MAO TSE-TUNG IN THE SCALES OF HISTORY

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT ORGANIZED BY THE CHINA QUARTERLY AND EDITED BY DICK WILSON

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THE CHINESE

Wang Gungwu

If heaven had feelings it would have aged!
People now talk of green fields risen from the sea.

The most Chinese thing about Mao Tse-tung was his poetry and his loyalty to its traditional forms. Despite all attempts by his admirers to give his poems a profound Marxist–Leninist meaning, the above lines, as with the dozens of others similar in style and phrasing, stir something in every literate Chinese simply by evoking the past masters of this art. But the poems also have a different significance. They remind us how near we still are to the times when every Chinese who could, would have tried his hand with similar lines, images and clichés, and known no better way to probe his own deep sense of being Chinese. They warn the historian that he is observing only the first lifetime of radical change in China. He is recording the life of a man who grew up when being Chinese was obvious and taken for granted, but who had redefined Chineseness partly by his own lifework so that, when he died, it had become hard to tell what was Chinese.

For most writers on Mao, it has become almost obligatory to pursue his Chinese roots. It is assumed that there is a Chinese cultural heritage, a complex and multi-faceted combination of all that had made up China prior to the 20th century, a deep, rich and massive pre-Western lode just below the ground which only needed cultural historians and archaeologists acting as miners to expose its wealth and significance. With this kind of effort, with digging and sifting, Mao would become knowable in all his stratified layers as we follow his progress, as he might have us do, from feudal student to semi-colonial petty-bourgeois nationalist to socialist philosopher to the new sage of communism.

The task of so sifting Mao’s thoughts and actions has begun and it will occupy many for a long time. Why should this be so? No one surely could mistake Mao for anyone but a Chinese. To write about Mao the Chinese would seem like writing about his whole life. Is it so important that he was a Marxist–Leninist as well? Of course, there are Chinese today who argue that he used an alien ideology to destroy great traditional values along with some of the finest cultural achievements of China and that this was the work of a traitor; only ignorant foreigners would call him a Chinese. There are also foreigners who would acclaim Mao as the great internationalist revolutionary leader and not a mere Chinese, but many more, who are not necessarily ignorant, are fascinated by his apparent Chineseness. For the latter, the difficulty is only in defining what is Chinese and in determining how Chinese he was.

Despite his fondness for traditional shih and tz’u poetry, Mao came to reject that part of the cultural heritage associated with the dominant literati elites. He was openly political about his preference for the values and aspirations of the majority, mostly the poor, illiterate, under-privileged, oppressed, and he preferred them because he thought that it was from this majority that the potential revolutionaries of China would come. As a Marxist–Leninist he believed that he must be on the side of the majority. And as this majority was, is and shall always be unmistakably Chinese to him, it followed that there was no contradiction between being Chinese and a dedicated Marxist–Leninist at the same time. The conscious will of the majority of Chinese could never be anything but revolutionary in his eyes, therefore identifying with such Chinese meant there was nothing disembodied about his thoughts and actions on behalf of revolution.

Let me clarify this further by making some brief comments on some other prominent Chinese figures of this century. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), for example, was only too conscious of the foreign origins of most of his political ideals and struggled all his life to try and make them more Chinese and comprehensible. He made a great effort at each stage of his career to fuse the disparate parts of his programme so that the alien nature of

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1 From “The occupation of Nanking by the PLA” (April 1949). There are many editions of Mao Tse-tung’s poetry and several translations. Unless otherwise stated, the translation is my own.
much of his early thinking could be disguised or blurred. 

Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) had a different kind of start and could only really comprehend the traditionalist elements of the Kuomintang heritage. He, therefore, embraced Methodism to try to overcome his obscurantist image to his Western friends, but this act remained baffling and meaningless, almost irrelevant, to the Chinese themselves. Among intellectuals, Hu Shih (1891–1962) was a dedicated modernizer and appealed to all Chinese who wanted to create a modern China. But his modernism was regarded by most Chinese as academic, even superficial, and he never converted more than a handful of the urban and the sophisticated. Even Ch’en Tu-hsiu (1879–1942), the first communist leader, was unable to overcome his ambivalence, something he seemed to have shared with the American-educated Hu Shih. The steep jumps he made from reformism to science and democracy and then to Marxism–Leninism and even a sort of “Trotskyism” revealed a series of bold but mainly cerebral decisions. Despite the modernity he espoused, he remained in practice something of an enlightened literatus. As for Lu Hsün (1881–1936), the only literary man Mao Tse-tung admired, he succeeded in marrying a fierce alien scepticism to a Chinese sensibility; but it was a unique achievement that did not endear him to many Chinese in his lifetime. He needed, after his death, someone like Mao Tse-tung to endorse his kind of “rebelliousness” before he could be thrust upon the Chinese majority.

I suggest that Mao’s achievement was different from those of the eminent Chinese mentioned above. It is difficult to find exact analogies in the Chinese past to explain his emergence. Perhaps we can point to the following: he was less unintegrated than Hung Hsü-ch’ián (1813–64) and the Taiping rebels; he was more enlightened than the Boxer leaders and more plebeian than K’ang Yu-wei (1858–1927) or even Yen Fu (1854–1921); he was not corrupted as were Yuan Shih-k’ai (1859–1916) and Li Hung-chang (1823–1901) by their imperial experience; nor was he as brutalized and hypocritical as Feng Yü-hsiang (1882–1948) and the southern warlords. But he shared something with all of these that few of his other contemporaries did: he never wasted time worrying about his Chinese identity or about the decline and fall of Chinese civilization. He was effortlessly and supremely confident about being Chinese,

almost the way Churchill was about being English, and never suffered the agonies and self-doubts which paralysed so many Chinese of his generation. And it was this freedom from genteel sensitivities that gave him the single-mindedness to bring Marxism–Leninism to the Chinese people as if it were the most natural thing for him to do.

This confidence and single-mindedness may be found in his earliest writings, his essay on physical exercise, for example, which he published in 1917 when he was 23 years old. There are no flashes of brilliant insight here, none of the sudden enlightenment that came upon most of his youthful contemporaries, merely the earnestness of the intellectually underprivileged, with all the ponderousness of a barefoot pugilist explaining the joys of training in Miltonic prose. But as a Chinese, he was doing something original: he was addressing the literate in their language on the virtues more common among the illiterate and the outlaws of the hills and marshes. And he was not afraid of stating the obvious carefully and patiently, as in his concluding section on the six kinds of exercises he recommended, a quality that he was to display often the rest of his life. It was the quality of the self-taught man with a justifiable pride in what he had taught himself, whether it be about peasant landholdings, military strategy, world affairs or Marxism–Leninism.

Mao was already 26 years old when he formed his own Socialist Youth Corps in Hunan; this qualified him to be one of the founder-members of the Chinese Communist Party the next year. For six years, he read and wrote and worked hard both for the CCP and for the KMT when all CCP members were urged to join the latter. These were very formative years, as can easily be seen from the vast contrast between what he wrote in 1917 or 1919 and his earliest efforts at class analysis in 1926. But the most striking feature of this change was that it seemed to have come so gradually. Mao seemed to have put his head down to learn how hard it was to be a revolutionary.

He was, of course, not alone in his work. There were numerous young men around him both of the KMT itself and of the CCP

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who played their part. The difference was that he was among the very few at the top of both parties who had never been abroad, who knew no foreign language and whose reading of each Marxist work and Leninist directive or resolution from the Comintern was in translation and was largely done in direct connection with some propaganda work he had to do or some group of peasants he had to study, organize or lecture to. At every point, therefore, there was little danger of his being merely theoretical. His knowledge of theory was limited but he absorbed without difficulty each bit of theory that could be seen or shown to be relevant to the Chinese people he was trying to rouse or train, and once absorbed became fully Chinese and was to remain deeply embedded in him. There is no better evidence of this than his famous essay "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society" published in early 1926. In this, he confidently asserts that:

The attitudes of the various classes in China towards national revolution are almost completely the same as those of various classes in Western capitalist countries towards social revolution. This appears rather strange but it really is not, because the revolutions of today completely share the same goals and methods, that is, the goal of destroying international capitalist imperialism and the method of uniting the oppressed peoples and oppressed classes in a common struggle. This is the biggest difference between revolutions today and all previous revolutions in history.

But when he summed up the classes in China in a table, it read as shown in the table opposite.

Clearly Mao did not allow his earlier comparison with the West to divert him from setting out some un-Western categories. Although he was later to realize how extraordinary some of his classifications were and did not insist on his estimates of the size of each class, the essay as a whole demonstrates his ready fusion of Marxist-Leninist concepts with his direct experiences. When he discovered that about 245 millions would serve the revolution directly and another 150 millions could be made to support the cause, he must have been greatly encouraged. For now, he was able to call out "Unite, you 395 millions!" Against them, the

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five millions who may be considered as enemies need hardly be feared. Obviously, Marxist-Leninist concepts provided the key he needed to unlock the secrets of power and revolution, and from the moment he could actually see a Chinese application of these concepts, Marxism-Leninism was no longer alien. I would

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big bourgeoisie</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle bourgeoisie</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty bourgeoisie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Those with surplus-right-wing</td>
<td>15,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Those self-supporting</td>
<td>75,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Those with declining</td>
<td>60,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomes - left-wing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-proletariat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Semi-tenant peasants</td>
<td>50,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. &quot;Semi-self-supporting tenants?&quot;</td>
<td>60,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Poor peasants</td>
<td>60,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Handicraftsmen</td>
<td>24,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shop assistants</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Peddlers</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sub-total)</td>
<td>200,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proletariat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Industrial proletariat</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. City coolies</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Agricultural proletariat</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lumpen-proletariat</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>400,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

suggest that at this stage of his life, it became no less part of his mind and personality than the words of the Hunan patriot, Wang Fu-chih (1619–92), the military writings of Sun Tzu (4th century B.C.) or the heroic stories of Shui-hu chuan (Water Margin), and even superior in his eyes because it was more progressive and useful.

The point made above that his adoption of some features of Marxist-Leninist analysis did not make Mao any less Chinese raises again the question of what was "Chinese," in this case what was "Chinese" in the 1920s. Let me, for the sake of com-

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{4 MTC, Vol. I, p. 162; this passage was deleted in the revised version.}}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{5 MTC, Vol. I, pp. 172–3; this table was deleted on revision. I have simplified it by leaving out Mao's judgments on how revolutionary he thought each class was.}}\]

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parison, take a rather extreme example. Was the American-educated engineer who subscribed to Jeffersonian democracy and loyally served the Canton Government under Sun Yat-sen any less Chinese than Mao? The answer for the 1920s would have to be “No.” There is nothing absolute about being Chinese, and being Chinese in the 1920s was probably more relative than at any other period of Chinese history. It was still a decade of wide-open choices for the Chinese people: nationalism, socialism, anarchism, liberalism, communism, fascism; even modified forms of restored Confucianism were not unthinkable. There was no orthodoxy, only the multifarious quest for some new successful orthodoxy to replace the old one. Everyone who cared for and identified with China could claim to be Chinese. Only those who explicitly rejected China, or abandoned their homes to live abroad, could not qualify and this was largely because they wished to disqualify themselves, and they were very few indeed. It was a decade of maximum freedom bordering on anarchy and no one had any right to determine who was or was not Chinese. Thus being “Chinese” was easier than being almost anything else, for the Chinese people were still struggling to find their new identity.

This condition, as the whole of Chinese history attests, was not one the Chinese people were comfortable with. It was identified with 乱 or disorder, a condition which was expected to be temporary and one that had to be followed by 适 or order, and that was but a short step to orthodoxy. For the period of disorder, however, almost everything was possible except perhaps a determined effort to preserve the state of disorder—that would have been clearly un-Chinese! And as the next decade was to show, Westernized liberals and anarchists who were suspected of partiality for disorderly freedoms were the first to be attacked for their alien beliefs.

Thus the fact that Mao was no less Chinese for being a Marxist-Leninist in the 1920s was not remarkable. Every other Chinese was modified in some way or the other. The interesting questions about being Chinese became more important only in the 1930s. After the KMT victory in 1927 over warlords as well as their leftist partners in the Northern Expedition, a condition of partial order had been established. The KMT leaders demanded the right to define who and what was Chinese. Soon

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the “party” and the “nation” were hardly separable in the eyes of the Nanking Government and indeed being Chinese should have meant a willingness to accept such a development. It was therefore only logical for the “party-nation” government to control publications and the media, to ban those who seemed to favour 轩 over 适 and ultimately to try to define more positively what values it recognized as “Chinese.” Hence the misnamed New Life Movement, more like a Confucian restoration, that was launched about the time of the great campaigns to exterminate all the communist bases in south and central China. This was appropriate to the right-wing of the Kuomintang because it had long condemned the CCP as alien, unpatriotic and destructive of the great Chinese values. Had the KMT united the country successfully, no doubt a new orthodoxy would have reigned, one that would have had greater continuity with the Confucian state than any offered by Mao and in the CCP, but now nevertheless in its strong nationalist rhetoric and slogans.

I suggest that Mao’s Chineseness was called into question during the period 1927–36: for taking orders from Moscow, for using Marxist jargon to reject the Chinese heritage, for not submitting to cheng-t’ung (legitimacy). After the CCP was nearly crushed following the April 1927 killings in Shanghai, Mao was largely on the run as a “bandit,” as the Nanking Government described him and his comrades. At the same time, the remaining CCP leaders depended more than ever on the new orthodoxy that Stalin had created in the Soviet Union; even their Sixth Party Congress had to be held in Moscow because there was nowhere safe for them in China. The pressure on Mao to be “Chinese” à la Nanking or “internationalist” à la Moscow remained great for the ensuing decade. Fortunately, the legitimacy of both was widely challenged for the whole period and Mao remained far enough from both capitals for him to learn in his own way from Marxism–Leninism and from rural China.

This period was in many ways Mao’s bleakest and most unfruitful. His only comfort was his faith in the peasantry which he had begun to study in detail in his home province in early 1927, just before the disaster to the Party. He was able to satisfy himself that peasant attacks on landlords, “local bullies and bad

gentry" constituted revolutionary actions and thus confirmed that the seeds of revolution were already in Chinese soil. He reported that there were 7,000 or so peasant associations in Hunan with 1,307,727 members and estimated that there might have been a mass following of some 10 millions. Whether these figures were realistic or not, his conviction that poor and middle peasants constituted 80–90 per cent of rural populations, and the utterly impoverished some 20 per cent, encouraged him to lodge all his revolutionary hopes where the numbers were. This remained his greatest safeguard against Nanking and Moscow, a safety in numbers that combined a Chinese traditional respect for size and the progressive idea of working on behalf of the majority. And through the years of survival around his Ching-kangshan base to the years of defence in the Kiangsi Soviet Republic (1931–34), he continued to study peasant society with intense care, personally compiling several reports examining every feature of the new village organizations which he and his comrades had devised.7

Thus Mao remained immovably Chinese by placing himself on the side of the peasants. Even the most conservative Confucians could not fault him, for such primary producers were highly regarded in Confucian rhetoric. The KMT's attack on the CCP's treacherous links with a hostile foreign power was partly blunted by Mao's stance and his practical and realistic attempts to proletarianize the peasantry only as fast as most of them were willing to go. He was less than comfortable with Stalin's men in the CCP's Central Committee, especially after they moved to Juichin when he became subject to their ideological control and his policies were vetted by them. Fortunately, the pressure of events helped him overcome some of the embarrassment of being patronized by the young Bolshevik cadets and their Comintern advisers. On the one hand, Japanese imperialism did not spare the Nanking Government just because it was anti-communist. It continued to tread on Chinese sovereignty and the Manchurian incident of 16 September, 1931 gave Mao and


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the CCP a chance to voice their patriotism as good Chinese. On the other, Russian anxieties about Japanese ambitions in Siberia eventually spurred Stalin and the Comintern to approve a wide-ranging United Front policy in China to unite all the Chinese people against Japan. Together, they enabled the CCP to present itself as a patriotic party and Mao as a patriot, and what could be more Chinese than that?

Another matter helped the cause of Mao: after the Kiangsi Soviet had been abandoned and during the Long March, Mao turned the tables, at the Tsunyi meeting in January 1935, on those who had failed to defend the Republic. He was thus the man to lead the remnants of his army into Yenan at the right time and place for his united front call to carry weight. That he and the CCP were now close to the northern front line with the Japanese and showed willingness to fight them cleared most of the doubts people still had about the CCP's Chineseess, and even more about Mao's, for many credited Mao with the Chinese image the CCP now began to have.

The years of frustration for Mao were clearly over. One only needs to compare his various writings in the 1929–34 period, his village and land reports, his drafts of laws, regulations and resolutions on behalf of the Kiangsi Soviet, with the spirited analytical writings in 1936–37, planning strategy and exorcising enemies, to see a new man. The most obvious reason for the contrast was the plain fact that he was, after 1935, beginning to be the real leader of the Party. He could now speak with increasing authority on national and international subjects, he had more time to devise new policies and strategies to meet the new situations and he could begin to test his arm in the area of Marxist–Leninist studies, albeit carefully and modestly.

But there was probably another deeper reason for this new authority: something partly due to the heroic perceptions of his destiny and partly to the intensity of the Chinese experiences that coloured the historic role he saw himself as having to play. His traditional poetry reveals this more clearly than his prose, and his later poems more openly than the poems of this period. But as early as 1929, he writes of his successes in western Fukien while "the warlords renew their battles":
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A part of the realm has been recovered
And the land is being actively redistributed.8

He uses the imagery of the faultless golden bowl for the realm in
combination with some down-to-earth words reflecting the
"divide land!" slogans of almost every peasant rebellion in
Chinese history. In this context, even his several references to
the red flags unfurling in the wind and reddening a patch of
battleground recall the peasant scarves of many a great rebellion
in the past.9 Also his millions of worker-peasants are t’ien-ping
or "heavenly host," so are his 200,000 troops marching into
Kiangsi, all on the side of the majority, on the side of Heaven,
seeking the mandate:

The heartening Internationale,
like a hurricane,
Whirls down on me from Heaven.10

Such sentiments had sat uncomfortably with the well-trained
"internationalists" among his comrades who were better tuned
to the messages they were receiving from Stalin. But all this was
changed in Yan'an. The Chinese struggle in 1936 had become an
independent part of the international struggle, the vision of a
special role for China was now legitimate and there was a need
to appeal not to world socialist approval so much as to Chinese
public opinion. For this new task, Mao was psychologically
well-prepared, now that he was unchained from his inter-
nationalist limitations and fighting entirely on his home
ground.

From this time on, Mao's confidence in his Chinese application
of Marxist–Leninist theory was unshakeable, nor was his
Chineseess among Chinese and foreigners alike seriously in
doubt again. It is therefore of particular interest that it was in
1937 that Mao began to venture seriously into Marxist

8 From "The War between Chiang (Kai-shek) and Kwangsi (Warlords)" (autumn 1929). I have used here the translation by Michael Bullock and Jerome Ch'en, in J. Chi'en, Mao and the Chinese Revolution (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 326, under the title, "Advance to Fukien."

9 See "New Year's Day" (1930); "On the Road to Kwang-ch'ang" (February 1930); "Against the First "Encombrement" (spring 1931).

10 "From Tingchou Towards Ch'angsha" (July 30). The translation is that of Bullock and Ch'en, Mao and the Chinese Revolution, p. 329, under the title "Attack on Nanch'ang."

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philosophy. He drafted his two famous essays "On Practice" and
"On Contradiction" for lectures which he gave to Party cadres,
and the next year he circulated his lecture-outline on "Dialectical Materialism."11 His quality as a philosopher and a Marxist
have been examined by others and I shall not touch on the
question of what Chinese roots lie behind his philosophy and
modified his Marxism. What is specially relevant here is why he
blossomed forth into theory at this time, at the age of 43. A
number of explanations are possible but one is specially relevant
to the theme of this essay: Mao the Chinese. When he said in
1933 that "my lecture notes are also not good because I myself
have only begun to study dialectics,"12 he felt the need to prove
that he could explain Marxism–Leninism better than his
Moscow-trained colleagues who had all succeeded in making
the subject profoundly difficult to understand. He simply had to
demonstrate that anyone could learn theory; there was no
advantage in going to Moscow, the important thing was to study
it in the context of revolutionary practice and this could, in fact,
be done within China. He was also laying the foundations to
challenge those comrades who habitually turned to Soviet
theoreticians and quoted Russian textbooks to overawe their
colleagues with the imprimatur of Stalin. As a major national
figure, admired for both his patriotism and his concern for social
justice in the countryside, it could not have been a better time for
him to show that such a Chinese could not only understand
Marxism–Leninism but was also able to place it in the Chinese
context. Thus 1937 was a wonderful opportunity to seek actual
and ideological leadership of a national Marxist–Leninist
movement.

Related to this question of national leadership was the chance
Mao had, through the United Front against Japan, to reopen the
question of what was "Chinese." I have suggested that, in times
of chih or order, China was inclined to orthodoxy and those who
ruled China were only too ready to try and define this orthodoxy
as soon as possible. The new order of the Nanking Government

11 The two essays "On Practice" and "On Contradiction" were not published until 1950 and we do not know how different our version is from the drafts in 1937; SWL, Vol. I, pp. 282–97; 296–333. The lecture-outline he circulated in 1938 has now been reprinted in MTC, Vol. VI, pp. 265–303.

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since 1928 had tried to determine such an orthodoxy. Had it been fully estab-
lished and accepted, the foreign-supported Communist Party would have be-
come so heterodox that even Mao would have ceased to be "Chinese." The United Front in 1937, how-
ever, postponed the issue of orthodoxy and gave Mao and the CCP a second chance to become fully Chinese. Once again, it was possible to be many kinds of Chinese: the modified "Con-
fucian" nationalist was not superior to the Westernized liberal, the Marxist–Leninist, and varieties of socialistic worker-peasant democrats, or even the "Trotskyites," as long as they professed unity against the Japanese enemy. In reality, the struggle was soon reduced to that between the KMT and the CCP as both prepared their armies for the eventual showdown after Japan was defeated by the Western allies. But Mao and Chiang Kai-
shek were perhaps among the few to grasp the all-or-nothing nature of the competition. In this mighty struggle, Mao was certainly no less Chinese than Chiang; what conditioned them was the Chinese tradition that the winner would have the right to determine the new orthodoxy and the parameters of the new Chinese identity. Mao clearly understood what was at stake when he wrote these famous lines:

Such is the beauty of these mountains and rivers
That has been admired by un-numbered heroes—
Pity Ch'in Shih-huang and Han Wu-ti
For their lack of literary skill,
And T'ang T'ai-tsung and Sung T'ai-tsu
For their weakness in style,
And the prodigious Gengis Khan
Knowing only how to bend his bow and shoot at vultures.
All are past and gone!
For men of vision
We must seek among the present generation.18

This leads me appropriately to the time when the man of vision won an almost complete victory over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949 and established, under the label of "New Democracy," the new orthodoxy. Such an orthodoxy was something that the majority of Chinese had always expected to be established once the condition of order had been restored and, whatever it might

18 "Scow" (February 1939). I follow, with slight modifications, the translation by Bullock and Ch'en, Mao and the Chinese Revolution, p. 340.

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have started as, it was by definition Chinese and, if sustained, would be seen as the replacement for state-Confucianism. The alternatives had been systematically reduced in the 1930s and 1940s. Now the CCP, in full control, was able to proclaim that it was the KMT in Taiwan which represented a treacherous heresy that had to be exterminated. The People's Republic of China strengthened its majority status by also drawing into its fold most of the non-communist traditionalists, nationalists, liberals and social democrats and fitted them loosely into the new order. The question may be asked: how new, how Marxist–Leninist, how Chinese was this orthodoxy and what was Mao's contribu-
tion?

I should say at the outset, however, that the influence of Chinese ideas and traditions on Mao's actions and decisions and on the policies of the People's Republic Government was so extensive that it would be meaningless to point to every occasion when that influence can be detected. There were also continuities of inherited obligations both written and unwritten, conscious and unconscious, too varied and subtle to try to sift out in a short essay. The important point about Mao was that, after 1949, he tried to rid himself of the obvious traditional values which had served him well as a "united front" leader during the Sino-Japanese War and even during the civil war that followed. He saw himself as being responsible for the task of moving the Chinese people firmly towards seeing themselves as part of the world and acquiescing in being in a world that could be explained by the use of Marxist–Leninist terms. Frater-
nal relations were now called for, not only with the Soviet Union but also with the workers, peasants and patriots of all other anti-imperialist countries. The time had come to wind down the nationalist phase and prepare for the socialist one.

Thus he began in 1949 by doing what might appear to have been a most un-Chinese thing. He declared that China would lean to the side of the Soviet Union and proceeded to develop the closest possible relationships that China had ever had with any single country. This could, of course, have been justified on strategic grounds alone, but he went much further and stressed the internationalist bonds that linked the Chinese revolution to the Soviet Union. Mao was confident enough of his Chinese image among most Chinese to know that he could do this with-
out serious doubts arising about his patriotism. Most Chinese
would have interpreted the decision as a tactic necessary for the
time and were probably surprised to learn over the years how
serious Mao and his comrades were about learning from the
Russians. Indeed, Mao was serious and for good reason. The
Soviet Union was the only model of socialism there was and
Stalin was the only person alive that Mao might have considered
his superior. China needed help to salvage its broken-down
economy, defend itself against possible imperialist counter-
attacks and to industrialize without having to depend on the
capitalist countries for equipment and highly specialized skills.
The Chinese in him made sure that there was no loss of
sovereignty. China’s size and spectacular triumphs made sure
that China would not be treated like one of the East European
satellites, or like Mongolia. Ultimately, he expected to use the
Soviet Union to make China strong, but as a Marxist–Leninist,
that was for a good cause, for the consolidation of the socialist
camp and for the advance of world revolution.

The death of Stalin put the Chinese in Mao to a great test.
Between that event and Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956
demystifying Stalin, he would have seen himself as inheriting
the mantle as the most successful socialist leader in the world.
His Chinese comrades would have seen that there was certainly
no one in the Soviet Union to match him for revolutionary
experience and world reputation. But when he was not even
consulted before Khrushchev prepared his speech to the 20th
Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and when many
of his own comrades seemed too ready to follow Khrushchev
uncritically, Mao must have had much to think about. He con-
tinued in public to say that China must learn from the Soviet
Union, but in private he began to warn against being too imita-
tive.14 He began also to express his doubts about going too far
and neglecting matters in which Chinese methods and experi-
ences were better, especially in areas like agriculture and light
industry. But most of all, he saw that Khrushchev did not believe

14 As in his “Talk at the Enlarged Politburo Meeting (April 1956),” Wan-sui
40–50; translation in J. Ch’en (ed.), Mao (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall,
1969), pp. 66–65; and in “Talks at the Chengtu conference (i) Talk of 10
96–103.

in fraternity and equality within the socialist camp and that the
Soviet Union insisted on leadership whatever the quality of its
own leaders.

Whether it was Mao the socialist who was disillusioned with
Khrushchev’s failures, especially in Hungary and Poland, or
whether it was Mao the Chinese who believed that there should
be only one sun in the socialist sky and that he be the one is still
a matter of interpretation. What is not in doubt is that he began
to challenge the Soviet way and this thrust him back onto his
Chinese resources. That Mao the Chinese would inevitably have
contributed towards a Sinò-Soviet rift, just as the long vulner-
able borders between the two countries and the respective his-
tories and cultures would have placed great strains on that
relationship, is clear. It is less clear, however, that the final break
in relations and the intensity of the conflict between the two was
due only to this Chineseness. I think that such an interpretation
would be a serious underestimation of Mao’s dedication to Marx-
ism–Leninism. It would lead to the rather simplistic view that
external relations brought out the Chinese in Mao, and that
would be just as simplistic as the opposite view, that internal
problems made him more consciously Marxist–Leninist.

Within the People’s Republic, Mao recognized from the start
that his Chineseness could be taken for granted and did not need
proving. The really mammoth task was to move his people
towards a full understanding of the Marxist–Leninist founda-
tions of the new China. The clearest evidence of how conscious
Mao was of his new internationalist responsibilities may be
found in the editing of his war-time writings for the first three
volumes of his Selected Works published in 1950–52. The best
example of this was his treatment of the small textbook on “The
Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party.”15 Mao
very carefully removed all the parts of the original 1939 version
that smacked of Chinese imperialism, taking out the references
to tributary states and omitting the list of such states (Korea,
Annam, Ryukyus, Burma, Bhutan and Nepal) from the new
edition. Another example was the way he added to the descrip-
tions of “peasant rebellions and peasant wars” the clause, “these
class struggles of the peasants.”16

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It was not, however, enough to change words or add new revolutionary messages to old texts. He had to reach the minds of hundreds of millions of people, and especially the millions of intellectuals who saw Mao as a great national leader but were unwilling to move away from their traditional heritage. He found the latter especially difficult to influence. A perfect example of his dilemma was his careful attempt to inject a bridging sentence into the 1939 text which would help his readers see how much Chinese history was part of world history. This was the sentence which he added:

As China's feudal society developed its commodity economy and so carried within itself the embryo of capitalism, China would of itself have developed slowly into a capitalist society even if there had been no influence of foreign capitalism.17

This was deliberately inserted to give authority to the view which would have logically followed the use of Marxist–Leninist social and historical categories for China. It strongly supported one of the basic tenets of historical materialism which Mao had reaffirmed in 1939 as follows:

The development of the Chinese nation (chiefly of the Han nation) was the same as that of other great nations in the world: It went through tens of thousands of years of life in an equal and classless primitive communist society, and when this primitive communist society collapsed, its social life was transformed into class life and passed through (the stages of) slave society, feudal society for five thousand years until now.18

It should not, therefore, be surprising to assume that China would also have developed into a capitalist society “of herself.”

The surprising thing was that the newly inserted sentence was greeted with much excitement as one that reflected Mao’s latest thoughts on an important phase of Chinese history. For the next half-dozen years, thousands of writers and scholars combed the literary and historical sources for evidence to prove what Mao had merely inferred. A great deal of time and energy was spent on arguing whether the “embryo” (more literally translated as “young shoots”) of capitalism had appeared in the Early or Late

18 My translation of the original version in MTC, Vol. VII, p. 98 is slightly different from that in the official translation, SWL, Vol. III, p. 73.

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Ming, or Early Ch’ing, dynasties, or much earlier, in the Sung or even the T’ang dynasties. The results of all this feverish inquiry need not concern us here. The question is, did Mao seek to open such a difficult and rather formless debate ranging over at least a thousand years of history, or was he misunderstood? Mao would have welcomed the re-interpretation of Chinese history along Marxist–Leninist lines, but he was carefully vague as to what might have been and did not say that the “young shoots” of capitalism could be located in the Chinese past. There was certainly no hint of boasting veering on the chauvinistic in what Mao actually said – if read together with all the corrections, omissions and additions he had made in editing his pre-1949 writings, the sentence is matter-of-fact and conforms with all other textual changes made to fit Chinese society and history into a Marxist–Leninist framework. The only value judgment implied here that moved a Chinese audience long accustomed to shame at China’s inferiority was the idea that the Chinese were as good and progressive as the Europeans. This aroused much chauvinistic pride and led to interpretations which Mao did not reject but probably did not expect.

All the same, the episode revealed some of the ambivalence that underlay Mao’s own position between the Soviet-type party he led and the millions of Chinese who saw him as their national leader. He himself, as I have argued earlier, saw no difficulty in being a good Chinese Marxist–Leninist. He had grown into one through the interplay of theory and practice in his long experience of revolution and I believe he found it effortless to talk and write as he did and was no longer consciously Chinese or Marxist–Leninist. But this, of course, was not the condition of the majority of the people in the 1950s for whom Marxism–Leninism was still mainly learnt through textbooks, lectures and study meetings, and through efforts to practise what they had been told. And for most of those who were beyond their teens, there were two parts to Mao; the Chinese, and the bearer of victory through a secret weapon that was impressive but no less alien for that, and it was much easier to respond to Mao the Chinese.

It must therefore have been tempting for Mao to do what most Chinese expected him to do: to act the Chinese ruler. Had he not been a Marxist–Leninist, it would be hard to see why he did not
do just that. Of course, he was not an entirely free agent. He led a tightly-knit Party, China needed Soviet aid and he could not afford to offend Stalin. But the evidence of his revisions of earlier works, his speeches and writings and all his actions show that the idea of not being Marxist-Leninist never occurred to him. On the contrary, in terms of the traditional heritage, he was iconoclastic as only someone who was wholly confident about his own identity could have been. In his writings and lectures, and especially in his Party discussions, he would interpose now and again remarks that were obviously intended to shock his bourgeois listeners and amuse his worker-peasant audiences. He would deliberately re-interpret some common sayings, giving them new twists and even making them mean the opposite of their original meanings. He grew specially fond of quoting Confucian phrases to show what hypocrites the followers of Confucius had been. For example, he was very concerned to attack conservatism and superstition, and his attacks ranged from serious criticisms of the idea that “Heaven does not change; the Way does not change” 19 to laughing at those who would not eat dog-meat by pointing to Mencius’ reference to the dog-eating ancient Chinese. 20 At another level, he recommended the romanization of the Chinese language and mocked the idea that “Chinese characters are the best in the world.” 21 But he reserved his sharpest barbs for Confucians and ultimately, the more he found that the older intellectuals resisted his calls for radical change, the more openly critical he became of Confucius himself.

Confucius seemed to have posed a particularly knotty problem for Mao the Chinese. The attacks against Confucius would seem to be a rejection of much of the Chinese past and its values. The Westernized liberal Chinese, the Christians, Marxist-Leninists and other types of radicals and revolutionaries had, since the May Fourth Movement, attacked Confucius as the symbol of all that was out-of-date and backward about China.


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and its intellectuals began again to look to China’s own moral and spiritual resources, Mao had grown so impatient and bitter that he said:

Confucius said, “The benevolent man loves others.” Loves which others? All others? No such thing. Loves exploiters? Not all of them, only part of the exploiters.26

After that it is easy to understand how some of Mao’s most enthusiastic followers after the Cultural Revolution could be so carried away as to publish some of the distortions and absurdities about Confucius and Confucians, especially during the anti-Confucian campaign of 1973–75. The young “radicals” rushed to imitate Mao’s style by abusing the past, but their imitations certainly reminded one of the old Chinese saying, “Failing to copy the tiger painting, the picture turned out to resemble a dog.”

Despite his frequent iconoclasm, Mao was uneasy about the power of the Chinese past over the Chinese imagination. He realized how complex a problem this was and how much it could become an obstruction to the speed and depth of revolutionary change in China. He was certainly forewarned by the energetic but misplaced response to his comment on “the young shoots of capitalism” in the 1950s. Although there was good response to his call to study the traditional heritage critically and to explain it all in Marxist-Leninist terms, he was keenly aware that the traditional Chinese skill in the use of historical analogies for political purposes could be turned against him and his regime. He was quite skilled himself in the political use of the past, especially in pointing to examples of progressive change which helped him to explain a current policy. This skill was not, of course, peculiar to the Chinese. Mao greatly admired the ways Marx and Engels used the past for both their scholarly studies and their polemical writings, and he recognized the positive benefits such uses of the past could bring to a new revolutionary order. If the Chinese could only learn to use the past in the framework of scientific and dialectical materialism and not, as they have always done, to illustrate moral and personal qualities and even to criticize rulers and


27 I have written more fully about this in my article, “Juxtaposing past and present in China today,” CQ, No. 61 (March 1975), pp. 1–24.


29 Mao had used this phrase earlier in “On the Question of Agriculture Cooperatives” (Report, 31 July, 1955), Hsieh-hsi, No. 11 (1955), p. 3, but it was equally appropriate in 1957–58.

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ministers, then the past could be recruited to help with the transformation of China itself.27

But the Chinese intellectuals were incorrigibly fond of using historical analogy in the traditional, and popular, ways. The most blatant example of this was Wu Han’s study of Hai Jui, which was easily recognizable through this 16th century analogy as an attack of Mao’s treatment of P’eng Teh-huai in 1959.28 Other obvious ones concern the motives of founders of dynasties, the judgments on emperors and the fates of rebels and peasant rebellions. The obsession with Chinese “kings, princes, commanders and ministers” was very hard to cure with heavy doses of Marx, Engels and Lenin who had themselves nothing of interest to say about Chinese history. And all the attempts to fit Marxist historical stages to the Chinese past led only to more disputes and disagreements—the difficulties also easily led to absurdities which must have had a subversive effect on Chinese confidence in Marxist historiography itself.

Thus Mao the Chinese understood a part of China which Mao the Marxist-Leninist could not easily eradicate. Although the use of historical analogies by most Chinese did not necessarily mean a hankering for the past, it did remind the readers of reference points which had once set standards for Chinese political behaviour and social responsibilities. It was therefore symptomatic of other resistant features in Chinese society which could not be speedily removed. In this way, the Marxist-Leninist in Mao became impatient with the Chinese in him—and this was to evolve into what was to turn out to be Mao’s most un-Chinese insistence on haste.

This really began with the events leading to the Great Leap Forward, where he abandoned his native caution and insisted on going faster than most of his colleagues wanted and faster than the available personnel and institutions could carry. He mocked and scolded his comrades for walking like “women with bound feet”29 but the whole campaign failed largely
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because of inadequate preparation, the pressure of impossible demands and ultimately the lack of clear objectives. The result was a large-scale disruption of the economy which, aided by three years of bad harvest, slowed down China's development considerably. Mao's first real personal failure in his long career was traumatic for him and for China. Already the two had, in Mao's eyes, become bound together, in the sense that Mao remained convinced that what he wanted was what the majority wanted and was capable of achieving were it not for the Party and government bureaucracies dragging their feet. The economic crisis that caused much suffering throughout the country checked his momentum and also some of his confidence. It was some years before he felt he could take full charge again and this time act the Chinese ruler in the way the people would understand: to do battle with laggard and corrupt ministers and serve the people. Thus he launched the Cultural Revolution to throw aside all those who had treated him like an honourless ancestor. In this original way of attacking the very Party he led, he propelled himself to become the sole arbiter of China's fate, a position not unlike that of an activist founder-emperor of a traditional dynasty. He was Chinese enough to perceive how he would appear to his historically sensitive people: many analogies spring to the Chinese mind, notably Ming T'ai-tsu (reigned 1368–98) and Ch' in Shih-huang (reigned 246–210 B.C.).

If it had to be, he would rather be compared to Ch' in Shih-huang, who had not simply restored an old order but founded a truly new one. The comparison was not at all original. Chiang Kai-shek's propagandists in Taiwan and Hong Kong had long called him that in the hope that his "dynasty" would be equally short-lived. And as early as 1958, Mao had been able to joke about it.

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I have debated this matter with the democratic people. I say, you abuse us for being Ch'in Shih-huang, you're wrong! We surpass Ch'in Shih-huang by a hundred times. You say that we are Ch'in Shih-huang, that we are dictators. We admit the whole thing. The only pity is that you don't say enough and we often have to add to what you say.

But he was careful to say "we."

What was Ch'in Shih-huang? He only buried 460 ("Confucian") scholars, we have buried 46,000 scholars.31

Whereas, for himself, he had added, "Of course, I also do not approve of taking Ch'in Shih-huang [as an example]." And Lin Piao, by his side, had given the stock Chinese answer, "Ch'in Shih-huang burnt books and buried scholars!"

It was still a joke then because his whole audience could see how absurd it was that they, who represented the majority and who had established a dictatorship of the proletariat, should be compared with a tyrant. After the Cultural Revolution, however, such a comparison was no longer funny, Mao was the sole authority, there were very few people he could trust to do his bidding or give him accurate reports about what the people really wanted. Despite much travelling around the country to meet the people personally, he could hardly be sure that people really told him what they thought. His battle to loosen and democratize the Party had given him victory over his Party but, ironically, his awesome success had so raised him above ordinary mortals that he had become remote, the cool distant father-figure that was the traditional ideal for a great emperor. Of course, Mao did not want to be a Ch'in Shih-huang, who was merely a shrewd aristocrat who used a group of Legalists to establish the first empire in China but was not conscious of the historic role he was playing in the class struggle. Only a post-Marxist analysis could reveal that the First Emperor was the spearhead, and his reign the climax, of the revolution's struggle between the feudal landlord class and the remnants of the slave-owning aristocratic class who were trying to restore themselves to power.32 Absurd though this must have sounded to

31 Ming T'ai-tsu was a commoner who drove off the Mongol conquerors with his peasant-based army. It is interesting that Wu Han had written a biography of him in the 1940s (Chu Yün-ch'ang ch'uan) and also wrote a study of Hai jü where one of T'ai-tsu's successors behaves like a tyrant (see note 26 above). On the nature of Ming "despotism," see P. W. Mote, "The growth of Chinese despotism, a critique of Wittfogel's theory of Oriental despotism as applied to China," Oriens Extremus, Vol. 8/1 (1961), pp. 1–41.

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31 I introduce the beginnings of this analysis in "Burning books and burying scholars alive": some recent interpretations concerning Ch'in Shih-huang," Papers on Far Eastern History No. 9 (1974), pp. 137–86. A more complete
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scholars who had read their documents and sources, this was probably credible to a generation of Chinese brought up on almost nothing else except the class struggle as the key to all history. From Mao's point of view, knowing the deep prejudice the Chinese have had against Ch'in Shih-huang, including himself and Lin Piao as noted above, only a Marxist explanation of Ch'in Shih-huang's place in revolutionary history could have made any comparison with him acceptable. And as long as Mao had control over the new world-view and was a conscious agent of global historical forces, he was clearly superior and there was no danger of his People's Republic suffering the fate of the First Empire.

Mao was also Chinese enough to know that his new orthodoxy would be compared with that of the Confucian state which came to an end in 1911 and which could no longer be successfully restored despite various pathetic attempts to do so. Although Confucians' reputation was more "fragrant" than that of Ch'in Shih-huang and his ideas are considered to have lasted a thousand times longer than Shih-huang's dynasty, Mao probably did not in the end want to be compared to Confucius. Unless he could thoroughly change Chinese thinking about Confucius, he must have realized that he could not but suffer in the comparison. Thus the anti-Confucian campaign would not only have served to cleanse Chinese minds of preconceived notions about Confucius' sagesness by branding him as a thorough-going reactionary wanting to restore the power of slave-owning aristocrats, it could ultimately, had it been successful, make it safe to compare Mao with Confucius to Mao's advantage. It would then be seen that Maoism was not only more progressive in its time than Confucianism ever was even at its best, but clearly also more much more far-reaching that it would help to change the world, something which Confucianism never did.

It would be wrong for me to suggest that Mao became more

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Chinese as he grew older and more powerful. I believe that, while he remained Chinese, he was also unwaveringly Marxist–Leninist in his mind until the day he died. What overcame his ambitious revolutionary vision was China itself: the 900 millions, the deep political and cultural heritage, the people's pervasive and incorrigible addiction to the country's long history and the urge for order after a century of chaos which grew stronger with each decade. When one considers what he inherited in 1949, it is, in fact, a measure of his personal success that he managed to move the Chinese as far and as long as he had done. In short, I do not think it helpful to ask whether he might have achieved more if he had been more conventionally Chinese or if he could have acquired a more purist form of Marxism–Leninism. Both China and Marxism–Leninism moulded the growth of his mind and character in inextricable ways. Even though he, as a brilliant, sensitive, thinking man might have been clearly aware from time to time which part of him was more Chinese and which more Marxist–Leninist, there is little evidence that this mattered at the crunch.

Of course, one could still speculate if some other leader who was both Chinese and Marxist–Leninist to a similar degree might not have had a different effect on China and thrust a different China upon the world. The question does force us to consider if the unique fusion that produced Mao's personality and political style actually helped China's progress or obstructed it. It seems to me that his mastery and vigorous use of the Chinese language helped to communicate both the need for radical change and a sense of urgency to his audiences. Most of the time, Marxism–Leninism was made to sound familiar and easy to understand after he had said it. This might not have been good for the original ideas of Marx and Lenin, but it was probably more effective than asking all the Chinese to read the Marxist classics and find the ideas alien and abstruse. If the danger to avoid was to dilute the idea of progress when the Chinese most needed it, I would think that Mao's Chinese expressions and striking use of Chinese analogies did more to avoid that than any text of Marx or Lenin translated into Chinese.

At the same time, Mao's supreme confidence in what the scientific truth of Marxism–Leninism could achieve and how
quickly this could be done, and his conviction that he knew what the Chinese would not do or could not do, led him in the end to obstruct China's progress by demanding too much of its people. He simply would not settle for steady progress; nor would he leave the matter to inevitable forces at work in history to guarantee success. Although we should take into account his reading of English and French revolutionary history where reaction and restoration took place and his belief that restoration of capitalism had also occurred in the Soviet Union, it was probably his Chinese fears about what China would do if it became prosperous and strong that determined him not to let the Chinese settle down. Had China had a different history, or had he known less about it, he might have acted differently. But given China's long history of literati-officials or bureaucratic elites, he could hardly not notice how easily some of his comrades enjoyed their hard-won privileges and were prepared to reinstate the meritocracy that had always ruled China. I believe that Mao was not willing to see corrupt Confucian bureaucrats be replaced by corruptible Marxist-Leninist bureaucrats, and therefore would rather see China's progress slow down to allow that to happen without a fight. The majority of the Chinese people probably shared his fears and were prepared to help him create the thoroughly selfless man, but the cost of continuous disruption, the risk of economic stagnation and the difficulty in keeping up living standards combined to throw doubt about whether that could ever be done. And if it could not be done while Mao was alive, what hope is there that it can be done after he is gone?

Despite his mistakes and failures, Mao did achieve the one important thing that he did want as a Chinese: his China has certainly made a great impact on the world. But this is not the old China, nor did he want the world simply to respect and admire the glories and achievements of a dead civilization. His message is that there can be a new China, one that is new because he had helped decisively to turn its eyes towards the world and see the world through his eyes. What he saw may or may not be the reality today, but China will never take the world for granted again, nor will it accept the world's own estimation of itself. The great mistake that Mao made was about the timing of all this. The sentiment at least may be found, most appropriately, in the following lines written in 1963, in the most Chinese tz'u form, to the tune of Man-chiong-hung:

There have always been
Many things that were urgent.
Although the world spins on
Time is short.
Millennia are too long:
Let us dispute about mornings and evenings.35

They might be included in the un-Chinese corner of his long and eulogistic Chinese epitaph.

35 "Reply to Kuo Mo-go." I have adopted the translation by Bullock and Ch'en, Mao and the Chinese Revolution, p. 360.