Review Essay

MAO BEFORE MAOISM

Brantly Womack


These are the first five of a projected ten-volume set of translations of the available works of Mao Zedong up to 1949. The remaining volumes are expected to be released over the next two or three years. Although no compilation of this sort will be complete, given the hesitations of Chinese archivists in releasing sensitive materials, it is a remarkably rich collection of documents, reaching from Mao’s school notebooks and marginal jottings as a young man to previously unpublished interview transcripts with Edgar Snow in 1936.

The texts collected by Takeuchi Minoru and published in Japan beginning in 1970 are the most important single source on Mao’s work, although the first

---


THE CHINA JOURNAL, NO. 46, JULY 2001
volume relies heavily on a collection of texts published in Hunan in 1991. There has been a remarkably extensive and careful search for additional texts, however, and comparisons of available versions. While there is evidence that other texts remain in the archives, at this point Mao’s Road to Power is the most complete collection of Mao’s pre-1949 writings in any language. In everything but name, this is a “Complete Works of Mao Zedong”, reaching to 1937 in these five volumes and eventually to 1949. The scholarly effort is worthy of the task. The translators, editors, scholars, supporters and funders have every reason to be proud of their accomplishment and, for the next generation at least, anyone interested in 20th-century China will be grateful for their labours.

The translations are careful and are generally an improvement over other versions. However, they lack the genius of the official Chinese translations. The translations in the official Selected Works of Mao Tsetung are remarkable for their ability to transcend the literal text and to get the original point across better with a different construction or wording. Of course, there are few official translations. The 3,692 pages of translation in these five volumes are covered in 263 pages in the Selected Works, and Beijing’s translated versions were edited and polished versions from the 1950s rather than the earliest versions, which are translated here. Given this, Mao’s Road to Power is the essential source for Mao’s pre-1949 works in English. The next major advance in Mao sources probably will not be another shelf of fat books, but rather an electronic version with instant interlinearity and glosses.

The explanatory footnotes to the translations are excellent, and a godsend to the reader. Every Chinese person, institution, place and event referred to in the text is addressed and explained in the notes, and the index provides thorough cross-referencing. Although the editor’s claim in the annotations to have “assumed no knowledge of anything relating to China” might possibly underestimate the ignorance of a first-year class, the explications are sufficient for anyone serious enough about Mao to be consulting these volumes.

The set has a brief general introduction and a detailed introduction to the period covered in each volume. These volume introductions total 358 pages, in themselves a substantial treatise on Mao’s thought and career. The introductions betray a definite “mission creep”: each succeeding one is longer than the last.

---


4 Mao Zedong, Selected Works of Mao Tsetung, 4 Vols (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).
with the first a modest 41 pages and the last weighing in at 103 pages. The later introductions provide more context, and those for Volumes 4 and 5 provide a historical context rather than an explicit discussion of the intellectual content of the texts. Thus Mao’s comments on the German philosopher Friedrich Paulsen receive careful commentary in Volume 1, while “Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War”, by far the most important text of Volume 5, is dismissed from serious consideration as being “too long and complex to be analysed in detail here” (Vol. I, p. xxviii).

All of the introductions show an admirable reserve in avoiding the imposition of a specific interpretation of the texts. The objective is to help the reader cope with the texts, not to tell the reader how to read them. The tone of the introductions is quiet and disciplined, with the assumption being that the reader is there to read Mao, not to read about Mao.

It is important for the understanding of Mao Zedong that his words and actions not simply be fit into a narrative that assumes that he succeeded ultimately in becoming the founding leader of the People’s Republic of China and the instigator of the Cultural Revolution. Instead, the uncertainties and practical horizons that faced Mao at each stage need to be appreciated, as well as the changing focus and development of his values and world view. In other words, we must seek to understand the young Mao, not just the “younger old Mao”. These texts are the best evidence both of Mao’s thinking and of his perceived environment, because in general he is trying to push that environment in directions he finds feasible and desirable. By concentrating on the texts, we can attempt to view Mao’s development as he experienced it; namely, as a series of vivid presents shaped by a remembered past, rather than, as we tend to see it, a prologue to a known future.

The task of recapturing Mao’s thinking is particularly important for the period ending in 1936. First, these writings represent the first half (43 years) of his life, and almost the first half (9 of 22 years) of the rural revolution. Second, the content and role of Mao’s thought and politics underwent a fundamental shift in 1936–37. Attaining the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party required him to reformulate personal ideas and convictions into official guiding principles. The process of articulating and systematizing what became known as the “Thought of Mao Zedong” within China and simply “Maoism” to outsiders began in 1936 and deepened in 1937. Mao took the task very seriously, and it was complicated by the shift from a rural class-based revolution to a national united front against the Japanese. Mao’s intellectual ferment at this time was comparable

---

5 Younger readers may need to be reminded that the first “Maoism” was that of the rural revolution rather than that of the Cultural Revolution. To relive the intellectual terrain of the judgments about Mao in the United States before the Cultural Revolution, see the debate on the subject from the first issues of The China Quarterly: Karl Wittvogel, “The Legend of ‘Maoism’”, China Quarterly, Nos 1, 2 (January–March, April–June 1960), pp. 72–86, 16–34; and Benjamin Schwartz, “The Legend of the ‘Legend of Maoism’”, The China Quarterly No. 2 (April–June 1960), pp. 35–42.
in depth to his pre-Marxist period, but the context of the ferment was completely different. As will be seen when we discuss "Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War," while Mao’s convictions in the "pre-Maoist" period provided the starting point for his views, the new tasks of Party leadership ushered in a new era in his thinking.

My purpose here, however, will not be to propose a definitive reading of Mao, but rather to entice and encourage other readers to take seriously the content and context of his thought.

The Pre-Marxist Period, 1912–1920

Volume 1 contains a wealth of newly available texts, which provide the most significant sources for the understanding of Mao’s pre-Marxist intellectual development since his autobiographical monologue with Edgar Snow in 1936. Of course, not all of the texts are new. Mao’s essay “On Physical Education” from Xin Qinqian (New Youth) has long been available, and the first volume of Takeuchi Minoru’s Mao Zedong Ji (1970) included Mao’s essays from the Xiang River Review and his arguments for Hunan self-government. But Mao’s extensive marginal notes on Friedrich Paulsen’s System of Ethics had been known only through tantalizing snippets quoted in Li Rui’s 1957 biography. Had this work been available, Frederic Wakeman’s History and Will, in part an attempt to encircle the young Mao intellectually by analysing all the influences on him, could have been more direct and more fruitful.

This is not to say that the general texture of Mao’s intellectual environment before 1921 was unknown until recently. It is a credit to the enduring value of careful scholarly judgment that Benjamin Schwartz’s 1951 classic, Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao, conveys a good sense of Mao’s general intellectual milieu by analysing the writings of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao on the eve of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. If Mao’s early writings were read in isolation he might be assumed to be a lone fish swimming against the current; in reality, the collapse of traditional order, the excitement of radical new ideas from outside China, and the absence of an institutionalized career path for young people created a veritable salmon run of active minds deeply engaged in radical alternatives. Mao’s solidarity with his friends and his generation—and by extension with China and the world—is a basic premise of his thought. As Mao put it in a letter from 1915:

---


7 Frederic Wakeman, Jr., History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung’s Thought (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

Of the little progress I have made in these last years, only the smaller part was achieved through books; the larger part of my gains were the result of questioning and seeking solutions to difficulties. Nothing would be worse for me than to give up discussion and debate and concentrate on books alone. (Vol. 1, p. 68)

The value of Mao’s marginal comments on the Paulsen text is twofold. Reading this book was a major influence on Mao at the time. It was a key teaching material used by Yang Changji, his most respected teacher and future father-in-law. More importantly, however, the 144 pages of text and commentary record a virtual conversation between Mao and Paulsen on basic questions of ethics. Although Mao’s comments begin as brief summaries of the texts, he develops a distinctive ethical perspective in the process of articulating his points of agreement and disagreement with the text.

The most basic similarity between the young Mao and Paulsen is that they both approach the world in terms of ethics, and consider ethics a problem of fundamental attitudes rather than one of sophisticated dissection of complicated dilemmas. The most basic difference lies in their views of the functions of philosophy and of the individual. Paulsen says in a passage not commented upon by Mao: “All philosophies originate in the conflict between the beliefs of individuals and the common beliefs of their nationality” (Vol. 1, p. 275).

This statement reflects both the influence of Plato’s metaphor of the cave and (in context) the distinction drawn by Ferdinand Tönnies between traditional Gemeinschaft (community) and modern Gesellschaft (society). For Plato, the pursuit of truth is a lonely and self-isolating mission. His notion of the “philosopher king” is an ironic oxymoron rather than a feasible ideal; more typical is the fate of Socrates, killed for educating Athens. But according to Tönnies, modernity dissolves the inertial power of communities and encourages freely contracting individuals to pursue their own goals and interests. Thus the modern ethical task addressed by Paulsen is that of enlightening the individual conscience concerning obligation, and his System of Ethics is essentially a judicious essay on how to be a moral individual in a modern society.

China’s situation was quite different in 1918, and Mao expected something else from philosophy. As Mao put it in a letter written while reading Paulsen:

---

9 As Mao recounted to Edgar Snow: “The teacher who made the strongest impression on me was Yang Changji, a returned student from England ... He believed in his ethics very strongly, and tried to imbue his students with the desire to become just, moral, virtuous men, useful in society. Under his influence I read a book on ethics translated by Cai Yuanpei and was inspired to write an essay which I entitled, ‘The Energy of the Mind’. I was then an idealist and my essay was highly praised by Professor Yang Changji, from his idealist viewpoint. He gave me a mark of 100 for it”. Edgar Snow, Red Star over China (New York: Random House, 1934, 1938, 1968), p. 146.


Therefore, in my humble opinion, in today's world there should be broad-minded people who will begin with philosophy and ethics to reform philosophy, reform ethics, and change fundamentally the mentality of the whole country. This is like waving a huge flag to gather tens of thousands of men; this is like a flash of thunder and lightning that everyone hears in the dark; it is utterly irresistible. (Vol. 1, p. 132)

One could easily misinterpret this passage as merely a plan to use philosophy for propaganda purposes, but in fact it is asserting the central importance of philosophical questions that Mao considers as yet unresolved. He continues:

Today, behavior such as observing chastity, rearing children, repairing bridges, and fixing roads, or even virtues like filial piety, loyalty to friends, love of one's neighbor, and generous charity are no more than blind acts. Although these deeds are laudable, in terms of the psychology of those enforcing the sanctions as well as those being sanctioned, they are rather aimless and are not based on knowledge of the great ultimate principles of the universe. (Vol. 2, p. 135, see also p. 211)

At this point, Mao does not consider himself the philosopher-saviour of China, but rather a microcosm of China's total chaos:

After graduation I think it is better to continue to study than to teach or work ... I have not the slightest idea of what to do about the universe, human life, the state, or education so how could I go about teaching or working? Forcing myself to do so would be a waste of time. I find it all extremely confusing, and what has its source in confusion will certainly result in confusion. (Vol. 2, p. 136)

What Mao wanted from philosophy was considerably different from what Paulsen was offering. Rather than a personal moral guidebook for a confusing world, Mao wanted an organizing certainty for a situation of chaos that seemed to offer only the extreme alternatives of transformation or destruction. The notion that ideas speak directly and immediately to the wills of listeners made the project of individual enlightenment something quite different from a solitary trip away from the common prejudices of the crowd.

Individualism is the resonance between Mao and Paulsen, but Mao's comments limn a fundamentally different notion of what individualism entails. For Paulsen, the individual is a distinct and free consciousness who must be persuaded to restrain his or her natural desires for the sake of others: "Thus those we call unselfish tend to stress altruism, while the so-called egoist leans toward emphasizing self-interest" (Vol. 1, p. 201). In contrast, Mao emphatically rejected the notion of altruistic morality and the separation of self-interest and duty. For him, the individual comes first, although it is not the granular, isolated individual presupposed by Paulsen:

Since human beings have an ego, for which the self is the center of all things and all thought, self-interest is primary for all persons. That this serves the interests of others is due to the fact that those others who belong to the same category as the self share related interests ... Nothing in this world takes the other as its starting
point, and the self does not seek to benefit anything in the world that is totally unrelated to the self. (Vol. 1, p. 200)

It might appear that Mao was advocating a Faustian egotism that would subordinate all to the desires of the self. But the categorical similarities that allow the extension of the self are substantive links, not merely intellectual typologies. Mao’s individual is a pre-Cartesian, socially located person, and he is suspicious of anyone who would deny themselves:

Alas! At this point I have a very strong feeling that there are many who use the excuse of altruism to seek their own egoistic gain. Truth is good, falsehood is bad. To act in self-interest may be small-minded, but is at least true ... To extend self-interest to the greater self of benefiting all mankind, to the greater self of benefiting all living things, to the greater self of benefiting the universe, this is to go from a small truth to a greater truth. (Vol. 1, pp. 201–2)

Mao opposed any attempts to constrain the individual, calling the churches, capitalism, monarchy and the state the “four evil demons of the world” (Vol. 1, p. 208). But the relationship between individual and society remains vague: “Thus the individual, society and the state are individuals. The universe is also an individual. Thus, it is possible to say that there are no groups in the world, only individuals” (Vol. 1, p. 209).

Mao’s elision of individual and community appears to resonate with Kang Youwei’s vision of a Great Harmony, but Mao embraces the challenge of living in a time of disorder with ferocious excitement. He notes that Great Harmony looks attractive because of current disorders, but he points out that new things and men of talent arise in times of chaos. The flux and decay of the social fabric expose the individual to consciousness and will, and from this challenge heroes emerge:

The great actions of the hero are his own, are the expression of his motive power, lofty and cleansing, relying on no precedent. His force is that of a powerful wind arising from a deep gorge, like the irresistible sexual desire for one’s lover, a force that will not stop, that cannot be stopped ... Because he cannot be stopped or eliminated, he is the strongest, the most powerful. (Vol. 1, p. 263–4)

It should be recalled that Mao was not simply polishing his armor and naming his charger. He was organizing evening literacy classes for workers and creating a physical education program at his school. The practical feasibility of action was always a primary consideration. But Mao’s horizons of thought were peculiarly important for his action because he rejected the “blind morality” of everyday life.

Mao’s emphasis on individualism and the idealism underpinning his attraction to Paulsen were short-lived. At the time of the May Fourth Movement a year later, the individual morphs into the “unions of the popular masses” and ultimately into the “great union of the popular masses” that will transform society (Vol. 1, pp. 378–89). The strong “I” of the Paulsen comments becomes an inclusive “we” persuading “we, the masses” to action. With the failure of the May
Fourth Movement, Mao’s focus shifts from persuasion to organization. Communism becomes his ideological and organizational anchor.

These later developments are not inconsistent with the perspective of his comments on Paulsen. Mao’s borderless ego expands from the self, and expects others to do so as well, so unions based on perceptions of common misery and interest are a natural step, and a view of society based on class struggle is but a small step further. Because community is not an aggregation of individuals, but rather a larger, collective individuality, the individual remains fully exposed to the tyranny of the masses. As in the Great Harmony, distinctions and boundaries are fictions of small minds. But Mao is prepared for the activity of the Great Struggle rather than for the contemplation of Great Harmony.

National Revolution and Social Revolution, December 1920 – June 1927

The next phase in Mao’s political and intellectual development is defined by his commitment to Communism in late 1920 and continues through the upsurge of peasant associations in conjunction with the Northern Expedition of 1927.

These six years cover a cycle in Mao’s view of the present and its possibilities. It begins with disillusionment in the wake of the failure of the May Fourth Movement to transform China completely and instantaneously, “A Russian-style revolution ... is a last resort when all other means have been exhausted” (Vol. 2, p. 9). Mao’s energy level remained extraordinary, however, and he was actively engaged in a broad range of political activities. In late 1925, as the Northern Expedition began to get underway, Mao’s revolutionary excitement started to mount again. In his classic Hunan Report of February 1927, Mao returned to a fever pitch of expectation, stating that “within four months the [peasant associations] have brought about a great revolution in the countryside, a revolution without parallel in history” (Vol. 2, p. 431). Mao would not again be so guilelessly optimistic until the Great Leap Forward.

The underlying theme of this phase is a commitment to political revolution. In contrast to the May Fourth Movement, when Mao rejected violence because it would taint the revolutionary society with the methods of the old (Vol. 1, p. 319), Mao’s activities were now premised on the need to capture political power. Between 1920 and 1925, political organization became the key task. This involved both the development of a Communist political core and a constant, multi-dimensional effort to influence broader audiences. In 1926 Mao returned to his previous level of excited anticipation, but the object of his excitement is a political revolution carried out by peasants who engage in necessary excesses of terror against the old order.

Mao did not become a pessimist in 1920, but he did become more realistic about the solidity of the old order. In a letter to his Hunansean colleagues in France, Mao argued that methods based on enlightenment are “all very well in theory. In reality, it can’t be done” (Vol. 2, p. 8). Mao pointed out that educating the public requires schools and newspapers. Unless the Communists have political power, they will not have these educational tools at hand. On a deeper plane, he argued that desires are stronger than ideas, and therefore the capitalists will never be dissuaded by mere enlightenment, nor will the proletariat be
persuaded to wait. Mao concluded that “my present view of absolute liberalism, anarchism, and even democracy, is that these things sound very good in theory, but are not feasible in reality” (Vol. 2, p. 11).

It is important to note that Mao's new realism regarding the means of transformation did not change his goal. Even though the situation of warlord disunity focused attention on national revolution, Mao continued to view the Chinese revolution as part of a world transformation, and he felt that Chinese revolutionaries had global as well as local responsibilities:

True, we who are born in this place, China, should naturally work in this locality, both because it is more convenient to act here, and because China is more immature and more corrupt than any other place in the world, and reform should therefore start here. But our feelings should be universal; we should not love only this place and not other places. (Vol. 2, p. 7)

Mao's own political work was extremely diverse in the 1920s. Despite his misgivings about the power of education, he was the principal of a primary school and expanded his Hunan activities to include a very successful progressive book service. He also became deeply involved in labour organization in Hunan before higher positions with the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang pulled him away to Shanghai and Guangzhou. Although this work was undoubtedly important for developing his political skills, Mao's intellectual development was not stirred until his re-exposure to Hunan's rural areas in 1925 and his subsequent involvement with the rural programs of the CCP and KMT.

Mao's 1926–27 writings on rural revolution were innovative in a number of important respects. First was his discovery of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. He was by no means the only person to make this discovery. Peng Pai had organized peasant associations as early as 1922. However, it was Mao's personal experience when returning to his hometown on sick leave in 1925 that firmly planted his perspective on the unfolding revolutionary upsurge. Both the CCP and the KMT were committed in principle to rural reform and the inclusion of the peasantry, but for different reasons it was not high on either agenda. For the KMT, the ideological rejection of class struggle, the landlord roots of much of the membership, and the necessity of collaborating with warlords during the Northern Expedition precluded a serious peasant policy. One might think that the CCP would be better disposed to a radical peasant policy, but the urban orientation of its activities and the cosmopolitan and Russian orientation of its ideology left the peasantry on the periphery. It was not surprising, therefore, that the leadership was willing to sacrifice peasant radicalism to maintaining the united front with the KMT.

Mao was not willing to forsake popular revolution in order to maintain Party discipline. He did not abandon the CCP in the first six months of 1927, but he did

---

stand on the side of the peasant associations and call for “every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade” to join him. If “the major objective of the Chinese national revolution is ... to help liberate the peasants” (Vol. 2, p. 472), then from Mao’s perspective the tension between himself and the CCP leadership was caused not by his own radicalism, but by their revisionism. From the point of view of a Party bureaucrat like Zhang Guotao, Mao had gone native. But as Mao put it bluntly to the Central Executive Committee of the Party:

Today the masses are going to the left, and in many places our party, not to mention the Kuomintang, shows that it has not reached the same level of revolutionary feeling as the masses. This is something that very much demands our attention. (Vol. 2, p. 427)

The classic text for Mao’s peasant revolutionary epiphany remains the Hunan Report of February 1927, and especially its introduction. Here Mao wrote up his empirical investigation of the facts of the peasant associations (and how these facts differed from urban impressions created by fleeing landlords), his claim that rural revolution is the core of the national revolution, and his challenge to his comrades to be revolutionary rather than merely political.

In a very short time, in China’s central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward on the road to liberation ... Every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade will be put to the test, to be accepted or rejected as they decide. (Selected Works [SW] Vol. 1, pp. 23–4; cf Vol. 2, p. 430)

Of course, in retrospect Mao’s rural fervor had a prophetic resonance with the direction taken by the Chinese revolution (undoubtedly the reason Mao included the Hunan Report in his Selected Works). Mao’s admonition that the Party will be judged by the masses even reminds us of his enthusiasm for bombarding the headquarters at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. However, for understanding Mao’s own intellectual development, it is more important to compare this stage in his thinking with his development up to this point.

Contrasting the Hunan Report with Mao’s enthusiasm for the May Fourth Movement not only highlights the change in his expectations of revolutionary transformation, it also highlights the conditionality of his commitment to political

---

13 Chang Kuo-t’ao (Zhang Guotao), Autobiography of Chang Kuo-t’ao (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1971), Vol. 1, pp. 596–615. For his part, Mao thought that there was a “hint of something counterrevolutionary” in the attitude of the Party Centre toward the peasant associations (Vol. 2, p. 30).

organization at the time. In 1919 Mao expected that a benighted society could be rendered instantly transparent by enlightenment, and that spontaneous association would accompany intellectual transformation. Like angels, Mao and his friends at the Xiang River Review were merely bringing the good news to the world. In 1927 Mao perceived the revolutionary process as a brutal power struggle in which excessive violence is necessary (jiao wang guo zheng) in order to destroy the entrenched power and prestige of the old order and to clear the ground for the new order. Mao still believed in rapid transformation, but mass political struggle now educated the educators. By 1927 there was a strong sense of the organized “we” and the “they” of the masses, but the Party had not created and was not in control of the rural hurricane. In contrast to Lenin’s emphasis on the scientific correctness of Bolshevik Marxism, Mao did not think it the Party’s prerogative to judge the revolutionary quality of the peasants, but the other way around. Mao’s estimate at the time that the democratic revolution was seven-tenths a peasant accomplishment was not made in ignorance of Marx’s preference for the proletariat, but in defiance of it.\(^\text{15}\) As Mao put it in the last line of the Hunan Report, “To talk about arousing the masses of the people day in and day out and then to be scared to death when the masses do rise—what difference is there between this and Lord She’s love of dragons” (Vol. 2, p. 464).\(^\text{16}\)

**Lessons of Survival, July 1927 – December 1930**

In the second half of 1927, the Chinese Communist Party was drowned by history. Not only did it lose 90 per cent of its membership in various clashes with warlords and the KMT, but its remnants were now located in the unfamiliar terrain of remote rural areas and in the more familiar but unpromising terrain of the urban underground. The turmoil of the moment created eddies where the Party survived; but with the Kuomintang’s capture of Beijing in June 1928 and the consolidation of KMT rule, most of these began to be wiped out. The Party’s structure, personnel and ideology were unsuited to the villages where it had taken refuge, and therefore it scrambled to return to the cities, which were the strongholds of its enemy. If history were beyond the influence of individuals, then the CCP would have become a quaint survivor of a historic moment of failure, and its rural remnants would be no more significant than the Mongol villages in Yunnan left by Genghis Khan.

Mao Zedong was the most prepared of the Communist leaders for a flight to the mountains, but it was hardly what he had forecast only months earlier. In October 1927 he led the remnants of his forces defeated in the Autumn Harvest Uprising to the rugged and remote Jinggangshan. There he had to figure out whether and how revolutionary survival was possible.

\(^\text{15}\) This sentence (Vol. 2, p. 433) was removed in the *Selected Works*.

\(^\text{16}\) The story is that Lord She was fascinated by dragons and filled his palace with representations of them, but when a real dragon heard of his interest and came visiting, he was scared out of his wits.
In a sense this was the most creative period of Mao’s political thought. In these three years from 1927 to 1930, Mao developed a strategy for rural revolution in which remote areas under CCP control would be the anchor for a protracted encirclement of the cities. The basic idea was heretical enough, and it was grudgingly accepted by the Central Committee only after the failure of the last wave of attempted urban conquests in 1930. But rural revolution involved far more than retargeting. The role and tactics of the military had to be recast, the Party’s handling of military, political and economic tasks had to be integrated, and problems of governance had to be addressed before a national political victory could be possible. All of this involved constant investigation, trial and error in situations where “one false move, and the whole chess game is lost” (Vol. 3, p. 118). Mao’s compass in rural revolution was the necessity of survival, and he managed to synthesize survival skills into a new paradigm of revolution that did not begin to be systematically formulated until 10 years later.

The problem of survival is best summed up in the title given in the Selected Works to Mao’s first substantial work after moving to the mountains: “Why is it that Red Political Power Can Exist in China?” The more practical version of the question would be “how” rather than “why”, and Mao dealt with that question every day. At the time of writing, Mao had been in the mountains for a year, and his most recent brush with personal and group annihilation had been only a month earlier, when he fought and won a desperate battle with less than one battalion against four regiments. Almost as dangerous as the enemy were the directives and emissaries from Party authorities, and the slow economic strangulation of the Jinggangshan base by blockade and poverty led to its abandonment in 1929 for greener pastures in southern Jiangxi. But simply having survival skills would eventually have made Mao into a local warlord with an interesting personal history. His answer to “why” marked the beginning of rural revolution.

Red power could survive not because of its strength, but because of the conflicts among the ruling powers, which gave rise to relatively autonomous power bases among surviving warlords and others who were only ostensibly under the Kuomintang government: no-one could consolidate an effective and disciplined national regime. This produced contested zones on the edges of local power centres where the Communists could survive. Defeating them in these border areas would require coordination between competitors. If Mao’s Jinggangshan force were attacked from the Hunan side, Mao could move into Jiangxi; and if the Jiangxi side exhausted itself against the Communists, it could expect to be pounced on afterwards by its warlord neighbours. Thus, although all the powers hated the Communists, localized possibilities for survival persisted.

This was the key difference between the realities of rural revolution and the Hunan Report’s vision of a national revolution with rural support. Strategy at Jinggangshan could not be that of a mighty storm. The fateful move from concentrating on the revolutionary moment to concentrating on the revolutionary

---

17 As Mao put it, “this battle [of Huangyangjie, 30 August 1927] saved our last base” (Vol. 3, p. 88).
place began here, even though Mao's hope for "prairie fires" was not finally snuffed out until the failure of the attack on Changsha in September 1930. If there were places where Communist control could be established, then the strategy and tactics of utilizing, defending and governing base areas had to be developed. Here Mao was in completely unexplored territory.

The most important policy dimension of survival was of course military. Even before the defeat of the Autumn Harvest Uprising, Mao was regretting the Party's inattention to military matters. One of the discoveries of Mao's *Road to Power* is that Mao first used the famous saying "political power grows from the barrel of a gun" in August 1927. In a situation of gross military inferiority but locational advantage, the military prerequisites of revolutionary politics required developing guerilla tactics that were very cautious about risking military assets in confrontations and very active in creating opportunities for surprise and harassment. Just as importantly, however, military activities had to be harnessed for arousing the masses and extending the base areas. Otherwise the army would be neglecting to develop the only advantage that it had over surrounding hostile forces.

Liberating the base areas turned out to be considerably more difficult than Mao had imagined in the Hunan Report. The leadership of peasant associations was often controlled by the local elite, one reason for the silent collapse of the "mighty storm" in 1927. But Mao's initial policies of massacring landlords and seizing all their land for redistribution were also ineffective. Although these appeared to benefit the majority of poor peasants, in fact the harshness of the policies intimidated everyone. The problem of maximum mobilization of the base-area population and resources could not be solved with a simple formula. As time in the countryside lengthened, the problem of regenerating the army and the Party from base-area resources became more acute.

Trial and error were inevitable in the development of policies for the base areas, and Mao shouted himself hoarse demanding that all cadres carry out careful investigations of the actual conditions in the areas under their control:

If you have not investigated a certain problem, you will lose your right to speak on it. Isn't this too brutal? Not in the least. Since you have investigated neither the actual situation nor the historical circumstances of this problem, and have no detailed knowledge of it, anything you said about it could only be nonsense ... This won't do! This won't do! Stress investigation! Oppose talking nonsense! (Vol. 3, p. 419)

Mao himself carried out a number of extensive investigations, especially in the 1927–30 period. Almost one-third of Volume 3 contains investigation reports, many available here in English for the first time, and his detailed interviews with

---

18 See Vol. 3, p. 31 (fn. 6). Previously it had been dated from the Sixth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee in November 1938.

19 This can be perceived in the "16-character formula" for guerilla tactics developed in May 1928. Vol. 3, pp. 155–6 (fn. 155).
people in the various localities he visited were vital to his grasp of the real horizons of possibility in each place. Without such sustained personal contact with existing conditions, a cadre would inevitably be “idealistic,” a word that had shifted from Mao’s earlier juxtaposition with materialism to mean not realistic. Idealism would lead to either opportunism or adventurism because the cadre’s mental distance from the target reality would cause policy to veer either toward the Right or the Left. The various leadership faults that Mao criticized in 1929, most importantly the “purely military viewpoint” and the “roving rebel mentality”, vitiated revolutionary strength by compartmentalizing military and political tasks, failing to develop local mass associations, and so forth (Vol. 3, pp. 195–207).

Mao himself made two major leadership mistakes in the 1927–30 period, one of which is greatly clarified by the documents in Mao’s Road to Power. The first and best known mistake was an overly harsh policy toward rich peasants and landlords. As Mao observed much later, the exclusion of landlords from the base areas drove them into the hills. The oppression of the rich peasants had two negative effects. First, it induced them to disguise their economic background, causing endless cycles of reinvestigation. Second, it lowered economic productivity in the base areas. Because Mao’s early Jiangxi investigations were premised on class struggle, he was alert to attempts by rich peasants to evade equal distribution of wealth but not to the costs of a hostile policy. Essentially, Mao’s harsh policies were based on what might be called a majoritarian view of class struggle in which the line was drawn between the masses, who could expect to benefit from the revolution, and everyone else. But the basic problem was mobilization, and a majoritarian policy left the middle peasants indifferent. It isolated the masses rather than the enemy and therefore the poor peasants became cautious. Mao gradually realized the necessity of a new approach based on uniting an overwhelming majority, one which would maximize the solidarity and energy of the supporting forces in the village and minimize opposition. In the new strategy, the involvement of the middle peasants became an essential

---

20 The title of one section of “Oppose Book Worship” (May 1930) is, “If you do not investigate the actual situation, you will be idealist in your estimate of class forces and in your leadership of work, and the result will be either opportunism or adventurism” (Vol. 3, p. 421).

21 In 1958 Mao looked back in time and criticized the leftist policy of the 28 Bolsheviks as follows: “Because the number of rich peasants was very small we decided in principle to leave them alone, and to make concessions to them. But the ‘leftists’ did not agree. They advocated ‘giving the rich peasants bad land, and the landlords no land’. As a result the landlords had nothing to eat, and some of them fled to the mountains and formed guerilla bands”. Stuart Schram, Chairman Mao Talks to the People (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 97.

criterion of success. As Mao put it in 1933, “the success or failure of the agrarian revolution will be influenced by whether the middle peasants support or oppose it” (Vol. 4, p. 435). As we will see, the softening of Mao’s attitude toward the rich peasants led to conflicts with the CCP leadership in 1933, but mobilization rather than majoritarian class struggle became the touchstone of policy after the Long March.

The second, related mistake was the Futian incident, the violent and wholesale eradication of a hostile Communist base area that was in competition with Mao’s own in southwest Jiangxi from late 1930 to mid-1931. The incident originated with the move of Mao’s Red Army from Jinggangshan to southern Jiangxi, where the opposition was a local Communist organization that was critical of Mao’s anti-rich peasant policy and his military tactics. Mao’s response was to eliminate this opposition as counterrevolutionary (Vol. 3, pp. lxi–lxv; Vol. 4, pp. xxix–xliv). Thousands were executed.

Both of these excessive policies were supported by the Party Centre. Indeed, the Centre demanded an even harsher policy toward rich peasants. But such a strategy violated the principle of maximizing base-area resources. In the next phase of Mao’s politics, that of governing the Jiangxi Soviet, he downplayed repressive measures and developed the dynamic mobilizational policies later known as the mass line.

Despite Mao’s mistakes during 1927–30 in harshly carrying out “class struggle”, his accomplishments in that period remain remarkable. He took a fragment of a drowning urban party and with it began to swim among the rural masses.

**Governing the Chinese Soviet Republic, 1931–1934**

The complicated political and military history of the Chinese Soviet Republic (from November 1931 this was the official name of the Jiangxi Soviet) tends to overshadow the equally important developments in Mao’s politics during this period. This is not to belittle the political and military complexities, which are handled very well in the introduction to Volume 4. With Mao’s successes in Jiangxi and the declining prospects of urban underground activity, the Party Centre took an increasing interest in base-area affairs, and ultimately the Central Committee moved to Jiangxi in late January 1933. Mao, who had just settled his accounts with localistic opposition in the Futian incident, himself became the local leader despised by incoming leaders for his lack of proper Bolshevik leftism. Meanwhile, the Kuomintang’s five encirclement and suppression campaigns provided a recurring sequence of military crises. The first military campaign involved 100,000 KMT and warlord troops and the last campaign over 500,000, as many as Napoleon took into Russia.

Scale and complexity made governing the Jiangxi Soviet a qualitatively different problem from surviving in the mountains. By 1933 the Soviet had a population of three million, and there were now many levels of administration between the chairman of the Soviet and the villages. Mao’s frustration in dealing with mid-level officials is especially evident in his directives regarding local elections. His first demand that local levels organize elections and replace non-
functioning functionaries (Vol. 4, pp. 175–76) was issued a few weeks after he became chairman and was repeated 10 months later in September 1932 (Vol. 4, pp. 263–5). In December he noted that “not a single county has completed the electoral process”, and judged that “this election campaign has been a complete failure” (Vol. 4, p. 335).

It is hardly surprising that the elections were a failure. In effect, Mao was demanding that ineffective bureaucrats replace themselves. If that were a feasible solution there would have been no problem in the first place. Clearly the solution to governmental ineffectiveness was not to shout louder from the top. Mao had committed the error of commandism (excessive reliance on the power of authority) while trying to correct the error of bureaucratism (excessive reliance on the convenience of authority). Both of these errors were versions of estrangement from the masses aggravated by the complexity of Soviet government. But what could be done to mobilize the masses on a larger scale than the face-to-face situation of Jinggangshan? Mao’s response to this challenge in 1933 was his first mass campaign, the Land Investigation Movement. This campaign involved most of the features later made famous in Yan’an, including the mass line.

The politics of the Land Investigation Movement were very complicated. When the Central Committee arrived in Jiangxi in late January 1933, it proceeded to launch a campaign criticizing local opportunism that attacked Mao’s subordinates, including Deng Xiaoping. The Central Committee also gave Mao the responsibility of implementing a harsh new policy that emphasized exposing hidden landlords and rich peasants and punishing these families more severely. Mao disagreed with the policy not because of its harshness per se but because it frightened middle peasants and endangered their support, especially by threatening everyone with yet another land distribution. To Mao, the major problem of governance was how to mobilize maximum support for the regime, including army recruitment, development of the Party and government, and economic productivity, not making another attempt to squeeze fines from hidden class-alien elements. Mao’s subtle transformation of the Land Investigation Movement from yet another top-down Stalinist campaign to purify class ranks into a mass campaign that integrated and maximized participation can be seen in his statement of its purposes:

The Land Investigation Movement is a cruel and fierce class struggle; it is a great revolutionary movement of the masses; it is the foundation for improving the work of the Party, the soviets, and the mass organizations; it is the most essential link in our work at present. Only if the entire Party and all the soviets and labor unions mobilize their forces to participate in the movement can we launch, develop, and carry through this movement. (Vol. 4, p. 416)

Proof of Mao’s lack of squeamishness is that he advocated roving courts to try “important criminals” on the spot and, with mass approval, to execute them immediately (Vol. 4, pp. 429–30). Essentially, violence that mobilized the masses was good, while violence that intimidated the masses was bad. This was clear in the Hunan Report, but the moral basis for the judgment goes back much earlier (cf. Vol. 1, p. 95).
The Land Investigation Movement was completely different from the election campaign only six months earlier. First Mao quietly experimented with a pilot program in one township. Then he launched a preliminary phase of the movement in eight counties, holding two large meetings for gathering ideas and building enthusiasm. He supplied simple directives and emphasized that the movement should involve all cadres and organizations and should integrate army recruitment, bond sales and agricultural work as well as looking for hidden landlords and rich peasants. There was a preliminary summary a month later that emphasized success stories, and three months after that the movement was consolidated by elaborating official guidelines, correcting excesses and generalizing the movement. Finally, Mao published detailed investigations on two model townships. Neither model township had located many hidden enemies, but they were exemplars in army recruitment, bond sales and production.  

All of the major elements of later mass movements in Yan’an are present in the Land Investigation Movement. As Tang Tsou pointed out in a classic essay, the mass line during the revolution was not primarily a means of class struggle, but an interaction between the political purposes of the Party and the existing horizons of interests of the masses in a particular locality. It is during the Land Investigation Movement that Mao shifts to a politics sensitive to mass opinion within a mobilizational framework. However, since the Party Centre did not intend such a shift, it also led to his removal from government leadership in January 1934.

The most poignant of Mao’s works was his last major public address as chairman of the Jiangxi Soviet, translated as “Be Concerned with the Well-Being of the Masses, Pay Attention to Methods of Work” (Vol. 4, pp. 714–22; SW Vol. 1, p. 147–52). He might well have surmised that this would be his personal swan song as a leading Communist and possibly his last public words before the defeat of the Jiangxi Soviet and the collapse of the Party. Mao did not reminisce, however. Instead, he emphasized his new insights concerning the importance of mass work, which the participants in the three-day conference neglected to discuss:

Our central task at present is to mobilize the broad masses to take part in the revolutionary war, overthrow imperialism and the Guomindang by means of such war, spread the revolution throughout the country, and drive imperialism out of China ... If our comrades really comprehend this task and understand that the


revolution must at all costs be spread throughout the country, then they should in no way neglect or underestimate the immediate interests, the well-being, of the broad masses. For the revolutionary war is a war of the masses; it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them. (SW Vol. 1, p. 147; Vol. 4, p. 716)

Mao’s understanding of the dynamics of rural revolution had completed a cycle from the initial perception of the importance of rural revolution in the Hunan Report seven years earlier, through the sobering lessons of surviving as a localized, weak power, to a realization that mass support is not a categorical derivative of class struggle, but rather a political process in which the Party’s identification with the masses was a policy objective rather than a presumption. At the age of 41, with the young Stalinists in the Centre orchestrating his ouster from the leadership and the noose of the Kuomintang government’s Fifth Encirclement and Suppression Campaign strangling the Jiangxi Soviet, he could not have imagined an opportunity to make use of this insight.

Toward the Second United Front, January 1935 – July 1937

With the Long March and Mao’s rise to Party leadership, he had to cope again with basic problems of survival, but in a transformed context. In 1935 survival was that of an uprooted army fleeing the enemy through 11 provinces rather than that of a base area, and even after arriving in northern Shaanxi in October, the political and military context of survival had to be reconceived on a national scale as defence against Japan.

Mao’s new position of leadership (which took most of 1935 to consolidate) was also novel to him. For the first time, he was now the primary leader of the Party. He was no longer a frustrated subordinate, and he was now responsible for articulating his viewpoint and policies as official statements of the Party. Before 1935 to speak openly was to speak in relationship to an orthodoxy set by superiors; the tension produced by subordination is most apparent in the Land Investigation Movement documents. From 1936 onward Mao became the official voice of the Party, and adjusting to this role was one of his major intellectual challenges in this period. Mao’s thinking was becoming Mao Zedong Thought.

It is remarkable that the Party survived the loss of the Jiangxi Soviet and the Long March. The Red Army was reduced from 300,000 to 30,000, and the hardships and narrow escapes were instantly legendary. As Mao put it two months after arrival, “Since the time when Pan Gu divided the heavens from the earth and the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors reigned, has history ever witnessed such a Long March as ours?” (Vol. 5, p. 92; SW Vol. 1, p. 160). At one point during the Long March he had decided to drive onward toward the Soviet Union and seek shelter, but newspapers found in a town they passed through informed him of Communist base areas in northern Shaanxi, so he headed there instead (Vol. 5, pp. xlvi–xlvii). Surviving the Long March did not convince Mao of his own or the Party’s indestructibility, but rather that mistakes could indeed destroy the revolution (Vol. 5, p. 484; SW Vol. 1, p. 199).

The Long March returned military matters to the top of Mao’s agenda, although initially in the deadly practical sense indicated by the title of one of his
messages, “There is No Urgency for Us to Seek Combat in the Next Few Days” (Vol. 5, p. 31). From a more theoretical perspective, he was faced with the task of generalizing his experience with encirclement and suppression campaigns to fit mobile warfare on the run. Moreover, the dislodging from Jiangxi as well as increasing Japanese pressure on China made possible the prospect of cooperation with non-Communist forces, and ultimately, after the Xi’an incident in December 1936, a second united front with the Kuomintang.

Mao’s rapid adaptation to the role of Party spokesperson to the outside world can be seen in a series of five interviews with Edgar Snow made available here for the first time. Mao focused relentlessly on Japanese imperialism, driving home the points that the Party was prepared to unite with all forces, domestic and foreign, against the Japanese, but in any case would resist Japan and would eventually prevail because “the war will be fought in China. This means that the Japanese will be surrounded by a hostile Chinese people” (Vol. 5, p. 265).

Internal Party politics was more challenging. First he had to consolidate his position within the leadership group from Jiangxi, and then prevail against Zhang Guotao when the Jiangxi group met up with Zhang’s much larger force. After arriving in Shaanxi, he had to persuade everyone to pursue a united front, and with the success of those efforts in 1937, he had to explain why, even though the previous policies were not incorrect, they would now be replaced by much milder ones.

The fundamental problem of leadership, however, was that of developing and articulating a new general orthodoxy:

What is most important for the person in overall command is to concentrate on attending to the war situation as a whole. The main point is that, according to the circumstances, he should concern himself with the problems of the grouping of his military units and formations, the relations between campaigns, the relations between various operational stages, and the relations between our activities as a whole and the enemy’s activities as a whole—all these problems demand his greatest care and effort, and if he ignores them and immerses himself in secondary problems, he can hardly avoid setbacks. (SW Vol. 1, p. 184; Vol. 5, pp. 470–1)

This soliloquy is part of “Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War”, a series of lectures prepared in December 1936 for the Red Army College (SW Vol. 1, pp. 179–254; Vol. 5, pp. 465–539). This was Mao’s most sustained attempt to formulate his military strategy, and it contains two of the three intellectual advances that would be developed in a philosophical form later in the year (and beyond Volume 5): the primacy of practice and the dialectical interdependence of opposites.

The primacy of practice is the underlying theme of the first chapter, “How to Study War”. Mao starts by pointing out that the laws of China’s revolutionary war cannot be deduced from the laws of war in general or from the Jiangxi Soviet experience. Moreover, the laws of a particular stage of a war differ from those of another stage. From the point of view of an individual commander, skill at handling a particular stage of war or level of command is self-limiting unless he adapts successfully to new stages and levels. In sum, the answer to the question,
“what should I do now?”, lies neither in books nor in personal experience; correct leadership corresponds to ever-changing concrete conditions.

Then why bother with strategy? Mao sets the next part of his argument at right angles to the first, arguing that commanders at all levels must constantly view their context as a whole. The various partial tasks must be subordinate to the overall mission, or otherwise a string of small victories can lead to a major defeat. No aspect of command can be neglected, but “commanders at all levels should center their attention on the most important and decisive problem or action in the whole situation he is handling” (SW Vol. 1, p. 185; Vol. 5, p. 471). The key link cannot be derived from abstract considerations, but must be thought of in relationship to the whole, and this requires strategic thinking. Strategic relationships—for instance, that of one stage of a campaign to the campaign as a whole—are not matters of empirical fact, “and yet, if we think hard, we can comprehend, grasp, and master them all, that is, we can raise the important problems concerning a war or concerning military operations to the higher plane of principle and solve them” (SW Vol. 1, p. 186; Vol. 5, p. 472).

At this point, Mao has his commanders in the quandary of standing in a unique and ever-changing present with the task of applying (but not mechanically deducing) the whole of theory in order to spot the key concrete task of the moment. It must have been a relief to the audience to see that the final theme of the lecture is that “the important thing is to be good at learning”. Mao observes that there are no “ever-victorious generals”. Subjective mistakes are made because of a lack of correspondence with objective conditions. Learning is a process of constant adjustment: “The plan is partially changed in almost every operation, and sometimes it is even changed completely” (SW Vol. 1, p. 189; Vol. 5, p. 474). Given that reality and tasks continue to change, Mao’s “learning curve” is an indefinite spiral of situation → plan → application → new situation → corrected plan, one that is informed by theory but driven by the need for appropriate action.27

In the remainder of the lectures, Mao’s task is to elaborate a strategic theory that does not pretend to give abstract answers to concrete problems and yet is useful for thinking about concrete problems. He does this by presenting a remarkable set of opposing concepts as well as a thorough discussion of Red Army experiences. Some conceptual pairs—for instance active and passive defence—contrast correct and incorrect strategies. Active defence—“defence

---

27 It would not be distorting the logic of the argument of the first lecture to put it into a Hegelian dialectical progression. The first moment is that reality starts with the concrete. The second moment, that correct action must be based on the whole situation, negates the first in the sense of limiting its concentration on empirical immediacy by stressing its opposite—namely, thinking about an indefinite set of relationships. The third moment, that of the process of learning, planning and adaptation, combines the partial truths of the first two in a process of knowledge and action. Whatever value this might have as an interpretation of Mao’s argument, it does demonstrate that the Marxist philosophical articulation of his later works is not the only possible path.
through decisive engagements”—is in fact the only kind that works; the term “passive defence” is useful only in describing strategic mistakes. Most conceptual pairs, however, have more interesting interrelationships. “Strategic defensive” and “strategic offensive” define the broadest relationship of forces, and it is clear that the Red Army is in a protracted defensive situation. But because it is an inferior force in a situation of protracted defence, it must concentrate its forces and fight battles of quick decision that annihilate the enemy. Mao thus places the commander between a strategic situation and a contrary tactical imperative; he provides descriptors for the horns of the dilemma, but no formula for what to do next. Although the description of strategy against Japan is more elaborate and elegant in Mao’s 1938 military works, this work is the best example of Mao’s dialectical style. He creates an intellectual mobile, a conceptual system that is structured and clear in its parts, but when one tries to fix something into a general prescription, it moves away and its opposite swings around.

The last of Mao’s three intellectual advances is his use of the idea of contradictions, and of primary and secondary contradictions. The most important locus is a report given at a Party Congress in May 1937, which is translated in the *Selected Works* as “The Task of the Chinese Communist Party in the Period of Resistance to Japan” (SW Vol. 1, pp. 263–84; Vol. 5, pp. 637–50). The purpose of the report is to explain that the contradiction between China and Japan has become principal, replacing China’s domestic contradictions that had dominated the previous political phase: that is, the new slogan of “Stop the civil war and unite against Japan” is correct, although the previous policies of class struggle and war with the Guomindang were correct for the previous period. This terminological innovation may have resulted from his philosophical readings at the time; in any case, it provides a useful formula and explanation for the abrupt change of policy. A rougher notion of shifts in phases and policy is present in “Problems of Strategy”, but at that time it was simply part of the general flux of the situation of command, and the notion of contradiction was still limited to describing dissonances in the enemy camp (Vol. 5, p. 455). The new prominence of “contradiction” is more a terminological advance than a substantive one, but it proved useful in 1937 in explaining the policy transformations associated with the beginning of cooperation with the KMT.

**Conclusion: Looking Back from 1937**

I will conclude this essay not by attempting to summarize the significance of Mao’s early thought for his later career, but by analysing how Mao viewed his own development in 1937. The new tasks of leadership in the new political phase drove him in 1936–37 to his deepest and most comprehensive reflections since his days of reading Paulsen.

It is clear from his military writings that Mao was proud of his early judgments of the long-term potential for base-area warfare in China, and also of his early directives on guerilla warfare and the more elaborate strategies and tactics that he applied in Jiangxi. He was also proud of the approach to governance in the Jiangxi Soviet that he evolved in 1933 but could not apply. He immediately reverted to a more moderate rich peasant policy even before class
struggle was sidelined by united front policies (Vol. 5, p. 66), but he viewed the suspension of rural work based on class struggle as a temporary policy required by unity against Japan (Vol. 5, p. 639). Implied in his emphasis on the importance of concrete conditions is an affirmation of the importance of investigations of local conditions. 28

Mao's "teachers by negative example" are the young Stalinists who had pushed him aside and had taken control of the Jiangxi Soviet. The bankruptcy of their policies and the fact that Mao himself was not implicated in their failure allowed Mao to suggest a new paradigm of Party leadership by criticizing their pretentiousness, their leftist dogmatism and adventurism, and their rigidity in military matters. 29 Mao did not blame the mistakes on individuals, but rather on the prevailing political atmosphere:

Why is it that certain bad habits are rather prevalent? This is because some people insist on behaving this way (and these people are the majority in the top-ranking leadership organizations), so that the rest of the people are forced or half-forced to behave this way. (Vol. 5, p. 679)

The Party needed a fundamental reorientation in its thinking and habits, one based on flexibility and policies sensitive to the masses, and Mao was ready to supply the model.

There were three aspects of his earlier politics that are missing from the 1936 reorientation and thus presumably discarded. First, the mobilizational mass line has definitely replaced the early majoritarian approach. Indeed, with the emergence of the war against Japan as the principal contradiction, class struggle is suspended in order to maximize support against the invader. Second, the purge techniques that Mao applied in the Futian incident are not repeated even though Mao now had more occasion, opportunity and discretion to do so. Although in his recounting of the early Jiangxi period Mao still considered his opponents at Futian to have engaged in a counterrevolutionary conspiracy, the major turning point that he emphasized was not the purge, but the confidence the Red Army gained by the defeat of the Kuomintang's First Encirclement and Suppression campaign (Vol. 5, p. 495–513, esp. p. 508). Third, the commandism evident in the 1932 election campaign did not return. The task is positive motivation to spur reorientation, not harsh criticism from above. It is doubtful that Mao was any less convinced of his own correctness, but he had learned that incompetent officials cannot simply be ordered to reform. The lesson of the Land Investigation Movement was to speak softly and carry on a big campaign.

At the same time, there were deep continuities between the Mao Zedong of 1937 and his past. Marxism-Leninism and its doctrines of the Party and of class

---

28 This affirmation is made explicit in the publication of Mao's rural investigations in 1941 as a model for local leadership (SW III: 11–16).

29 The most striking text for Mao's political critique of the previous Central Committee leadership is "On the Question of the Line and Traditions of the Party during the Past 15 Years" (5 June 1937; Vol. 5, pp. 676–80).
struggle were now the unquestionable framework for Mao’s thought and activities. The closest Mao had come to thinking beyond Communism was his infatuation with the peasant associations in 1927. His remarkable docility to Party authority between 1928 and 1935 rested on the ashes of his predictions in the Hunan Report, and his attempt in 1937 to articulate his paradigm in Marxist terms was not simply an exercise in political correctness. Marxism provided the template for reality beyond China and beyond the present. Mao’s own contribution was correct leadership for the Chinese revolution.

Of course, the idealism and anarchism of Mao’s pre-Marxist thinking had been decisively abandoned by 1921. But what remained in his thinking was the importance of ideology, the practicality of engagement, a holistic approach to ethics and the personal scope and ferocity of commitment evident in his earliest works. Even in the large mental step from 1919 to 1921, there is more specification of earlier attitudes than there is contradiction. It is not surprising, therefore, that the tone of Mao’s autobiography as recorded by Snow is basically positive and unidirectional. But he had travelled a long way by 1937.

Had Mao died in 1937, he would already be a major figure in the history of 20th-century China. He would be the person who shaped the Party’s failed second chance in Jiangxi and then led the Long March and resurrected the Party in the context of the Anti-Japanese united front. He would probably today be a folk hero of rural revolution. His writings would not be well known, and the Party would likely have remained more Stalinist in its habits. Perhaps the civil war would have been fought more conventionally, and perhaps the outcome would have been less conclusive. Mao would seem a more distant and much smaller figure, and he would be judged from the perspective of events far less of his making. There would be no collected works in English, you would not have read this far, and I would not have written this much. In this sense the meaning of “Mao before Maoism” depends on its subsequent consequences.

On the other hand, Mao’s early works are more than merely the base of his later thought and career. They are a vivid record of the interaction of a remarkably intelligent, active person with what Tang Tsou aptly termed the total chaos of 20th-century China. These five volumes are therefore a key resource for understanding a pivotal personality and a pivotal time in Chinese history.

Charlottesville, Virginia
January 2001