Maoism

Maoism refers primarily to the ideology, politics and writings of Mao Zedong (1893–1976; also romanized Mao Tse-tung). In official Chinese discourse the term 'Mao Zedong Thought' (s xãi) is used rather than 'Maoism (zhuyi)', out of deference to Marxism-Leninism. It can also refer to the ideology of groups who take Mao Zedong as a political model, or to the official role of Mao in the orthodoxy of the People's Republic of China. Mao considered himself to be creatively applying the general theory of Marxism-Leninism to Chinese conditions, and the inextricable interplay of his politics and thought made it difficult to abstract a theoretical essence of Maoism. Because of the radical turn in Mao's politics in his later years, most prominently in the Cultural Revolution, the content and effect of Maoism underwent major changes. Since Mao's political achievements were the prerequisite for his ideological role within China and for his attractiveness as a model for radical political movements elsewhere, Maoism beyond Mao has had a varied and shifting ideological content.

1. Mao Zedong's Theory and Practice

Mao never considered himself primarily a theoretical innovator. Indeed, the ideas that he was most proud of, namely, the unity of theory and practice and the particularity of contradiction, both emphasized the primacy of practice and they emerged as general reflections on his political experience. Correct revolutionary leadership—which was Mao's principal concern—depended on a practical dialectic involving an understanding of one's situation derived from grassroots investigation and the experimental application of an ideological plan of attack. Although Mao considered himself to be operating within the framework of Marxism-Leninism, his respect for the problems of practical application went well beyond Marx's philosophical commitment to the unity of theory and practice or Lenin's instrumental notion of tactics.

1.1 Basic Background

Mao was an intellectual among peasants and a peasant among intellectuals. In a rural country suffering total chaos, the combination was the key to his success. In a postrevolutionary party-state attempting to modernize, it was the source of catastrophic political interventions.

Born in the hinterland of Hunan, a rural province, Mao rose quickly to leadership among his cohort of scholars in the provincial capital. From the beginning, his leadership combined practical activism with voracious reading and intellectual engagement. His first published article, emphasizing the importance of physical education, appeared in the leading national journal of young intellectuals in early 1917. Mao was a provincial leader in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the abrupt and radical beginning of mass politics in China, and he became a founding member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921. The CPC began as an urban and cosmopolitan movement inspired by Bolshevism, and it was almost by accident that Mao rediscovered his rural roots and emphasized the importance of the peasantry to a meaningful revolution in China. The Human Report (1927), one of his most famous works, captures the enthusiasm of his rediscovery of rural revolutionary potential in the context of optimism about an impending national revolution.

Instead of victory, however, the CPC was destroyed in 1927, and remnants fled to remote rural areas. In the new, bleak context of survival in the countryside, Mao began to work out practices of land reform and guerilla warfare, and his success eventually led to his leadership of the CPC after 1936 and the formulation of his strategy of rural revolution from 1937 to 1945. In conformity with his own experience, Mao's strategy was not a theoretical magic bullet but rather an exhortation to cadres to go down to the basic level and to integrate the Party's leadership with the concrete concerns, limitations, and capacities of each village. From aggregating the primal politicization and militarization of villages came the strength that overwhelmed the government of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) in 1949.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China confirmed Mao's confidence in himself and in Marxism-Leninism, but it also set unfamiliar tasks of consolidation and construction in an unfamiliar environment in which cities, bureaucrats and intellectuals would necessarily play leading roles. The Soviet Union therefore became the model for the initial phase of China's development. By 1956, however, Mao's unease about developments in European communism and his growing confidence in China's own experience led him to radical experimentation in economics and politics. Having completed the transition to socialism, Mao took his goals for continuing the revolution from Marx's brief descriptions of a
communist utopia: critique of 'bourgeois right,' abolition of the differences between town and country and between mental and manual labor, direct mass participation in politics, and so forth. The Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) were as much the tragic consequence of Mao's unquestioning commitment to Marxism as they were the result of personal idiosyncrasies. In both cases Mao retreated from the unanticipated consequences of his interventions, but he did not adjust his theoretical framework to account for the failures.

1.2 Essence of Maoism

Mao was not articulate about the basic principles of his thought; from 1921 Marxism–Leninism provided his explicit theoretical framework. Nevertheless, three values are present throughout his career and underpin his commitment to communism: revolutionary populism, practical effectiveness, and dialectics.

Revolutionary populism stems from the conviction that the mobilized masses are ultimately the strongest political power. All exploiters are minorities and therefore vulnerable. The strength of the revolution comes primarily from its closeness to the masses rather than from doctrine or tactics. For Mao, the mass line was not a slogan, but rather a commitment to interactive, mass-regarding behavior by the Party that would maximize its popular support. Mao's successful strategy of protracted rural revolution is the best example of his revolutionary populism; his encouragement of the Red Guards to 'bombard the headquarters' in the Cultural Revolution showed the impossibility of applying revolutionary populism within a regime.

Mao's concern for practical effectiveness is the most prominent characteristic of his political and intellectual style. Mao insisted on personal, concrete investigation and once raised the slogan of 'No investigation, no right to speak.' Clearly Mao's empiricism had dwindled by the time of the Great Leap Forward, when visiting a model commune was considered sufficient evidence for launching a national campaign, but he still adjusted his leftist interventions in the light of unwelcome facts about their effects.

Mao's dialectics had its roots in both Marxism and in traditional Chinese thought. Mao saw a changing world driven by internal contradictions rather than a static world of fixed categories. Dialectics was a flexible method of political analysis that allowed Mao to concentrate his attention on one problem while affirming its interrelationship to other issues. More importantly, the expectation that one situation would transform into another—even its opposite—led Mao to emphasize process in his politics rather than institutions. The ebb and flow of the campaign cycle was better than apparent stability. Likewise, Mao expected unity to emerge from struggle rather than from compromise.

2. Official Maoism

2.1 The Cult of Mao

By the end of 1936 Mao Zedong had become the primary leader of the CPC, the Long March had been concluded, and the war against Japan had begun. Already in his mid-forties, Mao rose to the challenge of distilling his experience into general principles and applying them to the new challenge of war against Japan. The first texts of his major theoretical writings, Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War, On Practice, and On Contradiction, were produced as lectures to the Red Army College in 1936–1937. The Rectification Movement of 1942–1944 was a sustained attempt to inculcate Mao Zedong Thought as the authoritative standard of behavior. The theoretical dimension of Mao's leadership was confirmed at the Seventh Party Congress of 1945. The formulation of the Congress, that Mao Zedong Thought 'creatively applied Marxism–Leninism to Chinese conditions,' has remained the official summary of Mao's accomplishment. While it is deferential with regards to general theory, it made 'Marxism–Leninism Mao Zedong Thought' China's new orthodoxy.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao's public persona began a transformation from revolutionary leader to symbol of a new regime. Chinese tradition and Stalinist practice combined to expect a glorified, all-powerful leader, and the image reflected a tightening of Mao's control and a growing aloofness from collegial leadership. The four volumes of Mao's Selected Works were published in the 1950s, ironically increasing Mao's intellectual reputation at a time when he was drifting away from writing coherent, persuasive essays. But he was not falling asleep. His major essay from the 1930s, On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People (1957), raised the question of how to maintain correct leadership after the revolution. Unfortunately, the rather liberal answer of this essay was replaced by a harsh one based on class struggle even before the essay was published.

The canon of Mao's writings and the cult of personality took a dramatic turn in the leftist era from 1957 to 1976. Mao was supreme leader, and so his public gestures (such as swimming the Yangtze in 1966) and 'latest directives' displaced any need for persuasion. In the chaos of the Cultural Revolution Mao and his thought became an icon of salvation. Statues, buttons, and the Little Red Book of quotations became omnipresent symbols of devotion. Meanwhile, various Red Guard groups published various unofficial Mao texts. The nadir of official adulation was his appointed successor Lin Biao's claim that Mao was a genius far above the rest of humanity. After Lin's failed attempt to assassinate Mao in 1971 the claims of omniscience receded, but brief quotations were printed...
in red on the masthead of China's newspapers until after his death.

2.2 China after Mao

By the time of Mao's death in September 1976, support for revolutionary leftism had hollowed out to a clique of ideologues known (after their overthrow in October) as the 'Gang of Four.' The regime then faced the difficult challenge of framing the legitimacy of continuing CPC leadership while abjuring leftist and the Cultural Revolution. In 1978 a speech by Mao was published in which he admitted that the Great Leap Forward was a mistake and that he was responsible for it. Meanwhile, Deng Xiaoping resurrected the Mao quotation 'Seek truth from facts,' and by 1979 had abandoned the remaining policies of the leftist era. In September 1979 Party elder Ye Jianying made the first public analysis of Mao's errors, including the 'appalling catastrophe' of the Cultural Revolution, and his viewpoint was formalized in the Party's 1981 Resolution on Party History. The verdict was that Mao was 'seventy percent right and thirty percent wrong,' but in effect he was held to be correct for the first 70 percent of his life and incorrect for the last 30 percent.

The general framework of honoring but criticizing Mao has led to an explosion of available Mao texts, memoirs by those who knew him, and historical research. Since Mao can now be treated as history rather than as sacred authority, texts do not have to be adjusted for current politics as were the texts in the Selected Works. However, the cottage industry of academic Mao studies and the popularity of Mao charms and votive pictures should not be mistaken for a continuing influence of Maoism. The Cultural Revolution was too recent and too brutal, and the rural revolution is too distant from current challenges. For the foreseeable future Mao's primary function will be as a teacher by negative example. But Mao Zedong's thought and his example will remain deeply planted in China's heritage.

3. Maoism beyond China

Ever since the visit of Edgar Snow to Yan'an in 1936 produced Red Star over China, Mao has been known to the outside world and outsiders have interacted with developments in China. Snow's rendering of Mao's autobiographical interview was translated into Chinese and served for decades as Mao's unofficial biography. On a less flattering note, Stalin quickly detected Mao's originality and maintained a private attitude of derisive distrust towards him. By the same token reversed, in the 1940s many international communists considered Mao and Tito to be the most promising new leaders. The success of China's rural revolution increased Mao's credibility, and countries as distant as Bulgaria were inspired by the Great Leap Forward to attempt more modest leaps themselves.

The introverted radicalization of Chinese politics in the 1960s, highlighted of course by the Cultural Revolution, changed the pattern of external influence. On the one hand, China seemed less attractive and more dangerous to other countries, including other communist countries like Vietnam. On the other hand, those who sought radical political solutions idealized China and Mao. The fearsome mobilization, the radical egalitarianism, the thorough rejection of bourgeois values, and the sheer vastness and excitement of the Cultural Revolution induced people to form splinter parties from establishment communist parties. Mao was a major inspiration to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and to the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) in Peru. More broadly, by demonstrating that great things could happen if people massed together Maoism contributed to the world political ferment of the 1960s.

See also: China: Sociocultural Aspects; Chinese Revolutions: Twentieth Century; Communism; Communist Parties; Marx, Karl (1818-89); Marxist Economic Thought; Marxism and Law; Marxism/Leninism; Marxist Social Thought, History of; Revolutions, Theories of

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