Re-Review

AN INTERPRETATION OF FREDERIC WAKEMAN’S History and Will

Ever since the great debate on Mao’s originality between Benjamin Schwartz and Karl Wittfogel in the first issues of the China Quarterly, the image of Mao conveyed by Western analysts has moved through many different characterizations of his politics and writings. As a result, the various assertions that Mao is a Rousseauian, a Russian populist, a Trotskyist permanent revolutionary, a utopian socialist, etc. bewilder the reader with a choice between seemingly exclusive and contradictory images. Frederic Wakeman’s book, History and Will (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), is in some respects a culmination of these efforts, not in that it resolves the reader’s bewilderment, but in that it pursues the task of portraying Mao self-consciously and relatively comprehensively. The first six chapters of the book present montages of Mao’s cultural-revolutionary roles: “Red Sun,” “Revolutionary Founder,” “Great Legislator,” etc. The remaining fourteen chapters, with the possible exception of the last one, present various Western and Chinese thinkers as the sources of Mao’s thought.

The numerous sketches of Chinese and Western thinkers are done with such finesse and sensitivity that they would be valuable regardless of their contribution to the major theme of the book. The general objective is that of conjuring up in the mind of the reader a reliable image of Mao in his intellectual context and at the proper cultural distance. The execution is more an art than a science: the impression created is more important than a formal display of the research project. Hence an unusual amount of reflective effort is demanded of the reader if he wishes to come away from the book with more than a general impression and a few unconnected ideas. The primary purpose of this review is to present my grasp of the book, and to critically evaluate the book as I understand it.

It might seem presumptuous for an author to write a book interpreting Mao which itself requires an interpretation. The justification for such an approach (implied rather than stated) is that the subject demands it. There is a certain cultural distance between Mao as an entity and the Western reader which must be traversed; it cannot be exhibited, explained, and therefore neutralized.

The book has its origins in the shock of the Cultural Revolution, an event which was for most China specialists an almost traumatic experience of the opacity of Mao’s role in Chinese politics. Wakeman’s response to the Cultural Revolution was a decision to pursue the intellectual-historical roots of its initiator. The importance of such a study is self-evident, but its complexity demands a more explicit analysis of the project than Wakeman provides. No distinction is made between efforts to reduce Mao’s thought to its historical sources and efforts to present an understanding of Mao as an entity in context and in contrast to Western thinking; moreover, Mao tends to be identified with his various roles in the Cultural Revolution. The explicit method is intellectual history and the explicit subject is Mao, but the path which History and Will actually takes can only be explained by the co-determination of
the implicit foci of interpretation and the Cultural Revolution. Wakeman is so engaged in his subject that he leaves the task of sorting out these amalgams to the reader. The problem, however, is more basic than the placing of such a heavy burden on the readiness and ability to *mitemachen*: insofar as intellectual history and interpretation are concerned, Mao and the Cultural Revolution do not coincide, and to that extent the book lacks a unified direction.

What intellectual history and interpretation have in common is a concern for the theoretical context of the object of their inquiry. The interpretive perspective is best indicated in the preface: "a logically coherent exposition of the philosophical foundations of Sino-Western thought" (p. xiii) is necessary because Mao's Marxism is a hybrid of Chinese and Western thought. Otherwise Mao cannot be understood. An intellectual-historical perspective is presumed in this passage:

One could hesitantly work out an ideological calculus for Mao by listing the metaphysical integers from what we know of his early studies and the intellectual influences to which he was exposed. From Wang Yang-ming there certainly came a conviction that thought was to be expressed in action. From Paulsen and the Neo-Kantians came the assurance that reason created social forms, liberating the self from custom. From K'ang Yu-wei, Yen Fu, and the Darwinists came the notion of objective and universal laws of science which provided evolutionary change. From Wang Fu-chih came the intuition that change operated within matter, through its own internal relations. And from T. H. Green came not only the intense glorification of will, nor just the civil society of a Rousseau, but the depiction of political society as an instrument of individual realization. State/society, reintegrated, would force the individual to be free; for no single man could be free until all were. And the very struggle to attain that against human and natural opponents would both define will and elicit the kind of common effort that might prevent the state from becoming the static monolith—reason incarnate—represented by Hegel's thought. (p. 293)

The difference between the two perspectives lies in their attitude toward Mao. The interpretive assumes Mao to be a real intellectual entity to be approached by analogous comparison (the "Montage" chapters) and to be understood in context; the intellectual-historical assumes Mao to be a collection-point for various "metaphysical integers" which can best be understood by disassembling the parts and understanding them for themselves. The perspectival tension evident in the book is reduced by bending the content of the perspectives toward each other: by broadly construing the influences on Mao's thought and by somewhat narrowly construing "the philosophical foundations of Sino-Western thought," the two questions—What thinkers and thoughts influenced Mao? and What must we understand in order to understand Mao's hybrid language?—become the same in content. In my opinion it is unfortunate that intellectual history is the explicit perspective of the book. A pedestrian reason is that the materials from Mao's school years which are available in the West are not sufficiently rich to specify the significance of various influences with confidence; moreover, there is virtually no material which documents the relation between this period and the rest of Mao's life. The continuity is assumed by Wakeman and can be seen in Mao's writings, but whether this is the continuity of "metaphysical integers" can be doubted. A more basic demurrer is that Mao and many others were primarily interested in personal integrity, not the
integrity of their many intellectual sources. This approach is perhaps best expressed by Li Ta-chao in his seminal essay, "My Marxist Views," published in the May 1919 issue of Hsin Ch'ing Nien (New Youth):

Objectively speaking, Mr. Marx's theories are in reality a product of their times, and in Mr. Marx's time, they were really a major discovery. We certainly cannot now take a theory produced by the environment of that age and explain all of history with it, or take the theory as a whole and apply it to our existing society. However, the value of that age and of that particular discovery should not be ignored. . . . When we criticize or utilize a person's theories, we should not forget both his age and environment and our own age and environment. (Li Ta-chao Hsüan-chi, p. 195)

The confusion between Mao and the Cultural Revolution, or the identification of Mao with the Cultural-revolutionary Mao is facilitated by the predominance of the intellectual-historical perspective, since that perspective tends to make the book more around Mao than about him. This identification is particularly prominent in the Montages, but it is also essential to the individualist notion of Mao which underlies the whole enterprise. The Mao of the Cultural Revolution is the Mao of History and Will because particularly in that event Mao stands out as the individual unity of the two. My objection to this focus is not that it is no longer the current line of image, but that the magnitude of the political struggle in the Cultural Revolution reduced the persona of Mao to its immediate political function. Obviously this function is not unrelated to Mao, but just as obviously Mao should not be identified with that cluster of images. Mao's 1966 letter to Chiang Ch'ing shows serious reservations about the image projected of him by Lin Piao, but he agrees to it for political reasons. Ironically, the specific inappropriateness of Cultural-revolutionary imagery for Mao is apparent if one compares the concern for the mass-line which motivated the Cultural Revolution (chapter 20) with the oversized heroic projection of Mao which characterized its politics. A more inclusive historical perspective would have to balance the individual heroism of Mao-centered imagery with the independently potent figures of the Chinese Communist Party, the science of Marxism-Leninism, and the revolutionary masses.

The part of the book least affected by disparities in method and subject is the presentation of Chinese intellectual history. Particularly Wakeman's depiction of the Kung-yang revival, K'iang Yu-wei, and Wang Yang-ming are unqualified successes. The presentations are enlightening in themselves and are also useful in establishing the Chinese context of Mao's thought. Although many other aspects of China's culture were also important influences on Mao's thought (for instance, the popular novels, journalism, etc.), Wakeman is not obliged to include them among his "philosophical perspectives."

The treatment of Western thought is the most difficult and frustrating part of the book. This is in part due to the style of analysis. Wakeman's interest in the genealogies of problematics, and his faithfulness to the terminological matrices of the many authors mentioned, can obscure and even inundate the significance of what is being discussed. The reader sometimes feels that he is reconstructing a text of which only the footnotes remain. Besides the stylistic problem, it is in the treatment of Western thought that the disparities between the interpretive and the in-
tellectual-historical foci emerge most clearly. In the Montages, Western thought is a source of imagery and analogs. A wide variety of thinkers are utilized as foils and explications of the various images of Mao. In the rest of the book, the presentation of various thinkers as sources of Mao's ideas is the ostensive function, but this intellectual-historical function alone is insufficient to justify all the material included.

The material least explained by the demands of presenting Mao's theoretical genealogy is the chapter on Rationalism. From this point of view, Mao's remark, "All I believed in was Kant's dualism, particularly his idealism," (quoted on p. 166) unsupported by evidence that Mao actually read Kant, is a flimsy excuse for a lengthy discourse on Kant's philosophical system, complete with predecessors and successors. But this is a crucial chapter for the interpretive function of the book. Certainly "a logic coherent exposition of the foundations of Sino-Western thought" could not neglect Kant, even if Mao did. The function here is not genetic, but contrastive; as Wakeman indicates in the Preface: "One of the primary assertions of History and Will . . . is that Mao Tse-tung's dialectic was not truly Marxist because Chinese metaphysical constructions did not possess the universal ontological categories of European rationalism." (p. xiii) Underlying this is a realization of the uniqueness of the epistemological problem in modern Western philosophy. The formal constitution of subject and object as meaningful categories irrespective of content gave Western theoreticians since Descartes a unique type of autonomy and sophistication. Regardless of whether the unity of subject and object was affirmed, denied, or one preferred to the other, the unavoidable horizons of theoretical discourse in the West necessarily involve this problem. Hence the attempt by Mao and many others to borrow from this tradition the more synthetic formulations (popular and moral philosophy and various monisms) must transform what is borrowed by not retaining its context.

The question which lingers with the reader of History and Will is: In what sense is it a book about Mao? Although the progression of most of the book is loosely linked to a chronological narration of intellectual influences on Mao (which arrives in the last chapter at the Cultural-revolutionary context of the Montages), it is evidently not an intellectual biography. Wakeman calls the book "a series of essays which are thematically cohesive but not discursively sequential" (p. xiii) and relies on the reader to "draw these intellectual segments together for himself." The presence of Mao in the book is a diffuse one, which I would propose could be seen in three metaphors: Mao as an image, as a language, and as a philosopher.

Mao as an image is particularly well-depicted in the Montages. The sensitivity and depth of the various sketches make them very enlightening. Wakeman wisely avoids a simple characterization of Mao by presenting a variety of images, a "hall of mirrors" which aims at an impression rather than at encapsulation. This avoids the pretension that a certain portrayal is the one correct picture. Most previous characterizations of Mao have tended to confuse the plausibility of a certain image with a reduction of Mao to that image: instead of "Mao as x," "Mao is x." The images in Wakeman's gallery are many, non-exhaustive and have thematic overlaps, so that both the particular and the general impressions have only their proper heuristic function. My only reservation concerns the Cultural-revolutionary orientation of the images—Mao-centered, flamboyant, sometimes Lin Piao-ist. (see pp. 20–21)
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Some images are thereby distorted and the importance of images as a whole becomes exaggerated.

The primary level of the book and its specific contribution to the study of Mao is its attention to Mao as a language. The dual figure of history and will, present in Mao and both of his traditions, allows a wide-ranging development and enrichment of the philosophical terms and viewpoints which anchor Mao's thought. Both the interpretive attempt to grasp Mao as a hybrid of two cultures and the analytical attempt to find roots for his concepts contribute equally to a better understanding of his language. But this quasi-philological attention to Mao's language tends to reduce what Mao says to the vocabulary he uses. This is a shrewd delineation of the subject for an intellectual historian interested in conceptual continuities, for it is precisely in his vocabulary that any thinker is most dependent upon his environment. Wakeman however does not make it clear that this is a perspectival limitation which tends to neglect Mao's individuality as expressed in the logic of his thought and the concrete referments of his language.

The treatment of Mao as a philosopher is in two respects the most troubling aspect of the book. The general question of what does it mean to concentrate philosophical perspectives on Mao's thought is not raised by Wakeman, and it should be asked by the reader. The more specific problem is the effect of the book's viewpoint on the analysis of Mao's own more theoretical works.

Evidence of a certain incompatibility of Wakeman's point of view and Mao's can be found in the treatment of "On Practice" and "On Contradiction." These works are considered in part of Chapter 15—"Marxism" and the short chapter "Contradictions," 17 pages in all. Since the basic point of both of these works is emphasizing that the only value of universals is their concrete value, and Wakeman's approach is first abstraction to universals and then relating those universals, his analyses tend to upend the original arguments and cast Mao in the unfavorable light of being a mediocre philosopher. An example:

In order to reflect the essence (contradiction) of things in his own mind, man must create a system of concepts by rebuilding the data of perceptions. Kant's critical logic had supposed data to be arranged by a necessary order of categories external to the human mind. Mao made man, as subject, the sole source of those categories. Because that would lead to subjectivism, even idealism, Mao concluded that this 'reconstructed knowledge' (kai-tiao-kuo ti jen-shih) was based, in the final analysis, on practice which—we might add—objectified the self. (p. 231)

That knowledge is shaped and reshaped by practice is the basic thesis of "on Practice"; this is the "Relation Between Knowing and Doing" referred to in the work's subtitle. It is not a conclusion introduced as a counterweight for a possibly subjectivist epistemology. Wakeman's inversion occurs because, in the first sentence of the quotation, Mao's emphasis on experience as the basis of knowledge is put too abstractly: "man must create a system of concepts by rebuilding the data of perceptions." What is lost is the element of trial and error over time in a concrete situation. "The data of perceptions" for Mao are not a flash of consciousness, but hard-won personal experience; "rebuilding" is not a voluntaristic (or Ah-Q-ist) mastery over one's own reality, but the correct grasp of essentials. The compari-
son with Kant is unfortunate. First, Kant’s categories are not “external to the human mind,” but radically internal and hence indifferent to their contents (see p. 174). The only external for Kant is the noumenon, the Ding an sich. So Kant has subjectivist and idealist tendencies, which of course were criticized or developed by various successors. But does Mao? The apparent potential in these directions present in the first sentence is created by the abstraction itself; what appears in the analysis as Mao’s half-conclusion, half-correction is merely the return of what was lost through Wakeman’s original formulation.

It should be remembered that throughout his life Mao has been a thinker, but has been one who thinks that the value of theory lies in its contribution to practice. “The spirit and matter which together form my life are experience in the world. I must devote my strength to the actual (quoted on p. 206).” As a revolutionary activist, Mao values thought more as part of a dialectic to improve man’s life than as a self-sufficient dialectic aimed at truth. Hence, “correct thought,” the goal of Mao’s thinking endeavors, is basically different from its purely philosophic counterpart—Hegel’s concrete absolute—because it is the enabler of revolutionary action rather than the reconciler of idea and reality. To try to understand Mao solely through the universals in his thoughts violates his own thinking about universals. To put it bluntly, one wonders how happy Mao would be with Wakeman’s book. A negative answer would not render the book wrong or useless, but the question should place a burden on the author to explicitly relate the purpose of the book to the self-consciousness of its subject. The account of the origins of the book in the Preface (pp. x, xi) suggests the parameters of this relationship; but what is needed is a definite perspective on these philosophical perspectives, an explicit determination of project. But it is necessary not as a precondition to the value of the book, but to facilitate understanding it and to prevent misunderstandings. In the end it is the insight with which Wakeman executes the work of his interpretive and historical tasks which makes the book a memorable experience. And if the reader is up to the tasks of reflection and synthesis that Wakeman imposes on him, it can be one of the most stimulating recent books on modern China.

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