MAO TSE-TUNG IN THE SCALES OF HISTORY

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THE PATRIOT

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Mao Tse-tung’s first conscious political concern was the salvation of his country.¹ By the time he had left Shaoshan Primary School at the age of 13 to work on his father’s farm, Mao had grown acutely aware of China’s national jeopardy. Reminiscing 20 years later, he told the American journalist, Edgar Snow, that in 1906:

I began to have a certain amount of political consciousness, especially after I read a pamphlet telling of the dismemberment of China. I remember even now that this pamphlet opened with the sentence: “Alas, China will be subjugated!” It told of Japan’s occupation of Korea and Formosa, of the loss of suzerainty in Indo-China, Burma and elsewhere. After I read this I felt depressed about the future of my country and began to realize that it was the duty of all the people to help save it.²

Before that dismemberment began, the Ch’ing empire had stretched for nearly 4,500 kilometres. Its borders had encompassed much of the Asian land mass, reaching the Sea of Okhotsk in the far north and the shores of Lake Balkhash in the far west. Manchuria, Mongolia, Sinkiang and Tibet were all directly ruled by the emperor of China. The monarchies of Korea, Vietnam and Nepal considered themselves tributaries of Peking. In 1800 the Ch’ing dynasty of Manchus controlled more people and land than had any government in Chinese history.

By the early 20th century, however, China had become the sick man of the Orient. During every decade but one since the 1840s China had fought a major war, either with Japan or with a Western power. In each case, the Chinese and their Manchu

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Irwin Scheiner and Carolyn Wakeman for suggestions to improve this essay, and to the staff of the Center for Chinese Studies at Berkeley for helping with its preparation.
rulers were defeated. The imperial capital had been twice occupied by allied expeditions. More than 20 treaty ports had been opened to foreigners, who enjoyed extraterritoriality and economic privileges. Province-sized portions of territory had been ceded to Russia and the lush island of Taiwan had been lost to the Japanese. Along the coast five major leaseholds – each a foreign zone of occupation – had been granted to the British, French, Germans, Japanese and Russians. Even from young Mao’s perspective in landlocked Shaoshan, it was obvious that Western and Japanese imperialists were relentlessly pushing their way into the heartland of China, forcing the proudly anti-foreign Hunanese to admit them to their provincial capital in Changsha.

Mao Tse-tung’s generation of Chinese was certainly not the first to espy an emergency. In fact, Mao’s patriotic determination to restore China to the Chinese was nurtured by two earlier traditions of national defense: the Confucian elite’s conception of individual loyalty and patriotic statesmanship, and a more popular notion of heroic protest against injustice and of mass resistance to the presence of foreigners in China. The elite’s primary commitment was to defend a cultural tradition rather than a nation or race, but the Confucian loyalist heroes in their opposition sometimes seemed ethnic patriots as well. After the Manchu conquest a few Chinese scholar-officials actually took issue with the conventional idea that any group – regardless of race – could adopt universal Confucian culture. A Hunanese philosopher, Wang Fu-chih, wrote in the 17th century that barbarians had cultures of their own and were unsuited to take on the trappings of Chinese civilization. Wang also emphasized the importance of distinguishing the different categories (lei) of being, and of segregating species of things. Although his works were not widely read at the time he lived, Wang Fu-chih’s sociological justifications for ethnicism later profoundly influenced radical intellectuals and nationalists like Mao. In the high culture of the Ch’ing, the patriotism of the literati was stripped of its particular commitment to Chinese values, and instead defined more abstractly as the elite’s obligation to defend the Confucian heritage which Manchu emperors

could share with Han (native Chinese) mandarins. By the early 19th century, the only visible signs of purely ethnic patriotism were to be found in more popular manifestations.

Among the “black-haired masses” of China there existed an almost legendary history of popular resistance to foreign invasion. Since at least the 14th century, when White Lotus rebels overthrew the Mongol Yuan dynasty, sectarian movements had been strongly imbued with anti-foreign sentiments. During the Manchu conquest of China in the 1640s, there were numerous instances of peasants, sometimes led by marginal elements like bandits or smugglers, fighting against the invaders. Particularly angered by the Manchus’ insistence that the Chinese copy their tribal custom of shaved heads and plaited queues, Chinese peasants formed militia specifically to attack the Ta-tzu (Tartars) in their midst. Even after the Manchus had pacified south China, there continued to be uprisings to expel the barbarians and restore Han rule. Especially after the turn of the 19th century, the Triads of Fukien and Kwangtung provinces revolted repeatedly against Ch’ing officials in the name of the native Ming dynasty.

Because the object of the secret societies’ hatred was the ruling elite of China, the Chinese literati who served the Ch’ing dynasty did not find it possible to identify their own commitment to the defence of the culture with the popular tradition of anti-foreign resistance. In fact, secret society revolts helped convince members of the gentry that they had more in common with an alien emperor who was their cultural ally, than with Triad “riff-raff” (wu-jai) who were their social enemies. The domestic opposition between the two different traditions of scholarly cultural loyalty and popular ethnic anti-foreignism was thus reconciled by the appearance of a new external enemy. It was thus the growing presence of Westerners in China that provided an opportunity for these two forms of patriotism momentarily to merge.


The Opium War of 1839–42 saw the temporary fusion of the elite’s sophisticated determination to defend the empire and the peasants’ outraged passion to expel the barbarians. Wartime leaders like Commissioner Lin Tse-hsü tried both to equip their conventional forces with new weapons to oppose the aggressors, and to encourage rural militia to attack the British troops en masse. By the end of the Opium War, and even despite the Ch’ing dynasty’s submission to the British, many Chinese were convinced that, with proper leadership, patriotic gentry and zealous peasant irregulars together possessed the capacity to drive off European invaders.

During the Taiping rebellion the momentary alliance between gentry and peasants began to dissolve. The Taiping movement was an extremely complex social phenomenon, which left its own tradition of primitive communism for later revolutionaries like Mao to look back upon with pride and self-identification. At the time of their uprising in Kwangsi, the rebels drew deeply upon the strong anti-Manchu feelings of the nativist secret societies of south China. Yet the movement also acquired a certain foreign air because its major leader, Hung Hsiu-ch’ien, was seminally influenced by Christianity. The Taipings’ anti-foreignism was thus directed not against the Westerners, who had so recently invaded China, but against the Manchus. Selecting the ruling house as its target at a time when the Ch’ing Government was still allied with Han officials against European invaders, the Taipings aroused the avid opposition of cultural champions who believed the rebels were inspired by an alien doctrine to challenge the Confucian elite’s right to rule China. Thus, the very same statecraft writers who had enthusiastically applauded Lin Tse-hsü’s support of popular movements against a common enemy now strongly endorsed leaders like Tseng Kuo-fan who called for a new heroic Confucian commitment against the massed rebels.

Mao was a youthful admirer of this kind of heroic Confucianism. As a schoolboy he seemed to identify more readily with Confucian paragons like Tseng Kuo-fan, the imperial officia-


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cial who defeated the Taipings, than with the rebels themselves. One reason for Mao’s identification with Tseng Kuo-fan may have been that the latter stood for a much larger group of tough-minded administrators mainly from Mao’s native province of Hunan. These men had spearheaded the effort to restore order to central China and, while destroying the Taipings, had at the same time strengthened China against external enemies by trying to advance the military modernization programmes initiated by Lin Tse-hsü. Like Lin, Tseng Kuo-fan equated the resurgence of Chinese national strength with the revival of Confucian moralism. In Hunan, where the province’s reputation for anti-foreignism and cultural conservatism was a source of great pride, native writers were vaunted and their works printed under official rubric. Tseng, for instance, sponsored the publication of the collected works of Wang Fu-chih in 1864–66, thus helping revive the latent tradition of high cultural ethnic patriotism associated with Ming loyalists. Hunanese pride and interest in Wang’s writings would continue to grow in decades to come. By the time of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 there was a Wang Fu-chih Study Society (Ch’uan-shan hsueh-she) in Changsha, and Mao attended its meetings on more than one occasion.

Even though Tseng Kuo-fan’s or Li Hung-chang’s regional armies were originally formed to suppress the Taiping rebellion, they were also conceived as a line of defence against foreign aggression. After the internal rebels were quelled, therefore, some of these well-equipped armies (and especially Li Hung-chang’s Huai Army) were kept under arms to thwart Western encroachment. The latter grew to be more of a threat just as popular anti-foreignism and elite patriotism again converged to preserve the native culture. When the Taipings were finally defeated, this putative union between elite and popular champions of Han culture was even more fully realized as an alliance against Western missionaries and their converts.

Meanwhile foreign encroachment on China intensified. Although Japan was forced by Russia, France and Germany to drop some of the more onerous provisions of the Treaty of Shimono-seki in 1895, the Chinese were still profoundly shocked by the magnitude of their defeat in the war with Japan.

8 Schram, Mao, p. 51.
Most aroused were younger literati – and especially those who were convinced that fundamental political reform was now necessary. Beginning in 1895, young gentrymen throughout the empire formed reform clubs and study societies dedicated to further self-strengthening and to defending the country. The leading figure in this movement was a Cantonese scholar named K'ang Yu-wei. He and his major disciple, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, recommended, in a series of memorials addressed to the throne and journalistic pieces addressed to the literate public, that reforms be implemented as rapidly as possible. Their hope was to persuade the Kuang-hsu Emperor (reigned 1875–1907) – who had recently taken full charge of the throne from his aunt, the empress dowager – to order changes in the organization of the government by abolishing sinecures, drastically modifying the examination system, creating new schools, carrying out full-scale military modernization, and initiating assemblies to give the gentry a legitimate political voice.

Hunan was a major centre of reform because the provincial governor, judicial commissioner and director of studies all favoured some measure of educational and administrative change. Even more important, young Hunanese literati like T'ang Ts'ai-ch'ang and T'an Ssu-t'ung were eagerly engaged in building up a network of local clubs to take the lead in revising the educational system, in undertaking economic projects, and in urging the gentry to mobilize popular support. T'an Ssu-t'ung was especially eager to broaden his contacts with the peasantry by joining popular religious sects and by participating in secret society-style martial arts groups. There was thus in Hunan an especially conscious effort to fuse together the elite tradition of Confucian commitment to cultural preservation with popular ideals of peasant resistance to invasion.

The imperial government was slow to accept any proposals for reform, and certainly very cautious about encouraging these local clubs to lead provincial political movements. What kept the reform movement alive, and led K'ang Yu-wei to revive his organization in the capital, was the critical international situation faced by China. If the country had been helpless in 1894–95 to resist Japan's demands, China was even more impotent in the face of the series of diplomatic ultimatums that were delivered by the other great powers in 1897–98. In quick order, Germany demanded and got special concessions in Shantung, as did Russia in Liaotung, Great Britain in Shantung and in the New Territories, and France in the far south. This "scramble for concessions" understandably led many Chinese to believe that their country was being "carved up like a melon" by the imperialists.

Fearful now that he might actually lose his throne, the Kuang-hsu Emperor expressed interest in K'ang's reform memorials, and, beginning in June 1898, launched the "Hundred Days of Reform." After consultations with K'ang Yu-wei and some of the other reformers, the emperor issued a set of decrees which ordered a fundamental reorganization of the bureaucracy, the army and the educational system. But the reforms were never fully implemented. Reasserting her authority over the emperor in the autumn of 1898, the empress dowager moved back into the palace and ordered the reformers purged. Six prominent reformers (including the Hunanese, T'an Ssu-t'ung) were actually executed, and the abortive "Hundred Days of Reform" came to an abrupt end within China. However, the two most important leaders of the movement – K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao – managed to escape abroad. In years to come they would continue in exile to symbolize the spirit of patriotic gentry reform.

Indeed, 12 years later they still represented that spirit to 16-year-old Mao Tse-tung, then enrolled in Tungshan Higher Primary School in Hsiang-hsiang.

I was reading two books sent to me by my cousin, telling of the reform movement of K'ang Yu-wei. One was called the Journal of the New People, and was edited by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao. I read and re-read these until I knew them by heart. I worshipped K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao . . . I considered the emperor as well as most officials to be honest, good and clever men. They only needed the help of K'ang Yu-wei's reforms. 10

A year later, in 1911, Mao enrolled in middle school in the provincial capital of Changsha. There he learned of the anti-Manchu uprisings fomented by the Revolutionary Alliance (T'ung-meng hui) under the nominal leadership of Sun Yat-sen.

9 T'an Ssu-t'ung's religious activities have been studied by Richard Shek, whose research on this topic has not yet been published.

At first Mao confused these revolutionary activities with the reformist programme of K'ang Yu-wei, perhaps because both seemed designed to save the country.

I learned also of Sun Yat-sen at this time, and of the program of the T'ung-meng hui. The country was on the eve of the first revolution. I was agitated so much that I wrote an article, which I posted on the school wall. It was my first expression of a political opinion, and it was somewhat muddled. I had not yet given up my admiration of K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao. I did not clearly understand the differences between them. Therefore in my article I advocated that Sun Yat-sen must be called back from Japan to become President of a new Government, that K'ang Yu-wei be made Premier, and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao Minister of Foreign Affairs.11

Mao Tse-tung's chagrin at having failed to see the distinction between Sun and K'ang is certainly understandable. By the time Mao posted his article on the middle school wall a great gap had grown between the two men. This gap represented what had since 1898 become nearly a chasm between higher and lower traditions of patriotism in China.

The split in China between patriotic reformists and nativist masses was painfully apparent during the Boxer uprisings of 1899–1900. The Boxers formed an anti-imperialist movement as socially diverse as the villages and towns of north China itself. They were loosely organized into bands led by sectarian masters and boxing masters, and united as a whole by their common belief that magic would protect them against European weapons as long as they proceeded to destroy all signs of the Western presence in China. Their elemental anti-foreignism seemed to the empress dowager—then desperate for popular support as anti-Manchu uprisings were again occurring in the south—a sure sign of her subjects' eagerness to close ranks behind the dynasty against the great powers. To many of her own officials, however, the Boxers appeared at worst to be chilastic sectarians like the White Lotus rebels, and at best hapless peasants deluded by fanatic leaders who were just as capable of overthrowing the government as they were of murdering Christian converts. Especially at the provincial level, the reformist gentry was beginning to feel that its own nationally inspired self-strengthening projects would be jeopardized by the more primi-

11 Ibid., p. 135.

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tive anti-foreignism of the masses. All Chinese could agree upon the importance of restoring China to its proper place in the world. But what provincial reformers regarded as instruments of modernization crucial to national development (railroads, telegraphs, new schools) appeared to the Boxers as alarming signs of Westernization.

The cultural split between elite patriotism and mass nativism became all the more pronounced after 1901 when the Boxers were defeated and the empress dowager was encouraged to launch a second and eventually more effective dynastic reform movement. As the central government sponsored new local schools, chambers of commerce, native industry, new army units, and national railroads, the gentry became more deeply involved in provincial political and economic activities. The abolition of the examination system in 1905 eventually severed the gentry's dependence upon Peking for ultimate social status, and made it possible for wealth and a Western education to become determinants of elite status. The gentry thus dramatically altered its cultural outlook, preferring to educate its progeny in the new schools, and hopefully to send sons (and even daughters) abroad for higher training. Because modern schools and education abroad cost so much more than traditional tutors, entry into the new elite became much more difficult.12 50 years earlier, a young boy like Mao Tse-tung (whose father, after all, was a part-time rice broker with liquid assets of $2,000–3,000) might have hired a teacher in hopes of becoming an "aspirant" (t'ung-sheng) or "flourishing talent" (hsiu-ts'yi) in the examination system. Now, he could barely afford to leave home to attend a Western-style school in the nearby country seat.

One of the profoundest impulses of the student associations organized in Japan in the early 1900s was to get back in touch with the people of China. It is perhaps some measure of the students' distance from the peasantry that they turned so quickly to a man whose own mass support consisted largely of fund-raising contacts with the petit bourgeois communities of overseas Chinese dwelling in South-east Asia, the Americas and Europe. Yet Sun Yat-sen, product of an American missionary school in Hawaii and Western-style medical training, did

populistically promise access to the global network of secret societies (the Triads, Chih-kung t'ung and so forth) that supposedly led back through San Francisco or Singapore to the inhabitants of south China.

Not all exiles identified the secret societies' cohorts as authentically peasant revolutionaries. Sun's rival, Liang Ch'i-cha'o, viewed them as congeries of "gamblers and swindlers" - as "riff-raff" whose fanatic anti-Manchu "racialism" (min-su chu-i) was opposed to the unitary "nationalism" (kuo-chia chu-i) of responsible patriots like himself. 12 Liang's elite-sponsored "nationalism," however, did not promise to gain the students' popular support for a political revolution in China. Sun Yat-sen, on the other hand, could at least guarantee that anti-Manchu "racialism" was potentially a strong bond between secret society nativists and young republican revolutionaries. Thus, Sun Yat-sen's voice prevailed when the Revolutionary Alliance (T'ung-meng hui) was formed in 1905 in Tokyo and, at least in the very beginning, his strategy led to a series of abortive secret society uprisings that brought his name to the young Mao's attention in Changsha. Yet as the Revolutionary Alliance gained visibility in students' eyes, it may have sacrificed responsibility in the view of the reformist gentry.

The reformist gentry had responded vigorously to the throne's proposals for reform after 1901, and eagerly sponsored modern schools, banks, local railways, industrial enterprises, and so forth. However, these projects all cost a great deal of money. The central government was already deeply in debt to foreign bankers and had pledged some of its most important sources of income to pay off the ruinous indemnities resulting from its military defeats. Virtually the only way to pay for the urban gentry's reform projects was to increase the taxes upon the peasantry, mainly in the form of increased salt taxes and higher excise taxes levied upon farm goods brought into market towns. The tax burden, which was both visible and onerous, was also clearly associated in the public's mind with the gentry-sponsored modernization projects then being carried out. 14


It was just such a situation in Changsha that precipitated the rice riots of 1910. As Mao later explained to Edgar Snow:

Outside the little Chinese school where I was studying, we students noticed many bean merchants, coming back from Changsha. We asked them why they were all leaving. They told us about a big uprising in the city. There had been a severe famine that year, and in Changsha thousands were without food. The starving sent a delegation to the civil governor, to beg for relief, but he replied to them haughtily, "Why haven't you food? There is plenty in the city. I always have enough." When the people were told the governor's reply, they became very angry. They held mass meetings and organized a demonstration. They attacked the Manchu yamen, cut down the flagpole, the symbol of office, and drove out the governor ... [After the rebels were executed,] I felt that there with the rebels were ordinary people like my own family and I deeply resented the injustice of the treatment given to them. 15

What Mao could not have known, being at the time in Hsiang-hsiang, was that during the mêlée in Changsha, conservative gentry - opposed to the measures of modernization introduced by the reformist elite - helped direct the rioters towards the edifices that either contained foreign goods, were rented by foreigners, or were associated with the reformers' proposals. What had begun as a classic grain riot, in other words, turned into a forceful demonstration against the urban gentry's reform effort, with mobs attacking government schools, foreign missions, foreign-connected shops, foreign-style hotels, foreign steamship lines, and so forth. The most important targets were the schools. Five of the new government schools, the very symbol of Westernization and of the reform gentry's new expensive projects, were burned.

Mao may not have known about the burning of Western-style schools in Changsha; but he certainly must have sensed the implicit connection between this lower-class economic resentment and anti-Foreign feelings, which were often directed most strongly against the "foreign slaves" (yong ru) who had taken on Western ways. In fact, one of the teachers in his own school at Hsiang-hsiang incurred such attacks.

Another notable thing [Mao told Snow.] was that one of the teachers was a returned student from Japan and he wore a false queue. It was quite easy to tell that his queue was false. Everyone laughed at him and

15 Mao Tse-tung, quoted in Snow, Red Star, pp. 130-1.
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called him the ‘False Foreign Devil’... Many of the students disliked the ‘False Foreign Devil’ because of his inhuman queue, but I liked hearing him talk about Japan.16

The custom of plaiting men’s hair into a pigtailed queue had been forced upon the Han Chinese by their Manchu conquerors in the 17th century. By Mao’s time the population had grown so used to wearing the queue that most people thought it was their own native custom. To Mao and his schoolmates, not to have a queue was not to be Chinese; it was to be foreign. To the Westernized schoolteacher, on the other hand, the old-fashioned and Manchu-imposed queue represented both cultural backwardness and racial humiliation. Though now obliged to wear a false queue to avoid arrest by the Ch’ing authorities, he had cut his queue in Japan as a sign of his cultural enlightenment and his nationalistic identity. Back in Hsiang-hsiang, however, his action was taken to be a symbol of despised Westernization. Pigtale-shorn, he was ridiculed for slavishly imitating foreign customs, so that his false queue ironically became a symbol of Mao’s teacher’s loss of Chinese manhood.

This misunderstanding was not an isolated example in China at the time. Mao’s favourite modern writer, Lu Hsün, later published a very famous novella called The True Story of Ah Q which was set in the period of the Revolution of 1911. The “hero” of the serial, Ah Q, was an illiterate roustabout—“riff-raff” despised by nearly everyone who knew him—who none the less felt superior to a “fake foreign devil” in his village just like the teacher in Mao’s higher primary school.

From the distance approached another of Ah Q’s enemies. This was Mr. Ch’ien’s eldest son whom Ah Q thoroughly despised. After studying in a foreign-style school in the city, it seemed he had gone to Japan. When he came home half a year later his legs were straight and his queue had disappeared... What Ah Q despised and detested most in him was his false queue. When it came to having a false queue, a man could scarcely be considered human... 17

16 Mao Tse-tung, quoted in Snow, Red Star, pp. 132–3. As Professor Schram points out, Mao rallied his First Normal School soccer team against the Westernized Chinese players from Yen-chin China with the cry, “Yangnui!” See Schram, Mao, p. 73.


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Much of the irony in Lu Hsün’s novella rests upon Ah Q’s chagrin when he finds out that this “fake foreign devil” is one of the local leaders of the victorious revolutionary movement he, Ah Q, wishes to join. Consequently, Ah Q and the rest of the villagers discover to their surprise that cutting the queue signifies revolutionary opposition to the Manchu regime.

In much the same way and on the eve of the 1911 revolution, Mao Tse-tung also experienced the symbolic reconstruction of the queue. Now in middle school in Changsha, he noted that:

The students in my school became more and more agitated. They demonstrated their anti-Manchu sentiments by a rebellion against the pigtail. One friend and I clipped off our pigtails, but others, who had promised to do so, afterward failed to keep their word. My friend and I therefore assaulted them in secret and forcibly removed their queues, a total of more than ten falling victim to our shears. Thus in a short space of time I had progressed from ridiculing the False Foreign Devil’s imitation queue to demanding the general abolition of queues. How a political idea can change a point of view!18

The popular reformulation of the symbolism of the queue was an apt metaphor for the momentary reunion of elitist and popular traditions of political engagement during the initial stages of the Revolution of 1911. Anti-Manchuism thus provided the temporary bridge between Westernized leaders and the nativist populace, but only for a transitional moment. All too soon the span was gone. With their common Manchu enemy overthrown, the reformist gentry in the cities and the peasantry in the countryside lost the patriotic animus they had held in common. In Hunan, for example, the rift began even before the Manchu dynasty had surrendered the throne to the republic. The reformist elite in Changsha, led by the speaker of the provincial assembly, T’an Yen-k’ai (a former Hanlin Confucian scholar), quickly grew disturbed by the prospect of Revolutionary Alliance demagogues arousing tax-burdened peasants or secret society elements to carry out a social revolution. When the radical leader, Chiao Ta-feng, began to take charge of the revolution in Hunan with the help of secret society elements, T’an became alarmed, and “spoke to the people of their higher duties”:

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A civilized revolution is different from country banditry. It is only possible with the co-operation and dedication of the great families and ancient clans, and the military officers. 19

Consequently, as Chiao Ta-feng took over the governship (tu-tu) of Hunan in the name of the Revolutionary Alliance, T'an Yen-k'ai turned to the army for help. Mao, not yet in the thick of things himself, observed from the sidelines that:

The new tu-tu [Chiao Ta-feng] and vice-tu-tu [Ch'en Tso-hsin] did not last long. They were not bad men, and had some revolutionary intentions, but they were poor and represented the interests of the oppressed. The landlords and merchants were dissatisfied with them. Not many days later when I went to call on a friend, I saw their corpses lying in the street. T'an Yen-k'ai had organized a revolt against them, as representative of the Hunan landlords and militarists. 20

Thus, after the initial uprisings in October 1911, many of the T'ung-meng hui revolutionaries were displaced by members of the upper gentry. And less than five years later the reformist gentry had been removed from power by military men. After 1916 the generals ruled most of China, and it was obvious to nearly everyone that the Revolution of 1911 had turned out to be the destruction of an ancien régime rather than the construction of a new nation-state. By sweeping away the old Confucian monarchy, however, the revolutionaries did create the potential for dramatic future changes. In this sense, 1911 opened an era of political possibilities and social opportunities.

For Mao, coming of age with the revolution meant a brief stint in the revolutionary army of the young Wuhan militarist, T'ang Sheng-chih. Then, after some hesitation about choosing a career when he left the army, Mao enrolled in Changsha's prestigious First Normal School, where he was to spend the next five years. During that period he was to come the closest to being part of that local urban elite dominated by men like T'an Yen-k'ai. At the Normal School, Mao soon became a prominent student leader: chairman of the local student association, and by his senior year author of an article published in Ch'en Tu-hsiu's pace-setting magazine, New Youth (Hsin ch'ing-chen). For a while, Mao even contemplated study abroad. Helping organize a programme for work-study in France, Mao's own rural roots were attenuating. It seemed natural, then, for Mao to leave Changsha and go to Peking with a contingent of Hunanese students preparing to sail for Europe. Ultimately, Mao decided not to go abroad, perhaps because he found the study of French and English too difficult. He told Snow later that he had felt that he "did not know enough about [his] own country, and that [his] time could be more profitably spent in China." 21 Whatever the reason, this decision kept Mao from temporarily severing his strong provincial ties. After a brief three-month stint working in the Peking University Library, Mao returned to Hunan.

He was thus in Changsha, teaching in a primary school, when the May Fourth Movement erupted in 1919, beginning as a student protest in Peking against Japanese demands on China—demands which were supported by the Western powers and agreed to by Chinese warlords. As the movement spread across China, students, merchants and workers together called for national unity against imperialism. Mao strongly shared the emotions of the protesters. Organizing a very successful anti-Japanese boycott in Changsha, Mao eloquently appealed for a "great union of the popular masses" in a stirring article published in July 1919, in the Hsiang-ch'ang p'ing-lun (Hsiang-ch'ang p'ing-lun):

In reality, for thousands of years the Chinese people of several hundred millions all led a life of slaves... Today things are different, and in every domain we demand liberation. Ideological liberation, political liberation, economic liberation, liberation [in the relations between] men and women, educational liberation, are all going to burst from the deep inferno where they have been confined, and demand to look at the blue sky. Our Chinese people possess great inherent capacities! The more profound the oppression, the greater its resistance; that which has accumulated for a long time will surely burst forth quickly. I venture to make a singular assertion: one day, the reform of the Chinese people will be more profound than that of any other people, and the society of the Chinese people will be more profound than that of any other people. The great union of the Chinese people will be achieved earlier than that of any other place or people. Gentlemen! Gentlemen! We must all exert ourselves! We must all advance with the utmost strength! Our golden age, our age of glory and splendour, lies before us! 22

As Stuart R. Schram has pointed out, this newspaper article reveals a Mao who has not yet become a Marxist—a Mao who is

21 Ibid., p. 149.
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above all a nationalist. Yet one can also detect the first stirrings of Mao's conviction that China would remake herself, and that this change would occur precisely because the country had become so oppressed. Mao had begun to perceive that oppression had created a counter-force, the will of the people, who, liberated through struggle, would unite together to build a new golden age in Chinese history.

This new belief in mass action, as part of a generally patriotic commitment to the recovery of national strength and independence, was influenced by Marxist theory. Mao's initial exposure to Marxism had mainly been through the writings of Li Ta-chao, whose "Victory of Bolshevism" celebrating the Russian October Revolution was used by Mao as a text when he lectured on Marxism in Changsha in 1919. Li's revolutionary vision was global, so that China's struggle for liberation was viewed as part of a new stage in world history. He preached a romantic reunion of city and countryside—a China transformed by the nationalistic solidarity between the urban youth and the rural masses.

... we ought to work in the fields... Then the atmosphere of culture will merge together with the shadows of the trees and smoke of the village chimneys, and those quiet, depressed old villages will become transformed into lively, active new villages. The great unity of the new villages will be our 'Young China.'

Three years later, however, Li Ta-chao did accept the need for social conflict and forcefully identified the "proletarian nation" of China with the socialist world revolution as such. Invoking the popular tradition of peasant protest, Li claimed that the Triads and the Taiping rebels represented a national history of class warfare that was directly linked to the Marxist global struggle. Quite of its own accord—though "under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen"—the Chinese national revolutionary "tide" had "entered onto the correct track of world revolution in order to carry out a gigantic reconstruction of human history."

Mao Tse-tung was deeply impressed by Li Ta-chao's theory of national struggle. The most immediate effect of Li's influence

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may have been Mao's growing commitment to the new United Front between his own fledgling Chinese Communist Party and Sun Yat-sen's populist Kuomintang. Many Communists originally opposed plans for an alliance on the grounds that the larger "bourgeois" Kuomintang would engulf their tiny "proletarian" Party. Yet despite their misgivings, some members of the Chinese Communist Party retained enough of their initial commitment to a national revolutionary movement, and to patriotic unification, to accept even the idea that a bourgeoisie—the merchants supporting the Kuomintang—might lead the struggle against the warlords and imperialism. Mao was one of those who welcomed the United Front by arguing in July 1923, that:

The present political problem in China is none other than the problem of the national revolution. To use the strength of the people to overthrow the militarists and foreign imperialism, with which the former are in collusion to accomplish their treasable acts, is the historic mission of the Chinese people. This revolution is the task of the people as a whole... but because of historical necessity and current tendencies, the work for which the merchants should be responsible in the national revolution is both more urgent and more important than the work that the rest of the people should take upon themselves.

The United Front thus allowed Mao nationally to perpetuate the position taken provincially during the campaign to oust Chang Ching-yao from Hunan. Once again, he was cast in the role of an intermediary between a reformist elite and the masses whose support was needed to oppose the warlords. During the interim, however, Mao had acquired invaluable organizational experience, while coming to identify national liberation with social revolution.

Mao's role became increasingly ambiguous within the United Front—as was well illustrated in his article on class analysis

24 The populist qualities of Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang probably stem from his earlier Revolutionary Party (Ke-ming-tang), which has been described as an "inclusive elite single party" which proffered "a sort of fraternal paternalism" to the "vulnerable and ignorant" poor. Edward Friedman, Backward Toward Revolution: The Chinese Revolutionary Party (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California press, 1974), p. 26.
which appeared in *The Chinese Peasant (Chung-kuo nung-min)* in February 1920. Here Mao unequivocally declared that the Chinese revolution had so far failed because its leaders had not always been able to tell their true friends from their enemies. In the case of China, this meant that revolutionaries had not always been aware that the "big bourgeoisie" (big landowners in the countryside; big merchants, bankers and industrialists in the cities) was their class enemy, while portions of the vacillating "middle bourgeoisie," along with the "petty bourgeoisie" (peasant landholders), the "semi-proletariat" (part freeholders and part labourers) and the "proletariat" (agricultural labourers) were their class allies. Mao thus singled out portions of the reformist elite—and certainly those who were large landholders—as class enemies of the revolution, and yet at the same time continued optimistically to call out for national unity with "our true friends" whom he believed to constitute 99 per cent of the Chinese population.28

The Northern Expedition was cast in the metaphor of a mass revolutionary tempest then sweeping across China to smash warlords and imperialists. As Mao put it a few months later in his famous "Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan" (February 1927):

In a very short time, several hundred million peasants in China's central, southern, and northern provinces will rise like a tornado or tempest—a force so extraordinarily swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to suppress it. They will break through all the trammels that now bind them and push forward along the road to liberation. They will send all imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local bullies, and evil gentry to their graves.29

To T'an Yen-k'ai and "bourgeois" provincial gentry like him, this stormy image initially summoned up the old high cultural ideal of the enlightened gentry mobilizing popular militia during the Opium War. Their elite populism emphasized the importance of moral leadership guiding the people's zeal against outsiders (imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials) and against traitors in their midst (local bullies and evil gentry). T'an

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Yen-k'ai's own perspective was faithful to Sun Yat-sen's personal belief that his programme for improving the "people's livelihood" (min-sheng) was a politically administered prophylactic to forestall future economic ills. The Kuomintang's prescriptions for economic reform, in other words, were supposed to be a national socialist solution to the horrors of class warfare that the Chinese had observed in the industrialized West.

After his death in 1925, Sun's priority for the national revolution continued to be underscored by the Kuomintang leader, Hu Han-min, who argued that while the motive force of imperialism was individual profit-seeking, Marxism merely substituted class selfishness for the individual's self-interest. National unity demanded that such particularisms be put aside; class struggle would only weaken their common struggle against imperialism.30 In October 1926 Mao proceeded to Shanghai to take charge of his own Communist Party's Peasant Department, and by December could be found in Hunan investigating the peasant movement there. Mao soon discovered that the most active and vigorous peasant associations were those in which the poorer peasants had taken control and were directing their struggle against the power of local landlords.

After the peasants had organized themselves, action ensued. The main targets of the peasants are the local bullies, the evil gentry, and the lawless landlords; they also hit out against various patriarchal ideologies and institutions, corrupt officials in the cities, and evil customs in the rural areas... The dignity and prestige of the landlords are dashed to the ground... The broad peasant masses have risen to fulfill their historical mission, and the democratic forces in the rural areas have risen to overthrow the rural feudal power. The overthrow of this feudal power is the real objective of the national revolution.31

By identifying the ultimate aims of the national revolution with a social revolution against the supposed inexcusable of landlord-warlord-imperialist interests, Mao had forcefully moulded a conflict model of history. Class struggle, he was to declare in the future, was the key to everything: the mass line,

proletarian consciousness, military mobilization and national revolution. It was in class conflict that Mao discovered the means towards the ultimate “great union” that he had written about eight years earlier. As he observed in Hunan, the peasant movement was more than just *jaquerie*. Social struggle created its own forms of political participation. Encouraged to vent their wrath on local landlords, the poorer peasants’ rage brought them to the fore, so that they took charge of their associations, “rais[ing] their rough, blackened hands and lay[ing] them on the heads of the gentry.” *\textsuperscript{22} The peasant associations momentarily displaced the rural government of the landlords, and the peasants’ anger was expressed in popular tribunals which tried the worst of the gentry for their excesses. If only momentarily, the “riff-raff” ruled the countryside.

Mao’s own declaration in 1927 that the national revolution was, after all, a social revolution, partly reflected the immediate events he had witnessed. It also marked a momentary political reaction to the unitary nationalism of United Front conservatives like Hu Han-min. At a deeper level, however, Mao’s peasant report expressed his personal decision to abandon the elitist populism of T’an Yen-k’ai and to identify himself with the Chinese peasant tradition of rural protest. His was thus a commitment to join the Ah Q’s of China, the “riff-raff”: these people, who used to go around in worn-out leather shoes, carry broken umbrellas, wear blue gowns and gamble . . . [and who have] now dared to raise their heads.” *\textsuperscript{23}

Those words from Mao’s own peasant report were echoed later in his remarks to Edgar Snow about his days at the school in Hsiang-hsiang when “many of the richer students despised me because usually I was wearing my ragged coat and trousers.” *\textsuperscript{24}

But we must remember that in spite of his own memory of ragged clothing, Mao had once been a student and, at least in passing, a member of the intellectual elite of China. His rural background and marginal identity as an intellectual may have eased his unconscious identification with the poor, but there was certainly a conscious transformation as well when he embraced the lower classes to become more like them. In his

\*\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 254.
\*\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\*\textsuperscript{24} Mao Tse-tung, quoted in Snow, Red Star, p. 132.

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Yenan talks on art and literature in 1942, Mao made it very clear that he had resolved the contradiction between elite and popular cultural traditions by a form of social transvaluation which rejected the elite altogether. Li Ta-chao had urged his students to go to the masses. Mao now told his intellectual followers to become members of the masses themselves.

I began as a student and acquired the habits of a student; surrounded by students who could neither fetch nor carry for themselves, I used to consider it undignified to do any manual labour, such as shouldering my own luggage. At that time it seemed to me that the intellectuals were the only clean persons in the world; next to them, the workers and peasants seemed rather dirty. I would put on the clothes of other intellectuals, because I thought they were clean, but I would not put on clothes belonging to a worker or peasant, because I felt they were dirty. Having become a revolutionary I found myself in the ranks of the workers, peasants, and soldiers of the revolutionary army, and gradually I became familiar with them, and they with me. It was then and only then that a fundamental change occurred in the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feelings implanted in me by the bourgeois schools. I came to feel that it was those unreconstructed intellectuals who were unclean as compared with the workers and peasants, while the workers and peasants are after all the cleanest persons, cleaner than both the bourgeois and the petty bourgeoisie, even though their hands are soiled and their feet smeared with cow dung. This is what is meant by having one’s feelings transformed, changed from those of one class into those of another. *\textsuperscript{25}

By identifying with the masses, Mao not only adopted the social customs of the lower classes; he rejected as well the cultural manners of the Westernized bourgeoisie. Class struggle and patriotic struggle were thus reconciled in his decision to revive that part of himself attuned to lower-class culture, thereby embracing the peasantry’s nativism.

For 16 years, ever since discovering that the “fake foreign devils” of China were actually political patriots, Mao Tse-tung had belonged to the urban world of the bourgeoisie. By 1927, however, he had come to identify the upper classes with the enemies of China’s national liberation; to be bourgeois was to be at once both a member of an oppressive class and an ally of imperialism. The story is told of Mao’s encounter in Shanghai

\*\textsuperscript{25} Mao Tse-tung, “Literature and Art In the Service of the People,” in Schram, Thought, p. 362.
with a former schoolmate who had returned from study abroad.
Mao, who was dressed in old Chinese clothes, stared at his
friend's Western suit and advised him to exchange it for native
wear. "Why?" asked the friend. Mao's answer was to lead his old
classmate to the municipal park in Shanghai and point to the
sign which read: "Chinese and dogs are not allowed."
In Mao Tse-tung's eyes, the Westernized bourgeoisie had socially and
culturally betrayed China. His revolutionary identity thus
became a new form of national identity.

Mao subsequently made a strong connection between the
class question and the national question. As a Communist, he
could not ignore the importance of international class struggle.
As a patriot, he had to relate that struggle to the recovery of
Chinese national unity and strength. He told Agnes Smedley in
1937 that:

The Communists absolutely do not tie their viewpoint to the interests
of a single class at a single time, but are most passionately concerned
with the fate of the Chinese nation, and moreover with its fate throughout eternity... The Chinese Communists are internationalists; they are
in favour of the world Communist movement. But at the same time they are patriots who defend their native land... This patriotism and interna-
tionalism are by no means in conflict, for only China's independence and liberation will make it possible to participate in the world Commun-

ist movement.

By the time he and his comrades had won the civil war against
the Kuomintang, Mao had managed to subsume the identity of the
social revolution under the banner of national liberation. On
the eve of communist victory, therefore, many Chinese were
inclined to share Mao's confidence, that, "We have a common
feeling that our work will be recorded in the history of mankind, and that it will clearly demonstrate that the Chinese, who comprise one quarter of humanity, have begun to stand up."

Mao's contribution to national recovery ultimately stemmed

from this conception of class struggle. His patriotism, after all, was a form of egalitarianism. By urging fellow Communists to
become one with China's masses, Mao Tse-tung helped transform elitist populism into a unique belief in national class trans-
formation. This egalitarian emphasis upon changing one's class
feelings made a "proletarian nation" possible. When in 1965, on
the eve of the Cultural Revolution, André Malraux visited China
and paid his respects to Mao in the Great Hall of the People, Mao
spoke of the ongoing struggle to change China's traditional
customs into revolutionary ones, based upon the daily travail of the
people. The new China, he declared, would be a society which mixed together the elite cadre and the broad masses.

While Mao spoke, Malraux was reminded of the emperors of
China's past -- and yet of something more. No one since Lenin
had so profoundly shaken the world. The European era of world
power seemed to be dissipating, and a Chinese epoch beginning.
Thinking of world conquerors, Malraux told Mao that he believed the China of the future would be the China of the great
empires. Mao answered slowly that he was not sure this was true:

I don't know, but I do know that if our methods are good -- if we
tolerate no deviation -- China will remake herself. But in this struggle
we are alone. I am alone with the masses. Waiting.

Since then Mao Tse-tung has made his "final report to Marx."
Now the masses must wait, and struggle without him.

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