co-operativization which followed Mao’s July speech, he compared the Chinese revolution to the Russian revolution in the following terms:

If you compare our country with the Soviet Union: (1) we had twenty years’ experience in the base areas, and were trained in three revolutionary wars; our experience [on coming to power] was exceedingly rich . . . therefore, we were able to set up a state very quickly, and complete the tasks of the revolution. (The Soviet Union was a newly-established state; at the time of the October Revolution, they had neither army nor government apparatus, and there were very few Party members.) (2) We enjoy the assistance of the Soviet Union and other democratic countries. (3) Our population is very numerous, and our position is excellent. [Our people] work industriously and bear much hardship, and there is no way out for the peasants without co-operativization. Chinese peasants are even better than English and American workers. Consequently, we can reach socialism more, better, and faster. We should not always be comparing ourselves with the Soviet Union.

Thus, even at the end of 1955, when he was only just beginning to think about the possibility of an independent road for China, Mao saw the problem first of all in political terms. On the one hand, he suggests, because they came to power after 20 years’ struggle in the countryside, instead of by suddenly seizing the reins of government in the capital city, the Chinese Communists knew more in 1949 than Lenin and his comrades had known in 1917 about exercising authority over the population at the grass roots and securing their support. Thus they were able to establish their new state on a solid foundation. On the other hand, the Chinese peasantry, in his view, provides remarkable human material for building a socialist society, and the peasants must be given their full role in the process.

To give them their full role did not, however, mean for Mao to place them on the same level as the workers. “The peasants,” he said at the First Chengchow Conference of November 1956, in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, “after all remain peasants, throughout the whole period when the system of ownership by the whole people has not yet been implemented in the countryside, they after all retain a certain dual nature on the road to socialism.” At the Second Chengchow Conference of February–March 1959, he reiterated this statement several times, adding that at the present stage the workers, not the peasants,
still played the role of "elder brother" in the relationship between the two.25

If the workers were, in Mao's view, the "elder brothers" of the peasants, this was not so much because, in the manner of Marx and Lenin, he believed them to be endowed with qualities of organizing capacity and discipline which the peasants could not match. It was rather because, in the realm of economic development and the technology which underlies it, they were the bearers of the modern knowledge required to solve what he had called in 1949 the "serious problem" of educating the peasants.26 On the other hand, to adopt the classical Marxist stance calling for the political and economic primacy of the urban working class meant, in a country such as China, to confer a privileged status on a group far removed from the centre of gravity of Chinese society, and on ideas in many respects alien to the national tradition.

Mao's solution was not to be, as is sometimes suggested, to stand Leninism on its head, and to hand over the leadership of the revolution to the peasantry, in the name of some populism myth of the moral superiority of the countryside. Instead, he moved increasingly towards a synthesis of Leninism and Chinese realities. Whether or not, in the process, he arrived at an adequate theoretical solution to the dilemma of a peasantry which was simultaneously the salt of the earth, and the younger brother of the workers in building socialism, is a moot point. In any case, Mao's ideas about the relation between the workers and the peasants can be adequately understood only in the broader context of his vision of the social changes characterizing the various stages in the Chinese revolution, the methods by which he sought to bring them about, and the philosophical outlook underlying his approach to revolution, and to development.

If we compare Mao's vision of history with that of Marx, two points above all merit attention, both of them directly linked with the fact that Marx was a European of the mid-19th century. Firstly, Marx lived through, or immediately after and in the shadow of, the climactic phase in the industrial revolution, which saw the most dramatic increase in man's mastery over nature in the whole of recorded history. As a result, he conceived, and freely expressed, profound admiration for the achievements of the European bourgeoisie in carrying out this gigantic enterprise. The time had come, in his view, when the capitalist class was no longer capable of leading society forward, and bourgeois dictatorship must therefore be replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. This step was possible, however, only on the basis of the expansion of production already effected by the bourgeoisie, without which the very idea of socialism would have remained a chimera. In other words, the idea of redemption through technology was not the invention of Khrushchev or his disciples, or even of Lenin and Stalin, who also shared it, but lay at the very heart of Marx's intellectual world.

Secondly, though Marx had seen, in 1848 particularly, the mapping up of some of the "feudal remnants" which had survived the great French revolution and the Napoleonic era, he lived the whole of his life in essentially capitalist societies. He wrote, to be sure, about the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe, and he also followed contemporary events in "Oriental Despotisms" such as Russia, India and China. But he had no personal experience of what it meant to move from one "mode of production" to another, and completely different one, still less to live through two or three such changes, as fell to the lot of Mao and his generation in China.

It was in this context that Marx elaborated his vision of redemption in history. In his view, the material basis for the individual and collective freedom which constituted the highest form of experience attainable by humanity had already been laid. As soon as the dictatorship of the proletariat had been established, and the necessary changes in social and economic organization carried out, these ideals could be realized. The realm of freedom was within man's grasp, and there was no doubt as to the direction in which it lay. The single act of the socialist revolution would open the way, even if it would not bring about utopia overnight. Thus, however great the scope Marx allowed for human initiative in shaping the course of history as a whole, the next step forward for those living in a
capitalist society seemed so self-evident as to be virtually pre-determined.

In all these respects, the contrast between Mao’s experience and that of Marx could hardly be more marked. The material basis for creating a new realm of freedom did not exist in China. The working class, which was supposed to lead the struggle for socialism, was as yet, in the 1920s, and even in 1949, a marginal, though not an insignificant, phenomenon. The society into which Mao was born, whether we choose to call it “feudal,” “semi-feudal and semi-colonial,” “Asiatic,” or whatever, had been barely touched by the influence of foreign and domestic capital, and the landlords long continued to wield more power than the bourgeoisie. Lenin had been faced with similar, though not quite such acute problems, and had forged the instrument to deal with them in the shape of the “vanguard party”: the organization calling itself the “party of the proletariat” which seized power in 1917 and proceeded to carry out the industrial revolution in the place of the bourgeoisie, thereby greatly expanding the urban working class and creating its own class basis.

When Mao said in 1949 that the direction of the Chinese Communist Party’s work would henceforth be “from the cities to the countryside,” he was indicating very precisely that he proposed to follow Lenin’s example in this respect. But the social basis on which he would rely for such an operation was infinitely smaller, the process infinitely more complex, and the outcome more uncertain. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that he began to reflect in his approach to development, and even in his formulations of the principles of dialectics, some of the indeterminacy which he saw as implicit in a complex society formed by many layers of cultural and institutional accretions.

On several occasions, Mao used the metaphor of peeling away “skins” to evoke the successive stages in the Chinese revolution:

I say that China had five layers of skin: the three old ones were imperialist property, bureaucratic capitalist property, and feudal property. In the past, the intellectuals relied on these three skins for their sustenance. Apart from this, they relied on national capitalist property, and the property of the small producers. The democratic revolution which has already taken place merely removed those three skins;

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in all, it lasted a hundred years, beginning with Lin Tse-hsü. The socialist revolution removes two skins: the property of the national bourgeoisie, and that of the small producers (petty bourgeois property). At present, all five of these skins have ceased to exist; the three old ones have long ceased to exist, and the two new ones no longer exist either. What skins are left now? The skin of socialist public property. Of course, this is also divided into two parts, one being the property of the whole people, and the other being collective property... 27

Thus, in Mao’s thinking, the succession of stages, from the “bourgeois-democratic” revolution to the socialist revolution, and from socialism to communism, the definition of the nature of the state during the latter two phases as the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the axiom that progress towards communism would involve a transition from collective property (which had already replaced individual property) to the property of the whole people, remained fixed as they had long been in the Leninist tradition. The forces which would bring about these developments, and the way in which they should be mobilized and combined, were not however perceived by Mao exactly as they had been by Lenin.

It was in his speech of April 1956 “On the Ten Great Relationships” that Mao first developed systematically the ideas regarding the dialectics of Chinese society, seen as the prototype of a non-European society involved in a process of economic development and cultural change, which constitute perhaps his single most important contribution to Marxism. Underlying this analysis was his intuition that the situation, when pushed to one extreme, will move towards its opposite. He argued, therefore, that if you really want to develop one aspect of the economy, such as heavy industry, you must stress its complements, light industry and agriculture. 28

By thus sketching out a pattern of economic work in which exclusive emphasis was no longer placed, as it had been in the Soviet Union, on heavy industry as the sole key sector, Mao had laid the foundations for a “road to socialism” adapted to Chinese realities, and in particular to the weight of the

peasantry and the countryside. Mao's speech of April 1956, though it did not present a static image of the Chinese society, stressed rather the relations between sectors than the dynamics of the development process as a whole. Two years later, on the eve of the Great Leap Forward, Mao evoked this discussion, in his theory of the "permanent revolution" [pu-ťuan ko-ming lun].

The adjective "permanent" in the title of Mao's theory has, in fact, two rather different connotations, corresponding to the two main dimensions of a very complex intellectual structure. On the one hand, it refers to the ceaseless changes and upheavals which inevitably occur in Mao's view in a society riven with contradictions and undergoing very rapid transformation. On the other hand, it constitutes an injunction to the leadership never to let people rest on their laurels, but constantly to rouse their enthusiasm by setting new tasks. The second of these aspects raises fewer problems, and I will therefore deal with it first.

The rapid development of the economy, and in particular of industrial production, was consistently seen by Mao as a necessary, but in itself wholly insufficient condition for building socialism. Discussing this question in May 1958, he summoned up Lenin to criticize Stalin's fetishism of technology and of managerial expertise:

Stalin's two slogans are insufficiently dialectical. [If you say] "Technology decides everything," what about politics? [If you say] "Cadres decide everything," what about the masses? Lenin put it well: "Communism equals the Soviets plus electrification." The Soviets mean politics, and electrification means technology. The union of politics and professional work leads to communism.

Mao did not dispute the need for a technically-trained elite; indeed, he repeatedly paid tribute to its role. But he also laid persistent stress on the importance of human and moral factors, and of mobilizing the political zeal of the masses. One of the most tense and forceful of his statements to this effect is to be found in his criticism of Stalin's Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.:

From the beginning to the end of this book Stalin does not say a word about the superstructure. He gives no thought to man, he sees things but not people . . .

... [The Soviets] are concerned only with the relations of production, they do not pay attention to the superstructure, they do not pay attention to politics, they do not pay attention to the role of the people. Without a communist movement, it is impossible to reach communism.

If a movement was necessary in Mao's view, how was it to be generated? Dealing with this issue in the passage of the directive of January 1958, entitled "Sixty Articles on Work Methods," devoted to the theory of the permanent revolution, Mao wrote:

After winning one battle, we must immediately put forward new tasks. In this way, we can maintain the revolutionary enthusiasm of the cadres and the masses, and diminish their self-satisfaction, since they have no time to be satisfied with themselves even if they wanted to . . .

"Permanent revolution" did not, of course, mean maintaining tension always at the same extreme pitch. As Mao declared in March 1958 at Chengtu, using once again the metaphor of warfare, it was necessary to alternate "hard fighting" and "rest and consolidation," "haste" and "deliberation" in a "wave-like form of progress." But in the last analysis the theory of the permanent revolution remained, as a Chinese author wrote during the Great Leap Forward, "an ideology which continuously stimulates the enthusiasm of the cadres and the masses."

The wave-like pattern of advance which Mao advocated was, of course, paralleled in his view by the movement of reality. Thus, in his directive of January 1958, he wrote:

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a2 The quote here from the version of paragraphs 21 and 22 given in my article already cited. CQ, No. 46, pp. 226-9. Mao did not draft the whole of this directive, but he revised it and put his name to it on 31 January, 1958. For a complete translation see CB, No. 892, pp. 1-14.
The advanced and the backward are the two extremities of a contradiction, and "comparison" is the unity of opposites. Disequilibrium is a universal objective law. Things forever proceed from disequilibrium to equilibrium, and from equilibrium to disequilibrium, in endless cycles, but each cycle reaches a higher level. Disequilibrium is constant and absolute; equilibrium is temporary and relative.  

At first glance, there is considerable similarity between this view and that of Trotsky, who wrote:

During a period of indefinite duration, all social relationships are transformed in the course of continual internal struggles. Society is constantly changing its skin. The upheavals in the economy, in technology, in science, in habits and customs form, as they take place, combinations and reciprocal relationships so complex that society cannot reach a state of equilibrium. It is in this that the permanent character of the socialist revolution itself is revealed.  

The Soviets, of course, been denouncing Mao for nearly a decade as a "Trotskyite," but despite the striking coincidence in the use of the metaphor of a society shedding its skin, there are notable differences between Mao's theory of the permanent revolution, and that of Trotsky. One of the most obvious lies in the attitude of the two men towards the peasantry. Trotsky took an even dimmer view than Lenin of the political capacities of peasants, whether European or Asian, and therefore insisted even more implacably than Lenin on working class hegemony throughout the socialist stage of the revolution. Mao, on the other hand, attached more importance to the primacy of politics than to the absolute predominance of the workers. Discussing the relation between politics and professional work, in terms of the "unity of the two opposites," redness and expertise, he wrote:

I ideological work and political work are the guarantee that economic and technical work will be carried through, they serve the economic basis. Ideology and politics are the supreme commander; they are the soul. Whenever we are even slightly lax in our ideological and political work, our economic and technical work will certainly take a false direction.  

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To be sure, political leaders who understood too little of specialized work, and therefore had no grasp of reality, were merely "pseudo-red"; it was necessary to "integrate politics with technology." But the whole burden of the discussion was that everyone, not only among the leading cadres, but throughout Chinese society, must ultimately become as far as possible both red and expert, with politics firmly in command of the whole process. Peasants, as well as workers, must undergo this transformation, and the dissemination of rudimentary technical knowledge in the countryside therefore became an increasingly important concern.

Mao's view of the peasants as almost, though not quite, the equals of the workers was expressed in the way he divided up the social categories existing in China in the spring of 1956. Enumerating all those groups making up the "three big classes" in China at the present moment in his speech of 20 March, 1956 at Chengtu, he said, after mentioning the "enemy classes" and the "national bourgeoisie": "The third is the left, that is to say the labouring people, the workers, the peasants. (In reality there are four classes – the peasants are a separate class).

A fortnight later in Henkow, the existence of two separate "labouring classes" was no longer an afterthought. Both of them were said to be working and cultivating the land "under the leadership of our Party," and they were contrasted to the "two exploiting classes," of which the second (the national bourgeoisie) had been extended to include even the "well-to-do middle peasants." In other words, the whole of society had been divided into two opposing blocs, and it was this duality which appeared to Mao to be fundamental.

Mao's formulation reflects, among other things, a difference between him and Lenin regarding the respective contributions of the peasantry and of the bourgeoisie in a modernizing country of which Mao was well aware. He summed it up in a few pithy sentences, in his notes of the early 1960s on the Soviet manual of political economy, when he said:

38 Schram, Unrehearsed, pp. 112–13.
In carrying out socialist transformation, we united with the peasants to deal with the capitalists, whereas Lenin said at one time that he would rather establish links with the capitalists, with the intention of turning capitalism into state capitalism, in order to cope with the spontaneous tendencies of the petty bourgeoisie. These different policies were determined by different historical conditions.40

Mao’s polarization of Chinese society into two opposing forces which were not well-defined entities, but shifting alignments of disparate classes and strata, likewise reflected the indeterminacy which was increasingly to permeate both his vision of reality and the structure of his dialectics. It has often been suggested that the key to Mao’s thought lies in his essay of 1937, “On Contradiction,” to such an extent that his whole theory of revolution can be deduced from the ideas set forth there. This is, to put it mildly, somewhat exaggerated. The importance Mao attached to contradictions, in which he saw not only the motor of all change and development, but the very stuff of reality, is indeed a central feature of his thought. The implications of this for his interpretation of Marxism are to be found, however, most notably in his view that meaningful contradictions persist under socialism, which was hinted at in “On Contradiction”41 but spelled out only in the 1950s. Moreover, Mao himself has told us that many people in China in the period after 1949 regarded his interpretation of contradictions as derived not so much from Marx as from the yin and the yang42 and it is certainly true that there are echoes of the old Taoist dialectics in Mao’s writings from 1918 to the end of his life.

In May 1958, Mao claimed that his views on dialectics were “more or less in accord” with those of Lenin, but “not very much in accord” with Stalin, who had “negated contradictions” by writing that “the relations of production in a socialist society were completely adapted to the development of the productive forces.” But, said Mao, “before his death [Stalin] wrote an article to negate himself . . .”43

43 The reference is to Stalin, Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R., originally published in 1952, which did not quite negate what he had written in 1935, but “explained” what he had meant in the sense indicated by Mao.

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Mao’s insistence on the universality of contradictions, even under socialism, constantly reiterated from 1957 onwards, was indeed more in tune with the thinking of Lenin than with that of Stalin. But he also began to sound, in the 1960s, notes which are scarcely to be found in the Marxist tradition at all. Thus, in his criticism of the Soviet manual, he wrote, commenting on the phrase “Consolidate completely the system of collective farms”:

When I read these two words “consolidate completely,” I feel ill at ease. The consolidation of anything is relative; how can it be complete? If, since the human race has existed, all men had not died, but had been “completely consolidated,” what would this world be like? In the universe and on this earth, all things are constantly emerging, developing and dying; none of them can be completely consolidated.

Socialism will definitely pass over to communism, and at the time of transition to a communist society, some things from the socialist stage will certainly die. In the communist period too, there will also be uninterrupted development. Communism may well go through many different phases, can it be said that after communist society is reached there will be no changes in anything any more? That everything will be “completely consolidated,” so that there will be only quantitative change and not uninterrupted partial qualitative change?44

Some perspectives of this kind had been opened by Mao in 1958, when he wrote in his directive on the permanent revolution that even when the era of communism had been reached, there would still be many stages linked by mutations amounting to “revolutions,” and involving struggle.45 He had also shown something then of the acceptance of human mortality and of the order of things expressed in the first paragraph of the above quotation.46 In the mid-1960s, however, this note became more insistent, and was accompanied by explicit references to the Taoist classics. “I approve of Chuang-tzu’s approach,” he said in 1964. “When his wife died, he banged on a basin and sang. When people die, there should be parties to celebrate the victory of the dialectics, to celebrate the destruction of the old. Socialism, too, will be eliminated, it wouldn’t do if it were not
eliminated, for then there would be no communism." Mao likewise voiced his increasing philosophic detachment, and his conviction that socialism and communism, however they might be achieved, were not the last word in mankind’s experience, which was in any case only a passing phase in the development of the universe. “When the theologians talk about doomsday,” Mao said in 1964, “they are pessimistic and terrify people. We say the end of mankind is something which will produce something more advanced than mankind.”

While this Olympian detachment is a distinctive trait of Mao the man, especially in his later years, it should not be taken to imply any lessening of his determination to press forward with the revolution, still less as a symptom of resignation or disillusionment. On the contrary, in the very sentences which follow those just quoted Mao characterized the difference between his outlook and classical Marxism in terms of greater emphasis on the need for men to strive actively to make their own history:

Mankind is still in its infancy. Engels spoke of moving from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, and said that freedom is the understanding of necessity. This sentence is not complete; it only says one half and leaves the rest unsaid. Does merely understanding it make you free? Freedom is the understanding of necessity and the transformation of necessity – one has some work to do too. . . . When you discover a law, you must be able to apply it, you must create the world anew, you must break the ground and edify buildings, you must dig mines, industrialize. In the future there will be more people, and there won’t be enough grain, so men will have to get food from minerals. Thus it is that only by transformation can freedom be obtained. Will it be possible in the future to be all that free? . . .

The notion of “creating the world anew” by industrializing is, of course, wholly in harmony with the Leninist approach to building socialism. Mao’s query as to whether men will be “all that free” even under communism reflects, however, an unusual scepticism, and in some texts of the early 1960s, he expressed even deeper doubts as to whether the forward march of the revolution would be continued, and whether communism would ever be reached.

The immediate cause of this anxiety lay in Mao’s conviction that leadership in the Soviet Union had been “usurped by the revisionists,” and in his discovery that “new bourgeois elements” might still be produced in China itself. In response to this threat, Mao called for the strengthening of the proletarian dictatorship, and for diminishing the scope of “bourgeois right,” but he also turned increasingly to China’s own culture and historical experience to seek remedies for the gaps and shortcomings of the Soviet model.

One curious consequence of Mao’s rediscovery of Taoism (and also of Buddhism) in 1964 was his abandonment of two of the “three categories” of Marxist dialectics, including the negation of the negation. In 1958, he had explicitly reaffirmed these, saying: “The law of the unity of opposites, the law of quantitative and qualitative change, the law of affirmation and negation, exist forever and universally.” Now he declared that he “did not believe” in the second two, at least as basic laws; he regarded the transformation of quality and quantity into one another merely as a special case of the unity of opposites, and denied the existence of the negation of the negation altogether.

By arguing that “every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation,” Mao could be held to have seriously undermined the whole Marxist and Hegelian justification, in philosophical terms, for the idea that history moves irreversibly forward. His vision of a random succession of opposites, or in any case the absence in his thought of a continuing progression in a definite direction built into the structure of the dialectical method.
process, may have certain advantages over the original Marxist view of an inexorable trend leading to a communist stage in which the dialectic breaks down or evaporates. (As we have seen, in Stalin’s interpretation of Marxism the dialectic already broke down to a large extent in the socialist phase.) Mao’s ideas on this theme, none the less, raise serious problems about the conformity of his thinking as a whole to the basic logic of Marxism, and of Leninism.

The indeterminacy which is increasingly to be found in Mao’s view of the historical process during the last two decades of his life should, no doubt, be seen rather as the reflection of the circumstances in China as he perceived them than as the consequence of the dialectical axioms he employed. At the same time, the changes which took place in the structure of his thought may well have contributed to his increasing uncertainty about the future of socialism in China — and in the world at large.

One answer to the problem — since Mao by no means proposed to abandon the goal of socialism — was to re-emphasize the subjective dimension of the political struggle, and the influence of men’s attitudes on their objective roles, to which Mao had devoted so much attention from the 1920s onwards. In 1928 on the Chingkangshan, confronted by the fact that a majority of the soldiers in his army were not workers, or even proper peasants, but rural vagabonds or éléments déclassés, Mao had concluded that the only remedy was “to intensify political training, so as to effect a qualitative change in these elements.” On the basis of this and similar passages, I have in the past argued that Mao saw a person’s class nature as very largely determined by his subjective attitudes. There still seems to me to be an important element of truth in this conclusion, but at the same time I think this line of analysis has been carried much too far in recent years.

It has repeatedly been suggested since the Cultural Revolution that Mao defined a “proletarian” as someone who had a correct understanding of his thought. This is not only an extreme formulation, which ignores the fact that the real flesh-and-blood working class played a significant role even during the very exceptional era of the Cultural Revolution — for example, in July 1966.

It also perhaps puts the question the wrong way round. Instead of (or in addition to) saying that Mao saw class attributes as partially determined by ideological or other subjective attitudes, should we not say that he regarded moral criteria as complementary to political criteria? Consider the definition which he put forward in the 1950s for the so-called “five bad elements,” still used today: landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists. Two of these categories are sociological, two political and one moral. Mao did not appear to see any contradiction or problem in lumping them all together. Did he not perhaps see the revolution as the work of proletarians, peasants and good men? Does not all the available evidence suggest that Mao in fact shared with Liu Shao-ch’i the very Chinese and indeed Confucian notion that it is impossible to separate the inner moral world of the individual from his outward behaviour, and from the political realm as a whole?

How, then, shall we define the essential traits of the tree, representing his own brand of Marxism, which Mao planted in China? And what is likely to be the future imprint on China of Mao the Marxist, to the extent that it can be distinguished from his legacy as a whole? In a word, Mao’s Marxism was of the Leninist school, but it was modified by contact with Chinese realities, and enriched by a philosophical dimension which to some extent paralleled the thought of Marx, and to some extent diverged from it.

Mao placed himself squarely in the mainstream of Leninism by his insistence on the need for centralized leadership, and for leadership vested in the Party. The implications of Mao’s onslaught on the Party during the early phases of the Cultural Revolution were exaggerated at the time by Western observers (including myself); the history of the period 1949–76 as a whole shows conclusively that Mao regarded the Party as not only a useful instrument, but the only appropriate instrument, for leading the revolution. Mao was likewise wholly Leninist in his view that a “proletarian” dictatorship, led by the Party, could guide and control the evolution of a largely pre-capitalist society, through a series of transitional stages, to lay the foundations for socialism and then proceed to build socialism and communism.
Mao parted company with Lenin in substantially attenuating the primacy accorded by the Soviet model to the urban working class, to the technical and managerial elite, and to technology. To the extent that Marx had not set vanguard or elite elements apart from, or above, the ordinary members of society to the same extent as Lenin and his disciples, this could be seen as a movement back towards Marx. The unique role of the working class in the passage of humanity from pre-history to the history of the collective mastery of man over his environment is, on the other hand, as much at the core of Marx’s thinking as it is at that of Lenin. Mao’s subtle re-interpretation of the axiom of proletarian hegemony reflected on the one hand the heterogeneous character of Chinese society, and on the other a downgrading not only of the workers, but of the bourgeoisie, and of the place of Western urban and industrial society in world history.

Like Marx, but unlike Lenin, who was essentially preoccupied with the techniques of the political struggle, Mao constantly raised questions, especially during the last two decades of his life, about the scope and significance of human endeavours. He wanted to know not merely how to build socialism, but also why. Some of his concerns were identical with those of Marx: for example, to eradicate selfishness and replace private interest with the public good. In other cases, such as the elimination of the difference between the cities and the countryside, his stated aim was the same, but the route by which he pursued it was different. Marx wanted to lift the villages from their state of “rural idiocy” to the level of the cities; Mao saw virtue as well as backwardness in the countryside, and endeavoured to work from both sides at once. In one crucial respect, finally, Mao largely parted company with Marx, for whom freedom, though it could flourish only on the foundation of a collective economy, was in essence the self-expression of Renaissance man. Mao, as the heir to a culture in which the ends of individual self-cultivation were more strictly subordinated to the political and public good than ever they had been in modern Europe, and a member of a generation of Chinese who had felt themselves enslaved in the first instance by the domination of their country by the imperialists, could not but see these things differently.

Mao had made a place for “wars of liberation” in Asia in his

global vision of revolution, but he had not explicitly connected them with a social revolution even remotely comparable to that which was to be carried out by the European proletariat. To the extent that he and Engels talked about a “non-capitalist path” in Russia and other “ Asiatic” countries, this hypothesis was firmly predicated on the assumption that such a development would be initiated and guided by proletarian revolutionaries in Western Europe. Lenin did conceive of a “bourgeois-democratic” phase in the revolution in Asian countries taking the form of a struggle for national liberation, but for him, and even more for his successor, national liberation was a force to be exploited on the world scene in order to promote revolution and defend the Soviet Union. The struggle of the Asian peoples to preserve their own national heritage had for Lenin no value in itself.

Mao’s perspective was totally different. For him, the struggle of the Chinese people to seize control of their own destinies, first by throwing off imperialist domination, then by building China into a “rich and powerful” socialist nation, and finally (and no less importantly) by rejecting Soviet tutelage, was an integral part of what he understood by making Marxist revolution.

That Mao Tse-tung made an important contribution to the theory and practice of revolution there can be no doubt. That he was a kind of Marxist is also certain, for he drew extensively on both Marx and Lenin, whatever the other elements that went into the making of his thought. But did he make a contribution to Marxism? That depends on the answer each of us may give to another question: “Does a system of thought as important and as influential as Marxism belong to its author, or to history?” If the former, Mao cannot be regarded as having contributed to the development of Marxism, for there is little doubt that Marx would have rejected him as a disciple. (There are, of course, those who totally disagree with this judgment, but I believe the weight of evidence is against them.) If, on the other hand, Marxism is what those who seek to follow Marx made of it in every era, then Mao must be counted among the major Marxist theoreticians of our own day.

To the Leninist tradition (which is, by any reasonable stan-

55 See Marxism and Asia, pp. 7–15 and 115–25 passim.
STUART R. SCHRAM

dards, one of the theoretical currents deriving from Marx, though not the only one), he contributed three crucial insights: (1) that the socialist revolution is not the same thing as the industrial revolution, but also involves changing man; (2) that although leaders, endowed with consciousness and broad historical vision, are indispensable, the leadership will become ineffectual and corrupt if it does not listen to those below; and (3) that peasants as well as workers are worth listening to, and capable of participating in the creation of a new society. Mao's achievement would no doubt have been greater, and in consequence his reputation as a Marxist theoretician would have stood higher, if he had been able to leave well enough alone, temporarily at least, in 1973, instead of launching yet another offensive against the newly-renaissance bureaucracy, which in fact led only to replacing one set of bureaucrats by another. Perhaps, indeed, despite the fragmentary directives which are all he has left us for the last five years of his life, he did not launch these campaigns but, old and sick, was simply unable to prevent the ultra-leftist clique, seemingly well-qualified to speak in his name, from doing so on his behalf. If so, is it not ironic that our judgment of his contributions as a theoretician should be affected by historical accidents of this kind? But history is not always just.

And what, finally, was the nature of Mao's Marxist legacy to his countrymen? Was it a complete system of revolutionary thought, a method (which his successors would have to apply, if at all, in their own way), or something between the two? Despite the element of indeterminacy which Mao injected both into the laws of dialectics, and into the analysis of the reality of a very complex society, he left behind him, in my opinion, by no means simply a method, but something which, though open and undogmatic, was already more like a system. Perhaps its exact nature can best be evoked by one of Mao's own metaphors. Expounding in January 1958, his conception of the theory of the "permanent revolution," Mao recalled a Hunanese folk saying: "Straw sandals have no pattern—they shape themselves in the making." In other words, the revolution is a process of con-

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tinual improvisation. And yet, as he goes about his task, the weaver has always in mind a clear vision of the sandal he is striving to make. Mao has left the sandal of the Chinese revolution unfinished, but it has already begun to take shape, and for a long time to come it can scarcely fail to bear his stamp.