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Review Essay

Mao Zedong Thoughts


The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward. Edited by RODERICK MACFARQUAHAR, TIMOTHY CHEEK and EUGENE WU. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. 561 pp. $15.00.]

As the centenary of the birth of Mao Zedong arrives, Western scholarship on Mao is already in its second generation. These five translations illustrate the strengths of the new scholarship: they are meticulous, and they make texts available that are important to the deeper understanding of Mao’s politics and thought. But there is room for nostalgia about the first generation. Important as these texts are, they do not transform the portrait of Mao as did Stuart Schram’s The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung, the appearance of Takeuchi Minoru’s Mao Zedong Ji, the publication of the documents from the Lushan Plenum, or the first translations from Red Guard sources in the 1960s. Times have changed. The scholarly task is no longer a vital one of making the first forays behind the official portrait in order to understand China’s erratic ruler, but has become the more historical one of keeping abreast of newly available research materials in order to present a more detailed picture of a central figure of China’s recent past. Although the process of expanding textual and historical resources makes possible a more accurate understanding of Mao, at the same time it makes a comprehensive interpretation more difficult and remote. This may explain why the most interesting interpretive essays included in the volumes are those by the first generation stalwarts Roderick MacFarquhar and Benjamin Schwartz, with Merle Goldman close behind, while the essays by the translators themselves often do not seem to measure up to the general import of the Mao texts that they provide.

The Mao texts provided in these volumes illustrate four major phases in his politics and at the same time four important aspects of his thought. The first volume of Mao's Road to Power presents the writings of his

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pre-Marxist period. Since Mao was 28 at the time of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party it is not surprising that his early works reveal that many of his basic intellectual and political traits were already evident beforehand. The Xunwu investigation dates back from 1930, a turning point in Mao’s development of a rural revolutionary strategy. The lectures and notes on philosophy translated by Nick Knight originated in Yan’an at the time when Mao was faced with reformulating his successful military leadership of the Long March and his rural revolutionary experience into guidelines for general party leadership and for the war against Japan. Finally, the second volume of The Writings of Mao Zedong and the “secret speeches” document the transformation of Mao’s politics from the optimism and bold openness of 1956 and 1957, exemplified by the Hundred Flowers campaign, through the manic leftism of the Great Leap Forward in 1958. They show how his early theory and practice became enlarged in its own success and then in its failure, creating the pattern of optimistic ideological intervention and unarticulated practical retreat that became characteristic of Mao’s last 20 years. Each of these phases and concerns is already represented in the existing literature by a well-known text: “The Great Union of the Popular Masses” from 1991, “Oppose Book Worship” from 1930, “On Practice” and “On Contradiction” from 1937, and “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” (official version) from 1957. But the books under review provide a significantly more solid textual and historical base for understanding these key moments of Mao’s politics.

Mao’s Road to Power is a project to translate all Mao Zedong’s pre-1949 writings, and the first volume documents his transition from student to activist to revolutionary. Stuart Schram has had the well-earned good luck to have available an internal Chinese publication of Mao’s works from 1912 to 1920, Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao (Mao Zedong’s Early Writings), and has supplemented this with texts attributed to Mao by other sources. The result is a volume elegantly translated and well footnoted that not only makes available many writings for the first time, but is also likely to stand for some time as a reasonably complete collection of Mao’s extant early writings. My only major complaint against the editing is that the publication histories of the texts are not presented. For example, the reader is not told that “The Great Union of the Popular Masses” was originally published in the Xiang River Review, nor that a translation and commentary by Schram was published in The China Quarterly in the early 1970s. It can be inferred from a table in the introduction that the article is included in the Zaoqi wengao, but there is no information regarding when it was first available, other sources, or possible differences among texts.

This cannot be a comprehensive picture of Mao’s early intellectual and political development, but it includes interesting and extensive fragments that will fascinate researchers for a long time to come. Mao was unusually vigorous and independent in his thinking, his many activities and his “networking.” His notes on the German philosopher Friedrich Paulsen’s System of Ethics, which run to more than 100 pages in this
edition, show an ethic of interaction between the individual and the world that is intellectually more finely tuned than Paulsen himself. The practical implication of Mao’s philosophical views is a boundless urge to activity driven by an optimism concerning the unity of the universe rather than by an external moral imperative or by altruism. As Mao puts it: “The only goal of human beings is to realize the self. Self-realization means to develop fully both our physical and spiritual capabilities to the highest. Action is the means by which this goal is achieved” (p. 285).

Mao was the ultimate activist. His writings are peppered with enthusiasm for an amazing diversity of organized projects, from physical education to a night school for workers (well before his Marxism), bookshops, newspapers, campaigns against the military governor and for women’s rights, to name a few. The most impressive aspect of his activities was not their number, however, but the seriousness of each enterprise, and the fact that most of them were reasonably successful. Mao was deeply concerned with the practicality, feasibility and actual implementation of projects, not merely with “good ideas.” His choice of projects was politicized and radicalized by the excitement of the May Fourth Movement, but the imperative of practical effect remained. When the May Fourth Movement failed to transform Chinese politics by means of enlightenment and spontaneous demonstrations, Mao’s practical radicalism impelled him towards a revolutionary party.

Mao’s commitment to practicality and feasibility re-emerged most clearly when he was faced with the task of creating a rural revolutionary organization after the failure of the First United Front in 1927. The Report from Xunwu (Xunwu diaocha) exemplifies Mao’s exhortation to “spare no effort to study [yanjiu] one place thoroughly” (pp. 64, 56 in original). This is one of only two sentences in the report emphasized by Mao, and the 185-page investigations of Xunwu county in Jiangxi goes into exhausting detail about commerce, communications, class patterns before the revolution, and land reform. Mao completed the investigation in ten days in May 1930 with the help of eleven local informants. He wrote “Oppose Book Worship,” his famous exhortation to cadres to do concrete research, in the same month. In October he completed a similar investigation of a district in Xingguo county, and he also wrote a number of shorter empirical pieces that year on various specific problems of land reform. The detail can be mind-numbing, but the focus is on understanding the balance of forces in the countryside and the material context of rural revolution. The results sometimes contradict dogmatic expectations: in Xunwu many of the small landlords played important revolutionary roles. As Mao confesses, the analysis of rich and middle peasants is inadequate in the Xunwu Report, and this weakness is corrected in the Xingguo investigation. Even though the alignment of classes is generally the same in each village, empirical work is necessary because the practical questions of who helps and who opposes, who profits and who loses, is inescapably concrete. As Mao puts it in the only other sentence he emphasizes, “the real [shiji] struggle is in using the principle of
drawing on the plentiful to make up for the scarce [chou duo bu shao]’’ (pp. 205, 171 in original, not emphasized in translation).

The reason for Mao’s surge of practical research in 1930, and his demand in “Oppose Book Worship” that every cadre do it, was that he had become convinced that, rather than lurking in the countryside and awaiting the opportunity for the seizure of cities, the Chinese revolution would be essentially a rural revolution based on the political and military forces generated by land reform. Yet he knew from his experiences since 1927 that land reform was not a magic key. Revolution in a locality required local knowledge, and since the masses were its chief resource, the Party could not afford to separate itself from them. Mao’s rural reports of 1930 were at the same time attempts to understand his new venue of southern Jiangxi, models of practical investigation to inspire his colleagues to do the same, and efforts to come to grips with the key problems of rural revolution.

The Xunwu Report is a difficult work to translate because it is awash in local colour. Roger Thompson not only handles the localisms well, but provides a surprisingly detailed account of the political backgrounds of Mao’s informants and even contemporary photographs of Xunwu, including one of the building in which Mao conducted his investigations. There are some defects in the translation. It tends to be excessively literal, and perhaps as a result the dynamic of the original is weakened. For instance, I did not understand the section on rich peasants (pp. 136–37) until I read it in the original. Mao’s pithy sayings can lose their thump. For instance, his famous saying from “Oppose Book Worship,” “No investigation, no right to speak” (meiyou diaocha, meiyou fayanquan) becomes “Without investigation one has no right to make pronouncements” (p. 32). The discussion of the significance of the Report is disappointing because Thompson does not seriously discuss its relationship to the other rural investigations of 1930, or more generally to the emergence of Mao’s rural revolutionary strategy.

To move from the Xunwu Report to Mao’s lectures and notes on dialectical materialism is, intellectually, to leap from a sauna of earthy detail into a snowbank of Leninist philosophical abstractions. Nick Knight provides most of Mao’s philosophical texts from 1937, including a complete translation of “Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism” as well as the earliest available texts of “On Practice” and “On Contradiction.” He also includes a translation by John Hanafin of Mao’s “Extracts and Notes from Ai Siqi’s Philosophy and Life,” and selections from Mao’s marginal notes on two Soviet philosophical texts.

The spirit of Mao’s philosophical efforts in 1937 is well summed up by a remark in “Lecture Notes”: “Because of the backwardness of the evolution of Chinese society, the philosophical trend of dialectical materialism which is presently developing in China has not resulted from inheriting and transforming its own philosophical legacy, but from the study of Marxism–Leninism” (p. 95). Mao’s task was to learn from Soviet philosophy what seemed useful for articulating and generalizing his revolutionary experience. It became urgent after the Long March in part
because, in the tradition of Lenin, Communist leaders were expected to be ideological leaders, and philosophy was the highest level of ideology. But philosophy for Mao was clearly not just a burden of office or a language to be learned. He was searching in the texts for concepts that fit his convictions about the importance of struggle, the necessity for concrete investigation and the changeability of reality. For example, Mao used the term “contradiction” (maodun) in 1926 only to indicate something that was inconsistent or confused; by 1928 the idea of analysing contradictions between groups had become part of his analytic pattern. With his philosophic readings he could elevate contradiction to a universal. The unity of opposites could ground an outlook based on struggle and the mutual transformation of opposites, hearkening back to the strongly Daoist tones of his 1917 comments on Paulsen. Likewise, the particularity of contradiction provided a philosophical basis for his emphasis on practical investigation, because it implied that specific contradictions had to be understood in their own terms, they could not simply be derived from books or from the big picture. Mao knew for a fact that the revolutionary leader lived in a complex and constantly changing environment that demanded flexibility, decisiveness, risk-taking and readjustment. “On Practice” provides a good abstract picture of this situation, and “On Contradiction” a useful array of concepts for articulating it. The lectures and book notes are more direct attempts to appropriate orthodox concepts and arguments.

Without opposing his teachers, Mao was a headstrong student of Engels, Lenin and their Soviet interpreters. In contrast to the absence of epistemology in Marx and Engels and Lenin’s tendency in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism towards a simple reflection theory of knowledge, Mao emphasized that reflection was a process, and the restlessness of his philosophical outlook has more in common with his Chinese philosophical roots than with the rather stolid European Marxists. As he says in a passage excised from the official version of “On Contradiction,” “what the ancients called ‘to be familiar with Dao’ [wen dao] viewed from today’s perspective is to be familiar with the dao of contradiction” (p. 178). Indeed, the implication of the remark about China’s backwardness quoted earlier is that dialectical materialism could have been based on China’s own philosophical legacy. In any case, Marxism-Leninism provided an essential service for Mao by providing a larger intellectual framework that claimed scientific correctness, but it did not constrain his protean approach to life and politics. For Mao, as for Heraclitus, all is flux, and the basic element is fire.

Nick Knight has done an extraordinary job of translating, collating texts, matching texts with sources and providing a bibliography. One quirk is that in “On Practice” he used boldface to indicate deviations from the official version, while in “On Contradiction” boldface indicates congruence. He does so because of differences in the amount of congruence — possibly he was editing under the influence of Mao’s emphasis on the particularity of contradiction. Knight’s introduction provides a useful review of textual matters and includes an interesting presentation of some
Chinese interpretations of Mao. To the discussion of Mao’s plagiarism he contributes a table of direct and indirect sources of Mao’s writings. The analysis is somewhat marred by Knight’s signature *idee fixe* that Mao scholarship is crawling with persons claiming that “Mao was a crude empiricist and that the analysis of his thought and action should therefore employ an empiricism equally as crude” (p. 29), and that “Mao’s epistemology was an undiluted empiricism” (p. 27). At the risk of seeming crudely empirical, I will assert that this is simply not true. Even the early, politically-inspired denigrations of Mao denounced him as a faithful Stalinist rather than as an empiricist, and the Mao scholarship best exemplified by Stuart Schram highlights the unity of theory and practice in his thought and politics. Knight’s introduction does not put Mao’s philosophy in the broader context of his politics, and yet the content of Mao’s philosophy demands attention to concreteness and to interaction.

While Stuart Schram has had good luck (thus far) with the availability of texts for his translation series of pre-1949 works, the luck of the post-1949 series edited by Kao and Leung could hardly have been worse. The first volume of *The Writings of Mao Zedong* presented material from 1949 to 1955 already available in volume five of the *Selected Works* just before an extensive collection of new materials from that period became available. Similarly, volume two has been upstaged by *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, which presents a much more exciting array of new texts from the fateful period of transition in Mao’s politics. Apparently, such ill-timed bounty has led to the quiet abandonment of the original intention to translate “every text available anywhere in the world or everything Mao had written or spoken between 1949 and 1976” (p. xviii). Unfortunately the new principle of editorial selection appears to be that of presenting official texts down to the last birthday telegram with Mao’s name on it, and neglecting (though not ignoring) unofficial texts and some important variants of texts. For instance, only one version of “The Ten Great Relationships” is presented, although there are extensive differences between the two extant versions and this is arguably Mao’s most important writing of 1956. The texts from the overlapping portion of the *Secret Speeches* are not included. The superiority of the *Secret Speeches* variants is best illustrated by a conversation on 6 March 1957 which runs to 19 pages (193–211), compared with less than one page in *Writings* (364–66). On the other hand, the editors do a very good job of indicating sources and providing annotation, and their officials texts are a necessary supplement to the unofficial ones of *Secret Speeches*.

*The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* is an anthology of 400 pages of previously untranslated speeches from February 1957 to November 1958, along with 100 pages of introductory essays. The collection is not comprehensive. The texts were selected from more than 5,000 pages of newly-available materials, and, more importantly, many of the most important texts from this period are already translated and therefore are not included. Thus the book does not provide one-stop shopping for someone interested in Mao’s role in the Hundred Flowers or Great Leap...
Forward (for 1957 the *Writings* should be consulted), but it is the best place to start because of the volume and interest of the texts, the quality of the interpretative essays, and the bibliographic aids.

As Roderick MacFarquhar observes in his excellent historical overview, the period covered by this volume includes two of Mao’s three major personal initiatives in PRC politics, all of which ended in disaster. The Hundred Flowers texts are particularly strong on Mao’s determined attempt to encourage non-Party participation and his frustration with the cautious bureaucratism of the Party establishment. The prize text of the volume is the original transcript of Mao’s famous speech, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People.” Mao’s retreat from “blooming and contending” into the Anti-Rightist Campaign is less well indicated because the texts are available elsewhere. The whole cycle from initial euphoria to tension and damage control is better indicated in the Great Leap Forward texts, though the one-book reader should be reminded that the Great Leap Forward went on to a second and more disastrous cycle after Mao’s denunciation of his critics at the Lushan Plenum in 1959.

Seeing such events from over Mao’s shoulder is a complex experience. On the one hand, he is remarkably unbound by his party-state. He argues for a rectification campaign that would allow non-Party participation, and he views the opposition of nine-tenths of the Party establishment to the Hundred Flowers as a challenge requiring faster and more determined measures. In the Great Leap Forward there is a sense of abandon in Mao’s euphoria, an encouragement of mass enthusiasm without regard to the prerequisites of administrative control. On the other hand he is hypersensitive to opposition and criticism, and insensitive to the role played by his own authority in generating the problems that he faces. He seems unaware that the Party frustrates him because it cannot argue with him, that the intellectuals know their vulnerability (and if they forget then they are brutally reminded) and that the grassroots leadership must lie about their output because success has already been announced by their superiors.

On a personal level, he understands the dilemmas: “If you don’t have rice, the cleverest housewife will be hard put to make a meal. The peasants have all sorts of measures to resist us. For instance, in some areas they will specially appoint a falsifying reporter whose duty is exclusively to fill out those forms. [This is] because the higher levels absolutely want reports, and if too little is reported it looks bad” (p. 506). But he is blind to organizational implications: “I think there is some falsification around. There are some people in this world who are not all that honest. I suggest that you talk this over seriously with the secretaries of the county committees and the secretaries of the commune party committees and require that they should be honest and not falsify” (p. 507). Mao is power-blind in a situation in which the apparent reality surrounding him (reports, newspapers, model communes and so on) is largely determined by his and the Party’s power. No wonder he feels “like a fly in a glass house, blindly banging against the glass” (p. 470).
There is certainly a transformation of Mao’s politics and some development in his thought from the earlier texts considered here. Mao had not totally given up on the idea of investigation, but by 1958 it had shrivelled to accepting reports of one successful commune because “it is enough to dissect one sparrow; it’s not necessary to dissect all that many” (p. 383). The practical injunction to learn one place well had become the dogmatic excuse that one (claimed) success proves the policy. The ideological development is more positive. In 1937 Mao could not imagine antagonism developing in contradictions within the Party or among the people, and criticizes Trotsky for entertaining such thoughts (Knight, p. 202). By 1957 Mao was criticizing Lenin, and arguing that if contradictions among the people were mishandled they could lead to antagonism (p. 136). This was potentially an insight of fundamental importance for a Maoist theory of the state, because it implies that systematic democratic controls might be necessary even under socialism. But Mao did not have a theory of the state, and his insight led instead to personal exhortations to stay close to the masses and to be open to criticism, and to such ill-fated endeavours as the Hundred Flowers and the Cultural Revolution.

The introductory essays included in the volume are very good. MacFarquhar’s historical essay is useful for positioning each document in a finely woven political context. The main theme of Benjamin Schwartz’s “Thoughts on the late Mao” is the variability of Mao’s politics, which is rooted in his thinking: “...the plasticity and malleability of his entire arsenal of categories... seems to offer little resistance to manipulation in the interest of his very immediate preoccupations” (p. 21). Merle Goldman’s essay, “Mao’s obsession with the political role of literature and the intellectuals,” provides a good analysis of the relationship between Mao and the intellectuals during the Hundred Flowers, showing the fateful interaction of Mao’s belief in the importance of intellectuals and his alienation from them. Eugene Wu provides a brief and general overview of the problem of primary sources.

I have difficulty with Timothy Cheek’s proposal to label the different Chinese editions of Mao texts “collective wisdom” (for official, public editions), “genius” (for unauthorized anthologies that date primarily from the Cultural Revolution), and “historicism” (for more recent scholarly editions). Although the labels do allude to the general flavour of each category, they do not refer to the principle used to differentiate the categories. It seems that the categories that the Chinese use, “official,” “unauthorized” and “research,” are perfectly adequate and are not burdened with unnecessary interpretive overtones. Any leader produces texts that would fall into analogous categories, and yet one boggles at the thought of the “collected wisdom,” “genius” and “historicism” editions of George Bush.

In sum, the new translations enable a more detailed understanding of Mao’s intellectual beginnings, his shift to rural revolution, his efforts to master the Leninist philosophical framework and to articulate his own, and the turning point of his leftism. These are arguably four of the most important moments of his political and intellectual career, and together
they provide a broad mapping of his practice, theory and politics. The
new texts answer specific questions concerning what Mao said at a
particular time, but the overall picture is the more complex for being
more complete. It would be too empiricist – as well as un-Maoist – to
expect that additional texts would resolve general problems of inter-pret-
ation. As Mao suggested about truth in general, generations of Mao
scholarship will undoubtedly proceed “in endless cycles, and with each
cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level . . .
such is the dialectical-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and
doing” (final sentence of “On Practice”; Knight, p. 148).

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