THE PHILOSOPHER

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With the death of Mao Tse-tung, we may soon witness a gradual—or even precipitous—retreat from the tendency to seek in Mao himself the key to all of recent Chinese history. As the world becomes aware of the variety of actors in China, as it becomes more and more obvious that Chinese society has a life of its own apart from the “thoughts of Chairman Mao,” we may even witness a swing to the opposite pole—a trend to dismiss his impact on his times and to attribute everything to “objective forces” and “processes of development.” Yet if we leave aside for a moment the question of the durability of his legacy, the fact remains that there is much in the recent history of China that is simply unthinkable without him. I, for instance, would be willing to defend the proposition: no Mao, no Cultural Revolution. This does not mean that he anticipated the Cultural Revolution or created all the circumstances which led up to it or that he foresaw its outcome. It simply means that his actions and modes of thinking were an indispensable component in this whole mesh of events. The same holds true for the entire history of the People’s Republic until this point.

I have been asked to make some reflections on Mao the philosopher. I shall interpret the word “philosophy” in the broadest possible sense to refer to some of the central and dominant themes and ideas which may have shaped his mental world over the course of his stormy career. Whether the most important themes are all “philosophical” in the most precise academic sense of that term may well be doubted. To be sure, one can find philosophy even in the more precise sense in Mao’s writings and conversations. “On Contradiction” and “On Practice” are certainly philosophic treatises. Furthermore, Mao’s philosophic writings and reflections are significant. They throw
light on some of his basic tendencies. Whether they are the “heart of the matter” is, however, another question. Nothing in them negates the plausibility of Gramsci’s observation that “a man of politics writes about philosophy. It could be that his true philosophy should be looked for rather in his writings on politics.” I take this to mean that there may in fact be philosophical implications of a sort in the writings on politics. We all know that in addition to being a philosopher Mao was also a poet of some accomplishment and I shall suggest below that if there is indeed a heart of the matter it may be more readily found in some of the images of his poetry than in his reflections on dialectics and epistemology.

Even if we interpret the word philosophy in this extremely loose sense, how significant is Mao’s thought? Does not his real significance lie in the fact that he was one of the most successful and brilliant political leaders of our time? Would any of us be concerned with his thought if he had remained an obscure Chinese intellectual? Obviously we would not. Nor does his thought in itself fully explain his success – a success which cannot be understood without referring to various traits of his remarkable personality, to his combination of shrewdness, patience, boldness and ruthlessness, and to the remarkable political intuition which he often displayed. I would also maintain that it is extremely unwise to treat the “thought of Mao Tse-tung” as an abstractwhole divorced from his political biography. After he embarks on his political career his world of ideas becomes emergent world which can be safely understood only within the context of concrete historical situations. The ideas may or may not transcend the situation. The depth of his commitment to various ideas cannot be deduced from a group of abstractions. Thus one might have thought that his stress on the universal and eternal nature of “contradictions” in his pamphlet of 1937 would immediately have led to his concept of a “permanent revolution” and to a rejection of any notion of a static utopia. In fact, the idea of the “permanent revolution” only emerges within the particular atmosphere of the Great Leap Forward of 1958. The idea of “non-antagonistic contradictions”

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However, the question goes deeper than the adequacy of this particular psychological account. The question of the relationship of the world of thought to the world of psychic mechanisms is a question of enormous philosophic complexity. In our own lives, we tacitly tend to assume that our thought is a response to "something out there" as well as an expression of something "in here." We go on believing that there are reasons for our thought as well as causes of it. The European phenomenological philosophers have wrestled bravely with the question of whether the contents of our thought can or cannot be dealt with in terms of psychological reductionism, and have emerged with a negative. Psychological factors influence and limit our thought, but to what extent and how is a question which remains unresolved. Nor can we assume that we have any adequate psychology available to us. Can one possibly believe that the extraordinary and unprecedented life experience of Mao after early childhood did not fundamentally affect both thought and personality? Quite apart from the question of presumed causes, whether psychological or sociological, the ideas are worth examination in their own right because in the end it is the ideas (as well as the socio-political strategies) of Mao which work their influence in the world "out there" whatever their genesis. Furthermore in examining Mao's ideas and their sources, we soon discover that Mao is not operating in a vacuum but participating in an intellectual and cultural milieu shared by others. Anyone who studies the intellectual world of Mao's generation, as well as the generation which preceded his, soon realizes the extent to which he draws on a common world of ideas.

One can nevertheless share Professor Pye's conviction that a concern with Mao's childhood and, one should add, his youth is essential to, an understanding of his subsequent development. This concern however, need by no means be focused entirely on the question of his immediate family relations. Those concerned with the development of his ideas will be immediately struck by the fact that Mao's earliest years were spent almost entirely in "traditional" China. In the early 1890s the village of Shao-shan had certainly not been affected in any directly perceptible way by the "impact of the West." Yet "traditional China" is not entirely synonymous with "peasant China." Mao's father was an upwardly mobile prosperous peasant-businessman prepared to give his son a respectable elementary education. He may have wanted his son to follow him in business but there is really little evidence that he stubbornly resisted the son's efforts to pursue his education further. Mao himself informs us that at a very early age he began to think of himself as a student. This means that at a very early point in his life he was in touch not only with the popular culture of the villagers but with the traditional high culture as well. In fact it may have been the latter which exercised the more profound influence. The adoption of the self-image of a scholar in pre-modern China was an act fraught with deep significance. In undertaking it, one took on the perspective of those with a responsibility for leading society. Mao's youthful fondness for "popular" novels does not diminish the truth of this observation. For one thing many other students including those of gentry background shared this taste. His favourite novel, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, concerns itself not with popular uprisings but with heroic deeds and cunning strategies of the great generals and statesmen of the Three Kingdoms who are definitely establishment figures. The warriors on the Liang Shan Moor in Shui-hu chuan (Water Margin) were to be sure a "counter-elite" who fought against injustice (and for plain revenge) but they were also leaders rather than led. His extreme fondness for these works may suggest that he may have already been much more attracted to the traditional image of the virile hero leader than to the Confucian image of the sage-statesman, but both images are leader images.

To be sure, he was a villager and in immediate touch with the rhythms of peasant life. We can believe him when he tells us of his indignation at the injustices and iniquities which he observed in his rural environment. There was in fact nothing either in the classics or the romances which would necessarily have run counter to this sense of indignation. He was also quite able in later years to employ the earthy peasant idiom whenever it suited his purposes just as he was able to use quite obscure allusions from classical literature. No doubt, his early contacts with the turbulent political restlessness of the peasantry of his native Hunan made it difficult for him in later years to inter-
nalize Marxist generalizations concerning peasant passivity and rural idiocy. Yet despite all these threads which bound him to his village environment he was already thinking the thoughts and dreaming the dreams of a “student.” The young Mao aged 13, having read Cheng Kuan-yang’s tract on China’s perilous plight, was already able quite easily to identify himself in his own mind with those who were concerning themselves with the plight of the empire.

To be sure, when Mao enrolled in the Tungshan Primary School in Hsiang-hsiang at the age of 16 we are told that his well-heeled fellow students regarded him as a country bumpkin. His burning sense of injured self-esteem may have arisen precisely from his own feeling that he was anything but a country bumpkin. He had in fact read many books and pondered many thoughts. It is probably quite true that experiences such as this and later experiences may have laid the foundation for his later hostility to establishment intellectuals and enhanced his sense of solidarity with the “people,” but in his relationship towards the people he already regarded them from the perspective of a potential leader of the people rather than as a member of their ranks.

Traditional Chinese thought has much to say about the people and the obligations of rulers towards the people. The treatment of “the people” as a kind of abstract uniform category is very ancient. In Confucian thought the dominant attitude towards the people is overwhelmingly benevolent. The people are often regarded as good, albeit ignorant. Chinese Confucian literature down through the centuries is full of eloquent denunciations of injustice towards the people. Equality within the ranks of the people is often set forth as an ideal and there is an unflagging recognition of the need for satisfying the elemental economic needs of the masses. Popular rebellions are most often treated as a symptom and result of the corruption, greed and malfeasance of rulers. All of this the young Mao could have found not only in his novels but in classical Confucian literature even before his contact with populist ideas brought in from abroad. Thus if it is indeed true that the adolescent Mao was already sensitive to the mistreatment of the “people” which he observed in his environment, this was by no means incompatible with what he read in his books or with his “scholar’s” perspective.

It should also be remarked that Mao’s early life in “traditional” China left an indelible imprint on his entire personal culture. His aesthetic and literary sensibility (not populist) remained wholly Chinese. His personal “style of life” remained Chinese. He continued to the end to find categories of thought derived from the tradition quite as compelling as Western categories even though he subsumed them under the higher truths of Marxism–Leninism. One has the feeling that the Western urban style of life as he might later have observed it in Shanghai’s foreign concessions held no charms for him. One might contrast this with Lenin who in spite of his hatred of the Western bourgeoisie continued to regard modern Western European urban life as the norm and epitome of all that which is kul’tury.

Yet if Mao was born in traditional China, his readings and school experiences very soon brought him into contact with a new world of ideas. At a very early point he came into contact with the writings of that remarkable group of transitional figures—Liang Chi-ch’ao, Yen Fu, K’ang Yu-wei, and others—who were to introduce him to some of the basic notions and orientations which were to define the boundaries of his intellectual world. Their influence was to be enriched by the ideas of the pre-1911 revolutionaries and later by figures such as his beloved teacher at the Provincial Normal School in Changsha, Yang Ch’ang-ch’i. His contact with these new influences did not signify a total break with his traditional education. Like Mao, most of the members of this pre-May Fourth generation had been born in traditional China, albeit on a different social level. In spite of their involvement with new ideas from the West, they did not yet think in terms of a sharp dichotomy between “Traditional China” and “Modern West.” They had lived sufficiently deeply within the traditional culture to see in it not a monolith but a complex of differing and contending tendencies. Rightly or wrongly, they thought that they could discern affinities and comparabilities as well as contrasts between Chinese ideas and the new ideas from the West. Even though most of them were of gentry origins their preoccupations were very much shared by the young scholar from Shaoshan.

The more we study their writings, the more impressed we
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become with the role which they may have played in defining some of the basic motifs and boundaries of Mao's thought. Stuart Schram in his life of Mao Tse-tung* observes that Mao may well have come to modern nationalism before he developed any clear ideas on social problems. If this was so then one must strongly credit the transitional figures mentioned above. I am well aware of the perils involved in any attempt to define the word nationalism. The distinction made by China scholars between traditional Chinese "culturalism" and modern nationalism has been challenged by some. The Chinese ruling class, it is maintained, was always intent on preserving the interests of the Chinese state [as indeed were the rulers of the Roman empire]. The Chinese in the past were often anti-foreign and often displayed a strong "we feeling" as Chinese. The validity of the distinction remains. In the writings of the transitional figures there is an overwhelming preoccupation with the preservation and enhancement of China as a political-societal entity in a world of other societal entities known as nation-states, and a decline of identification of "Chineseness" with universal cultural, ethical and social values. Values and ideas to a degree come to be judged in terms of their contribution to the survival of the societal entity rather than vice-versa. There can be no doubt that the young Mao who as a student already identifies himself with public affairs is immediately responsive to this shift in preoccupation and that his concern with the wealth, power and dignity of China as a nation will remain a constant preoccupation to the end without in any way precluding more universalistic goals.

The transitional thinkers of the late 19th century and early 20th century also found it possible to combine their nationalism with universalistic goals. One strand of traditional Chinese thought very much present in their writings is the tendency to think in terms of universal impersonal patterns of world history. The patterns, while applied essentially to Chinese history, were universalistic to the extent that Chinese civilization was regarded as civilization tout court. To be sure, in China where the Cartesian split between man and cosmos had not occurred, the historical patterns were often thought to correspond to cer-

*Schram, Mao, p. 23.
evidence that the young Mao responded most eagerly to this variety of individualism. To be sure, in Yen Fu and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao this view of the individual was still somewhat influenced by Adam Smith’s insistence that the motivation of the individual’s enterprise spirit would be found in his own enlightened self-interest. It is quite likely that the young Mao, who read the version of individualism preached by his later famous teacher Yang Ch’ang-ch’i in tune with his own proclivities, Yang Ch’ang-chi, who had been influenced by Kant and the British idealists such as T. H. Green (who had reacted strongly against British utilitarianism), stressed the compatibility between the new Prometheusian view of the individual and a theory of motivation based on a deep sense or moral obligation to the larger societal whole. This Prometheusian heroic and “idealistic” view of the individual is quite vividly illustrated in Mao’s first published article, “A Study of Physical Culture.” It is to be noted here that this modality of “individualism” is quite particular. It does not necessarily involve any belief in the infinite worth of individuals as such or any belief that individuals may not be sacrificed for what is regarded as collective goals. If we think of the intellectual energies of individuals mainly in technical terms, it does not offer any deep support for freedom of thought or expression. When one reads the story of Mao’s love life one does indeed feel that he may have been somewhat influenced by the notion of the individual’s right to emotional “fulfilment” but it is not a doctrine he readily extends to others.

From these same sources, Mao could have derived a particular view of authority. The holders of authority in the past—whether familial, political, or religious—had represented the powers of darkness because of the negative, repressive nature of their authority. They had crushed and repressed the vital energies of the people. This view of authority did not necessarily preclude the belief in new vital forms of authority. On the contrary, in the immediate future what China required was the creation of a new positive authority which would nourish and channel the energies of the people. While the young Mao may have had moments of interest in an anarchism which simply called for the removal of all authority on the presumptions that the released energies of the masses supported by the movement of history would find their own proper channels, in the end he would lean towards the need for enlightened authority.

From the theme of Social Darwinism which played such an important role in the thought of some of the transitional thinkers, Mao may well have derived the exciting idea of the role of conflict and struggle as a positive propellant force in the onward march of evolution. To some extent the novels he read as a youth had already affirmed the positive values of conflict, but Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism had been as one in their devotion to peace and harmony and their aversion to conflict as an unmitigated source of evil. Social Darwinism as presented by Yen Fu and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao tended to operate at two levels. On the level of individuals it tended to support the competitive struggle for survival among individuals and on this level it could be fused with orthodox classical economy. On another level it was applied to groups as in the contention for supremacy among nation-states. One suspects that it is on the second level—as a metaphor for group conflict—that the idea made its appeal to the young Mao who probably remained quite allergic to the appeals of economic liberalism.

Yet if the transitional thinkers did not convert Mao to economic liberalism they must have certainly given him some appreciation of the role of what we now call economic development as a vital ingredient in the achievement of state power and human welfare. If we shall raise questions about the depth of Mao’s later commitment to the Marxist conception of the forces of production as the driving force of history, this has nothing to do with the question of whether he regarded “economic modernization” as one of the essential tasks of the future. The question was not whether economic development was essential. It was whether the driving forces of history were to be sought in the inertial forces operative within the economic realm. Mao did not have to wait for Marxism to teach him that economic progress was a vital necessity if China were to achieve wealth and power however uninterested he may have remained in questions of pure economics.

One vital element which the pre-communist Mao may have
derived not from the transitional thinkers but rather from the
literature of the pre-1911 revolutionaries (some of whom were
extremely active in Hunan) was the concept of the people as a
dynamic historic force in its own right. We have already touched
on some of the ideas about the "people" which Mao may have
derived from his readings in traditional literature. What was
lacking was the notion of the "people" as a primary force in its
own right. While popular resentments were traditionally
regarded as a symptom of a disordered society, they were not
regarded as a primal force engendering change. The transitional
thinkers espoused Western evolutionary doctrines which also
did not encourage views of "the people" as the dynamic bearer
of evolutionary progress. On the contrary, it was evolutionary
progress itself or rather evolutionary progress implemented by
an enlightened elite which would bring an ignorant and undevel-
oped people into the stream of historic progress. Given the
resentments of the young Mao, one may well imagine that he
responded eagerly to the new populist ideas of the
revolutionaries and one may doubt whether he was very much
troubled by the objections of Yen Fu, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and
others to the notion that an unenlightened people could act as an
instrument of progress. So long as one thinks of the people not as
an aggregate of individuals and groups but as a collective body
united by a Rousseauian General Will, the people becomes more
than the sum of its parts. What is more, if in speaking of the
nation one eliminates the holders of wealth, power and privilege
who embody the repressive authority of the past, one can envi-
sion a fusion of people and nation, of populism and nationalism.

The notion of a popular General Will immediately suggests all
sorts of ambiguities. It may, on the one hand, suggest a kind of
anarchism in which the people itself as a kind of self-
constituting force rushes forward like a torrent breaking down
all barriers in its way and creating the free and good society of
the future. As late as 1919, Mao's article "The Great Union of the
People" suggests a vision of this sort. While the Chinese people
is described as a conglomerate of many parts including such
strange categories as students and primary school teachers,

a Stuart Schram, "From "The Great Union of the Popular Masses" to the "Great

these parts are rapidly becoming fused into one great whole
embodying the higher vision of history. It will be noted that
students are a significant part of this alliance but the article does
not suggest the need of a vanguard. This emphasis on sponta-
neity may well reflect the apocalyptic mood of the May Fourth
period. Yet the concept of General Will may also lend itself to a
much more Jacobinist–Leninist view that the popular masses
must be led by a conscious vanguard which "concentrates" the
General Will and guides the masses on the way to the future.

Closely related to this populism is the idea of revolution itself
as a kind of total qualitative break with the past. If one conceives
of the people-nation as a kind of total organism, this makes the
notion of the total break all the more plausible. While Yen Fu,
Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and others had drawn non-revolutionary con-
clusions from their evolutionary outlook, the notion of a pro-
geressive history was not, of course, incompatible with the idea
of revolution. Mao Tse-tung's mentor at Peking University, Li
Ta-chao, had developed a kind of Hegelian view of a historical
process which might lead to new dialectical breaks in the
agonizing processes of history.

It should also be noted that vague notions of "socialism" as a
name for the good society of the future were certainly available
to Mao before 1919 although we have no evidence of any deep
commitment to it on his own part. On the other hand, we already
note the tendency to include "capitalists" in his categorization
of the holders of power, privilege and wealth. Whether at the
time he simply meant the very rich, whatever the source of their
wealth, or capitalists in the more precise sense is not clear. Yet
these notions were certainly available to him in the literature of
the times.

All of these strands and themes drawing on both the Chinese
past and the modern West were very much available to Mao and
his young contemporaries before the arrival of the October
Revolution. Not all those who were influenced by them were
impelled to adopt Marxism–Leninism as their faith. Yet one can
readily observe how many of these general notions prepared the
way for the more specific doctrines of Marxism–Leninism. In the
case of Mao, not only did these more general notions prepare
the ground for the acceptance of Marxism–Leninism, but I
would suggest that they continued ever after to condition and blur his perception of many of the more specific doctrines of Marxism—Leninism.

In his conversation with Edgar Snow in 1936 Mao stated “Once I had accepted it (Marxism) as the correct interpretation of history I did not afterwards waver.” This is no doubt a statement he would have reiterated to his dying day. In considering once more some of the factors which may have led Mao to this irreversible self-identification as a Marxist—Leninist, the following factors among others come to mind. There was the fact of the October Revolution itself. Mao’s own statement of 1949 that the “salvos of the October Revolution brought Marxism to China” is certainly inaccurate as far as China is concerned but it may be most accurate as it applies to Mao himself. The progress of World History in the West had not led to any major revolution since the second half of the 19th century. Historical progress had moved forward in an incremental, evolutionary way which held no promise of a total breakthrough in a China bogged down in misery and chaos. China’s own revolution of 1911 had certainly not produced the breakthrough. It had instead aggravated China’s weakness. To Mao’s mentor Li Ta-chao, the Russian revolution was the signal that World History was again on the move. “The Russian revolution has shaken off the last dismal autumn leaves from the tree of the world.” 6 The Russian revolution was part of World History and China was part of the world. This perception may have become as important for Mao as it was for his mentors Li Ta-chao and Ch’en Tu-hsiu who were soon led to form the Chinese Communist Party. Many of us have stressed the degree to which Mao has, in the course of his political life, emphasized the power of the human will and de-emphasized the “objective forces” of history. None of this has been incompatible with a kind of deeper general faith that history (as a kind of general cosmic force) has been supportive of his efforts, or with the faith that history (as a series of events) will inevitably lead to Communism. It was the October Revolution which kindled this faith. The sage-king can shape history but History will also support the sage-king. Finally, the October Revolution having proved that World History was on the move also forcefully called the attention of Mao and his two influential mentors to the doctrinal foundations of that Revolution.

The behaviour of the Great Powers at the Paris Peace Conference (resulting in the Treaty of Versailles) and the Soviet renunciation of Russian privileges in China also turned the attention of Mao and others to the Leninist theory of imperialism in its rougher outlines. The theory both provided a coherent explanation of the behaviour of the capitalist powers and envisioned an active role for non-Western “national liberation” movements in the world historical drama. What may not have come through so clearly to Mao may have been Lenin’s views concerning the provisional and transient nature of nationalism in a world in which the proletarian revolution was imminent. Mao’s nationalism was never to become a merely “bourgeois democratic” strategy. It was not instrumental.

Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party basically cured Mao of his anarcho-populist tendencies. His arguments for the need of a vanguard of professional revolutionaries were to finally confirm Mao’s more deeply-laid feeling that the masses required leaders. It also committed him more specifically to the conception of the Communist Party as the ideal organization of the vanguard. Yet the experiences of later years were to reveal an ongoing tendency to discern a possible distinction between the true leaders of the masses and the organization as such.

A much more problematic contribution of Marxism—Leninism was the Marxist doctrine of class struggle. Since Mao read the Chinese translations of the Communist Manifesto and of Kautsky’s “Class Struggle” in 1920 one assumes that some of the specificities of Marx’s concept of class must have come through to him. We have already seen that Social Darwinism had already created the disposition to regard group conflict as a positive propellant of progress. In his pre-communist populism there was already implicit a kind of loose notion of class struggle in the early French revolutionary sense – the struggle of those without power, wealth and privilege against the possessors of power, wealth and privilege. Marx, of course, specifically pointed out that he had not discovered the concept of class conflict in this sense. His innovation lay in the fact that he had

defined social divisions in terms of the relations of production and had seen the relations of production in terms of their organic relationship to the ongoing march of the forces of production. It was on the basis of this analysis that he was able to determine which classes in fact represented the cutting edge of historical progress. I shall not dwell here on Lenin's transformations of Marx's class doctrine which have been amply discussed elsewhere, except to point out that in a much modified form, the idea of the primacy of the industrial proletariat as the mass basis of the Communist Party and as the leading World Historical class had survived in Lenin. The fact that immediately after the formation of the Chinese Communist Party Mao's attention was first drawn to the area of labour organization would indicate that the notion of the industrial proletariat as the Party's class basis had come through to him. To what extent had it, however, truly become central to his whole image of the world?

During the period of the first Kuomintang–Communist alliance, the idea was somewhat blurred by the concept of the Kuomintang as the party of the people-nation (the four-class alliance). This was a concept he readily accepted and he seemed quite prepared to work within its framework when he turned his attention to work in the peasant movement. During the "Soviet" period he devoted all his attention to Hunan-Kiangsi rural strategy but acknowledged in orthodox fashion that this was auxiliary to the proletarian movement in the cities. By the time he had established his spiritual leadership of the movement in the north-west, the term "proletarian" had already acquired new connotations. It had already come to refer to a cluster of proletarian moral qualities which could be set before both Party and masses as a norm of true collectivist behaviour. To a considerable extent, it had already been disengaged from its concrete class reference.

The Marxist concept of class was of course, organically tied to the Marxist view that the dynamic principles of history are immanent in the economic order. To what extent had Mao internalized this idea? While he may have read Kautsky, basically it came to him with all its Leninist modifications. One could, of course, easily apply it to past history and Mao eventually would provide his own simple abstract Marxist account of Chinese history basing himself on Soviet models. However, whenever he discussed Chinese history in concrete he continued to the end to refer most often to ideas and phenomena (e.g. Confucianism versus Legalism) which were largely "superstructural." As for the present and future, as stated above, he had no doubt already been converted to the need for "economic development" in China even before coming to Marxism–Leninism. Yet this in itself did not involve any commitment to the idea that the dynamic secrets of China's future were to be sought in tendencies inherent in the economic order itself. No doubt, one of the reasons for his seemingly uncritical acceptance of the entire Stalinist development in the Soviet Union (however exasperated he may have been with Stalin's policies on China) is to be sought in Stalin's own sweeping modifications of Marx's conception of the mode of production. In the Soviet Union, Stalin insisted, the building of the industrial mode of production would be undertaken by the "superstructure" itself. The "proletarian dictatorship" would itself build industry and would do so with "socialist" methods. It would also successfully build socialism in one country. There is every reason to believe that Mao found all of these ideas extremely congenial to all his previously held predispositions.

There are, no doubt, other factors in the specific appeal of Marxism–Leninism to the Mao of the May Fourth period. At this point, however, we might briefly consider how his pre-communist and communist ideas may have shaped his life as a political actor and leader. It is, of course, at this point that the various dimensions of his personality, his capacities as a political leader and above all, the concrete circumstances within which he operated, interacted with and shaped his outlook. One can readily agree with Mao's emphasis in "On Practice" on "concrete history" even if one does not necessarily accept his analysis of that history. I do not propose to recapitulate the long history of the Maoist revolutionary strategy (a strategy in whose development others played no small part) but something should be said about the particular Yenan image of reality which emerged out of that long and arduous experience. It was an image which was in varied and complex ways to affect the whole

subsequent history of Mao's role as the leader of the People's Republic.

In considering some of the elements of this image I would like to look again both at its specifically Maoist core and at its more "Marxist–Leninist" dimensions. The fact that the mass basis of the movement was now overwhelmingly peasant, the fact that the leadership of the Party was now drawn from a variety of strata – intellectuals, semi-intellectuals and peasants – provided, as it were, the objective conditions for the use of the concept of "proletarian spirit" as the designation of a cluster of moral qualities. On the other hand, the enormous stress by Mao on the internalization of these qualities as a sine qua non for the success of the movement may have in part reflected the deep impression left by the Long March experience. It also linked up with the younger Mao's deep concern with the moral cultivation of the individual – a concern which he had shared with all his early mentors from Liang Ch'i-ch'ao to Yang Ch'ang-ch'i and – some would say – a concern which he shared with the whole cultural heritage of the past. Yet the content of this panoply of "proletarian" virtues was, of course, by no means entirely traditional. The virtues of self-abnegation, limitless sacrifice to the needs of the collectivity, guerilla-like self-reliance, unflagging energy, implacable hostility to the enemy, iron discipline, etc., were in the first instance, to be instilled in the leading cadres and then imparted to the masses as a whole, for in spite of all the insistence on the masses as the fountainhead of all wisdom and virtue, the notion of proletarian virtue as an ideal made it possible to admit that the masses in the flesh remained unredeemed.

The realities of the Yenan period also facilitated the stress on the "mass line." Party personnel in the border areas did indeed operate in close quarters with the masses. They did indeed "travel" rather than remain confined in offices. They did indeed pay close attention to mass organization and mass indoctrination. Given the loose organization and scattered nature of the "liberated" area of the north, no doubt a great deal of attention had to be paid to local conditions and particular needs of time and place. The extent to which the masses participated in policy-making is, of course, a moot point even as applied to the

Yenan period. While there may be considerable truth to this picture of moral solidarity between cadres and masses, this does not mean, however, that at the time Mao perceived any contradiction between this and the need for highly articulated organization on the Leninist model.

In addition to proletarian spirit and mass line, the Yenan experience also led Mao to formulate many particular maxims. There is thus the maxim that the proletarian spirit when instilled in cadres and masses is more important than material resources whether military or economic; that Party cadres endowed with the proper spirit should be able to put their hand to any task – military, economic, educational or political. Given the proper spirit (i.e., the specific skills (ts'ai)) could be easily mastered. Again, within the conditions of north-west China at this time this maxim was by no means implausible. Finally, in Mao's discussions of the sinification of Marxism, it became quite clear that the spirit of nationalism was back in place. This nationalism whatever its relation to the world communist movement was neither provisional nor strategic. Mao's own esoteric version of the united front strategy saw the CCP and Yenan base as the vanguard of all the "healthy" forces of the Chinese nation.

If this is the Maoist core what shall we make of Mao's assertion that Marxism–Leninism was the arrow being used to strike at the target of the Chinese revolution? We know, first of all, that even while Mao was establishing his own claim and his own physiognomy as spiritual leader of the movement, he was also intensively studying Soviet ideological literature. He still seems to have drawn enormous comfort from the belief that his movement (whose success was far from certain) was part of a World Historical movement led by the world's first socialist state. This led him, on the whole, to accept without much reflection the picture of the outside world projected from Moscow. In spite of all his ambivalence towards Stalin, in spite of his assertion of his own authority as the theorist of the Chinese revolution, there is no evidence that he in any way doubted the socialist nature of the Soviet Union. We have already reflected on why he may have found some of Stalin's doctrines most congenial. Not only does he seem to have been attracted to the notion that one can use
socialism to build industry, but he also seems to have found the Stalinist model of socialism as described in the literature quite acceptable. As a potential builder of socialism within one country, he was probably not shocked by Stalin’s lop-sided emphasis on heavy industry. In fact, he may have sympathized with the nationalist motives which underlay it. While he may have regarded Stalin’s purges as excessive, while his own style of leadership was quite different, his moral sensibilities were probably not outraged.

To be sure, China was still far from socialism. The doctrine of “New Democracy” postulated that China was so backward that a mixed economy would be required for some time to come. In retrospect, however, it would appear that Mao’s interest in embracing the “national bourgeoisie” in his people’s alliance was more political than economic. The speed and eagerness with which Mao passed over to the period of “transition to socialism” after the consolidation of the People’s Republic was based on a full acceptance of Stalin’s doctrine that “socialist” methods could be used to build industry in an under-developed society.

This deference to Soviet views on the nature of the world and the shape of the future may also have served to inhibit his own perception of the deeper implications of his own Yenan ideas. It was the Soviet Union after which had built socialism. He and his colleagues were still dealing with the humbler tasks of the new democratic stage and all his maxims were perhaps only applicable to the task of winning the new democratic revolution. It was only in retrospect after the disillusionment with Soviet models that Yenan itself began to take on the aspects of a quasi-communist idyll. “Until the early stage of liberation,” states Mao in 1967, “all party members by and large lived on an equal footing carrying on their daily pursuits energetically and fighting quite bravely. All this had nothing to do with so-called material incentives. What really counts is inspiration drawn from the revolutionary spirit.”

Another powerful “Marxist–Leninist” influence was the Stalinist model of the Leninist philosopher-king and theoretical helmsman. In projecting himself both as the theorist of the Chinese revolution and as a leader interested (as he no doubt genuinely was) in the most philosophical questions of Marxist dialectic and epistemology, he was very much basing himself on the Leninist–Stalinist model, although some may also see here echoes of the Chinese sage-king.

When we turn to the content of Mao’s Marxist–Leninist theory of the Chinese revolution as provided in “On New Democracy” and elsewhere, I continue to feel now as in the past that it is the strategy which guides the theory rather than vice-versa. It represents an effort to provide a Marxist–Leninist categorial framework for strategies based on a long political experience (and experience which, to be sure, includes the entire gamut of ideas discussed above) and excellent political insights.

What then of Mao’s philosophic works such as “On Contradiction” and “On Practice”? There are many who feel that in these writings one can find the algebraic key to Mao’s Marxist methodology. No doubt, these writings are significant. “On Contradiction” illustrates Mao’s ongoing obsession with conflict not only as a propulsive force of history but almost as a good in itself. The treatise illustrates his continuing fascination with the “towness” of things and an ongoing tendency to place almost every dyadic relationship in the universe under the category of contradictions. “On Practice” illustrates his Baconian inductionist view of natural science (which he may have acquired very early), as well as his aversion to the authority of mere book-learning and abstract intellect. At the same time, he combined this inductionism and pragmatism with firm views about the absolute and eternal validity of certain abstractions of his own choosing. Do these works provide a key to Mao’s life as a political actor? One might simply point out that Mao himself seemed to believe that this entire dialectical and epistemological apparatus could be applied correctly only by men of superior insight. The ability to distinguish between the principal contradiction and secondary contradictions in any given historic situation hardly derived automatically from the method itself. Similarly, the “summing up” and synthesizing of the “scat-
tered and unsystematic ideas” of the masses could be done correctly or incorrectly. Once more we are faced with a situation which requires the presence of a higher intuition and superior insight.

If one must seek for the “heart of the matter” I would suggest that we might rather look to certain themes in the corpus of Mao’s poetry (both pre- and post-Liberation). If we combine certain recurring images of this poetry we can construct a kind of overriding poetic vision. To a degree this vision corresponds to what Stuart Schram has called Mao’s “military romanticism” and yet it is even more than that. Given the overwhelmingly military cast of the Chinese Communist revolutionary experience, the prevalence of military imagery is no surprise. Again and again we see the surging ranks marching on and fighting constant battles against foes on all sides “holding light the ten thousand crags and torrents.” One must assume that these are not only armies marching across the impossible terrains and against overwhelming odds, but the popular masses — the people-nation marching into the future over the terrain of time and prevailing against all hostile forces both human and natural. Intertwoven with this image is the image of the heroic leader who like the “victorious hero” Kung Kung of old butts against Mount Pu Chou “breaking the pillars of heaven and snapping the ties of earth.” We also have the evocation of vast and grandiose landscapes of mountain, sea and plain viewed as if were from above. One assumes that the eye which beholds these vast vistas is again the eye of the hero leader who like Chuang Tzu’s roc bird with “the blue sky on his back looks down to survey Man’s world with its towns and cities.” One might say that it is the hero leader who surveys the entire scene from the larger historic perspective who alone is able to guide the masses and “sum up” their experiences. Leader and led are bound together by the epic drama in which both are involved. They share all the toils and austerities of the march as well as all its triumphs and sorrows. It is the leader himself who sees to it that the masses are never diverted from the historic task. It is the leader who strives mightily to preserve the heroic virtues of his troops.

We are dealing here with a poetic vision and as such it allows for many fruitful ambiguities when translated into the language of prose. Does the epic march lead to a fixed destination of peace and harmony or is the destination ever-receding, and does the real significance of life lie in the march itself even though there may be many specific goals along the way? Does the image of the hero leader represent only the transcendent leader himself or does it embrace the army’s “general staff” as well? Must the army and its leaders rely heavily on efficiency of organization and technical competence or is the main thing the high morale and collective virtue of the troops? (The two of course are not mutually exclusive.) Are the troops themselves all equal to the historic project or will individuals and entire groups fall by the wayside? Indeed may not the army as a whole, as well as its officer corps, flag in its devotion and fall back unless constantly inspired by the proletarian virtues inculcated by the leader? Finally, while the overwhelming image is that of surging advance, may there not at times be need for strategic retreats and periods of quietude even though such quietude always holds the danger of diversion and desertions from the line of march?

To a degree one can think of the whole role of Mao since 1944 in terms of this poetic vision without in any way derogating from our image of him as a hard-headed, canny politician. The speedy consolidation of the People’s Republic after 1949 was, of course, still based on the universalization of Yenan methods. The quick achievement of law and order, and of a new sense of national efficacy in these first years is certainly one of the major triumphs of the People’s Republic. Yet when we turn to the “transition of socialism” we sense a new modesty and diffidence on the part of the hero leader. He does not clearly envision the terrain lying ahead. He (like his colleagues) suspects that in building socialism one must defer to the technical wisdom of the Soviet friends who have already achieved socialism. The Yenan ideas are, to be sure, not completely thrust aside and Mao continues to cling to some Chinese differences. Yet the main thrust is in the direction of Soviet models. By 1955–56, there is, to be sure, a revival of the leader’s exuberant self-confidence. The Chinese people had displayed their ability to achieve socialist goals and had in a sense “done it better” than the Soviets themselves. At the same time Mao, like his colleagues, was by 1956
becoming more aware of the limitations of the Stalinist model of socialism. For a moment, the confidence that socialism had been “basically achieved,” combined with a realization that many problems remained unsolved led to the relaxation which came to be known as the “Hundred Flowers” period. The intellectuals were for a moment again taken back into the ranks of the masses.

However the true resurgence of Mao’s poetic vision in its pure Yenan form coincides with the “Great Leap Forward” of 1958. It was this experience which provided the revelation in China that the maxims of Yenan were, after all, applicable not only to the new democratic revolution of the past but to the present tasks of modernization as well. The reliable intellectuals had fallen out of the ranks but the “poor and blank” masses would march on into the future. They remained a source of infinite moral energy. If this energy could be tapped, mobilized and directed by dedicated leading cadres, the masses would surge forward to scale the formidable heights of agricultural and industrial production. If socialism merely meant the nationalization of the means of production it was now obviously clear that socialism in the purely structural sense was not the end of the road in China as it seems to have become in the Soviet Union. The masses inspired by the proletarian ethic of Yenan were again marching into the future.

While Mao may have grudgingly accepted the retreat from the Great Leap Forward, he did not renounce the vision which underlay it. Instead, he seems to have come to the conclusion during the 1960–66 period that his own general staff was now abandoning the epic march. Conflicts between the leader and other Party leaders had occurred before but now it became increasingly clear that these others held views of the future which clearly diverged from his own. Their views of the requirements for building a “wealthy and powerful China” (a goal which he shared with them) had clearly come to diverge from his own. They did not accept his perception that these goals would be achieved by relying on the “proletarian” Yenan spirit. It was this failure of vision on their part as well as his meditations on Soviet corruption which really led him to the view that bureaucratic power as such was laden with “bourgeois” potentialities (bourgeois vices were defined as the opposite of proletarian virtues). The leader was now alone with the masses. Yet this was also not to be the end; the masses in the form of the Red Guards and “revolutionary mass organizations” also failed him. Instead of maintaining proletarian solidarity and discipline they fell into complete disorganization and thus made it necessary for him once more to call on the forces of organization to preserve the nation and carry on the business of the state. He would, however, continue to foster and carry on the cultural revolutionary spirit within the vital cultural and educational spheres. It was at this somewhat uncertain moment in the leader’s 10,000 mile march that death overtook him.

One is tempted at this point to speculate as to which parts of Mao’s legacy will endure. I would suggest that the poetic vision as a whole will retreat from the centre of the stage. The great mass of mankind may at times be wholly caught up in epic marches but the masses (including the Chinese masses) are also people and as people they are inevitably concerned with other things. Even people who live on modest material levels tend to have a lively concern with their own personal destinies (which does not simply mean material incentives), and with their personal relations with others. They may crave peace and harmony as much as the excitement of battle. Like the much criticized intellectuals, they are aware that life has many vital dimensions which can not be squeezed into Mao’s historic drama. The hero leader can derive endless gratification from his roc-like position on the mountain peak but the foot soldiers involved in the grimier routines of the campaign may require other things as well.

Mao’s really enduring legacy may perhaps be found in some of the more specific achievements along the way. The attainment of social peace and order after 1949 and the restoration of China’s national dignity, the success in maintaining a general equity of distribution while carrying on an arduous effort to achieve economic development, the ultimate realization (no doubt shared with the other leaders) that the Stalinist model of development did not apply to China’s needs, the realization that in China agriculture required primary attention, the final realization that there was no readily available formula of “modernization” and that China would have to find its own way to
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modernization — these seem to me some of the more solid legacies of the Maoist period. Another curious legacy is a legacy of awkward questions raised by Mao for his own reasons during recent years. May bureaucratic and political power be as real a source of exploitation, oppression and corruption as power based on property? Are there any political institutions — including the Communist Party — immune to corruption and error? As new leaderships attempt to create stable institutional bases in China these questions will remain to haunt them.