The Foundations
of Mao Zedong's
Political Thought
1917–1935

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For Tang and Yi-chuang, and Ann, David, and Sarah
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Introduction

This study traces the development of Mao Zedong's political thought from his earliest writings to the beginning of the Long March. It thus covers the first forty-two years of Mao's life, during which he participated in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, helped found the Chinese Communist Party, originated his political-military strategy of base areas, and administered the government of the Chinese Soviet Republic in Jiangxi. Although overshadowed by his later accomplishments, these experiences and activities were of considerable importance in themselves, and they were accompanied by writings which reflect Mao's judgment of their significance. The arguments, values, and methods revealed in his writings helped shape Mao's contributions to Chinese politics and are indeed themselves a significant part of his contribution.

The purpose of the study is to draw upon the practical nature of Mao's writings and their political context in order to produce an interpretation of his early political thought in vivo. I attempt to present emerging political concepts with their original referents and to discuss the subjects which Mao depicts as urgent and important in terms of the practical decision points he was facing as a political actor. This approach is particularly well suited for Mao because his theoretical concepts tend to emerge from a course of practical experience rather than an abstract program. Mao's explicit theorizing was a reflection of his experience, and the gestation of his concepts in practice provided the referents and the connotative significance of his more theoretical statements. This can be seen in the style of his theoretical discussions after 1949, in which he constantly refers to his own experience and belittles any role which theory might play apart from such practice.\(^1\)
Attention to the unity of theory and practice is the basic principle of Mao's political thought, and I have argued elsewhere that this is also a major innovation within both the Chinese and the Marxist political traditions. Thus the primary task in understanding Mao's thought is grasping its practical context. The secondary tasks of logical interpolation and extrapolation, formulation of history of ideas, and comparison with other thinkers depend on this type of in situ interpretation. To view Mao simply as a theoretician, or to abstract his theory from his political life, not only runs a serious risk of distorting Mao's views by taking them out of context. It also presumes the incorrectness of one of Mao's fundamental tenets—that theory and practice are inseparably interwoven.

Mao's theoretical development has never been simply an exposition of earlier convictions; developing experience and shifting political contexts led to continual recastings of his thinking. Hence a study of any particular period of Mao's thought cannot be a survey of all the roots of all his thought; to be comprehensive, therefore, this study would have to continue to 9 September 1976. The reason this is not attempted here is primarily practical: the development from alpha to omega of Mao's thought in its political context is too vast a subject. The period covered in this study is the first of three major periods. I call it the "foundations of Mao's political thought" because it was during this time that most of his important political concepts germinated. His subordinate role in the party at this time did not require Mao to make official, comprehensive pronouncements, but his practical political tasks induced the development and confirmation of a distinctive epistemology, political thought, and political style.

In the next major period, 1936-1940, Mao's new responsibilities of general leadership required him to state his views authoritatively. Mao's confidence in his own correctness vis-à-vis the Stalinist ideologues in the Comintern and the party was greatly strengthened by the lessons of the Chinese Soviet Republic in Jiangxi, but the transformed political context of the Anti-Japanese War required an abstraction of his political principles from their practical roots. The results of this abstraction and reappraisal are Mao's theoretical works of the late 1930s ("On Practice" and "On Contradiction" are the best known) and his strategic analyses of the war and the Second United Front with the Kuomintang. As the war persisted, the rectification of the party and the political economy of the communist-controlled areas required new authoritative statements on matters of revolutionary administration. Most of these statements also have clear precedents in the "foundations" period. Finally, in the civil war the accumulated revolutionary experience and military power were applied to the task of final victory in China.

The third period is that of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This stage is first characterized by Mao's relinquishing of active direction of the revolution (for instance, the establishment of "first and second" lines of leadership in the Central Committee). Mao had stepped down because of his assumption that the new postliberation stage would be radically different from his accumulated experience and because of his desire to continue the viability of the revolution by allowing other leaders to develop their experience. But certain problems of the new China turned out to be quite similar to those of Mao's experience, and other truly novel problems were presented by the leadership to which he had entrusted the management of China. These developments led Mao to reintroduce the politics of revolutionary struggle (the Great Leap Forward and, most important, the Cultural Revolution) but with far more complex results than in the original struggle for liberation. Whereas Mao's leadership before 1949 prevailed because of the timeliness of his politics, his two major interventions into the politics of the PRC were of a different sort. The "revolutionary romanticism" of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution involved a distinctive opposition of revolutionary will and the processes of history. The experiential foundations of Mao's values and policies are evident, but to a great extent they are the retrospective experiences of Yanan and Jiangxi attempting to preserve, shape, and push onward a revolutionary present. Mao's lifelong concern for the survival of the revolutionary movement shifted away from the pre-1949 problem of physical survival to the more difficult ethical and political ones of preserving revolutionary identity.

The "Gang of Four" brought the self-destructive tendencies of unlimited moral critique to a fever pitch and thereby contributed greatly to the ease of their own removal. Since the main ideological strength of the Gang of Four lay in their single-minded extrapolation of Mao's revolutionary values as expressed in the Cultural Revolution, Hua Guofeng has since emphasized the concern with socialist construction which was prominent in Mao's
writings in the 1950s and Deng Xiaoping has emphasized the practicality of Mao’s thought in order to provide a thread of continuity into the post-Mao era. But there is no easy solution to the political and ethical challenges of Mao’s legacy, and the multistage movement to criticize the Gang of Four is testmony to this. The fruit of Mao’s practical revolutionary efforts was the contradiction of a revolution in command. The struggle with this contradiction will continue.

It is my expectation that the basic values of Mao’s politics, formed in his early activities, will prove to be a durable contribution to Chinese politics. Before Mao’s death, such an expectation would have been considered too obvious to deserve mention, but the public criticism of Mao and the large-scale repudiation of his policies which have been increasing since 1978 require an investigation into the limits of “De-Maoization” and the prospects of his basic approach to politics. Briefly, I would argue that the foundations of Mao’s politics have already been incorporated into China’s political culture. During his last twenty years, however, Mao applied these principles in an egalitarian critique based on class struggle, and the current leadership repudiates this approach in favor of the more stable development of the “four modernizations.” Reversing twenty years of Chinese politics creates a major political watershed at the expense of Mao, but his basic approach to politics remains influential even in the new era of post-Mao modernization.

In terms of political power, Mao did not pass from the scene until almost two years after his death. Until mid-1978, the legacy of Mao’s political preferences and aversions was still a significant factor—although no longer a decisive one—in Chinese policymaking. The key effort of Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping’s forces in 1978 was to break decisively the inertia of policies identified with Mao as a result of his personal, radical interventions in Chinese politics from 1958 until his death. Two related theses were essential to the effort: first, that China had entered a new period in which practical commitment to modernization determined the course of politics; second, that practice was basic to Mao’s system of thought, and policy should be determined by practical considerations rather than dogma. Together these theses implied that China should rethink her politics on the basis of the practical needs of the new age and that those scandalized by the abandonment of Mao’s policies were still suffering from the poison of Gang of Four dogmatism. In short, yesterday’s Maoism was today’s anti-Maoism, and yesterday’s “capitalist readers” were rehabilitated as victims of dogmatist persecution.

The rollback of the Cultural Revolution was interpreted as a rejection of Mao because its radical policies had prevailed through his personal intervention and the ensuing chaos had been contained and legitimated by an unprecedented glorification of his wisdom and power. The policies of Mao which emerged in his last ten years had as their target the power and political predilections of China’s intermediate leadership. Now the former victims were asserting the legitimacy of their privileges and the autonomy of their responsibilities.

On the other hand, Deng Xiaoping in his major speech on the subject made an excellent argument for the primacy of practice in Mao’s thought, and the research of this book supports his contention. Moreover, Deng Xiaoping’s political style is closer to Mao’s preliberation style than was that of the Gang of Four. Many of the current attempts to further material well-being and to increase popular control over officials—and the rationale behind these policies—have precedents in Mao’s base area activities.

To the extent that the political thought of Mao Zedong can be identified with the radical policies which succeeded because of his personal esposes and the superhuman image of the Great Helmsman, the reorientation of 1978 marked an attack on his influence. Since Mao in fact had been so identified during his last ten years, both within China and outside, the assumption is natural that the current phase is a complete displacement of Mao. From a longer historical perspective, however, the weakness of this assumption and the limits of the identification upon which it is based become apparent. Deng Xiaoping has returned to pre-Cultural Revolution (and in some cases pre-1957) positions, but he could not return to a pre-Mao position. Mao’s preeminent contribution to Chinese history was his guidance of the Chinese revolution. The lengthy process of this revolution was also the process of creating the structures, values, and leadership cadres of the People’s Republic of China. A Hong Kong supporter of the current changes expressed the relationship to Mao eloquently:

Mao Zedong’s thought is a spiritual treasure of the Chinese people; for years it has melded with the people and no one can reject it. The people can’t reject it because they cannot reject their own revolu-
introduction

Gonary past. They cannot throw aside the weapon with which they
know and change the world. . . . Mao Zedong made mistakes, but
the demand that the party completely and accurately grasp Mao's
thought [the official formula under which his mistakes are ana-
yzed] should not be regarded as a remonstrance against Mao
Zedong the individual. It is self-examination (fangxing) by the Chi-
nese people, their self-criticism and their self-evaluation. 

As a constitutive rather than a controversial contribution, 
Mao’s proliferation politics forms the accepted framework of as-
sumptions for Chinese Communist politics. The common ground
and its origin are not called to the attention of the foreign observ-
er, but if one does not devote special efforts to grasp it, the changes
in Chinese politics must appear unintelligible. The Cultural Re-
volution was not a typical expression of Mao’s politics. It was an ex-
treme effort by Mao, using novel means, to correct what he per-
ceived to be the drift of party leadership away from revolutionary
ideals. The leadership could not defend itself from this charge
because Mao’s constitutive role in the party, the revolution, and its
ideology made his authority unimpeachable. The post-Mao rejec-
tion of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution is complicated not
only by the fact of Mao’s leadership of it but by the general desire
to retain and reestablish continuity with the party’s revolutionary
past.

Because such a distinction between Mao’s constitutive role in
Chinese Communist politics and his specific political interven-
tions since 1957 has been lacking in most understandings of Mao,
his politics is assumed to be irrelevant (except as a target) to cur-
current Chinese politics, and hence uninteresting. The contrast
with the attention to Mao of a few years ago is enormous, but, as the
Chinese say, the periods have changed. For our purposes, how-
ever, it is worth reviewing the assumptions of Cultural Revolution
studies of Mao. The tendency to replace the study of a whole com-
munist polity with a study of its leader made an intensive study of
Mao during his lifetime too easy to justify. This approach to Mao
has been discarded rather than criticized; hence its assumptions
tend to reappear—with much weaker grounding—in the analysis
of the current Chinese leadership.

The cultural ideal of the Promethean revolutionary has pro-
vided a satisfying—but false—interpretive model for Mao’s life.
There are two equally basic errors in the presumption of this sub-
jectivistic image. First, Mao’s determination of purpose was at
least as dependent on objective factors as it was on subjective pre-
ference. He aimed at correct action—the apt solution for the parti-
cular problem—rather than the implementation of a private notion
of the good. The epigram of a German theorist-politician that
“politics is the art of making necessity possible” is apt for Mao’s
approach. Second, Mao’s method of leadership—through prac-
tical models rather than through theoretical treatises, through
struggle rather than through harmony, through collective action
rather than through authoritative command—committed him to a
process in which individual preferences were risked in the attempt
to induce a communal movement. In what he pursued and how he
pursued it, Mao was not merely an individual in relation to his-
ory: he was one immersed in history through a self-conscious dia-
lectic of subject and object.

If Mao’s presence in Chinese politics is grasped as a historical
dialectic, one runs less risk of exaggerating Mao’s influence in the
study of China. Concentrating attention on the masses is also an
eminently Maoist adulation: “Comrades! What is a true bastion
of iron? It is the masses, the millions upon millions of people who
genuinely and sincerely support the revolution, that is the real bast
ion which no force can smash, no force whatsoever.” The result-
ing revolution is a collective accomplishment, and Mao
takes his own role in it clear in his criticism of Lin Biao’s “theory
of genius”—the tendency to attribute all accomplishments to the
power of Mao’s thought which became prominent in the Cultural
Revolution:

It is not that I do not want to talk about genius. To be a genius is to
be a bit more intelligent. But genius does not depend on one person
or few people. It depends on a party, the party which is the van-
guard of the proletariat. Genius is dependent on the mass line, on
collective wisdom.

Mao’s preference for collective wisdom is shown even in the writ-
ing of his critique of the genius theory: “I wrote ‘Some Opinion,’
which specifically criticizes the genius theory, only after looking
up some people to talk with them, and after some investigation
and research.”

Mao’s dependence upon colleagues and ultimately upon the
masses clearly does not imply passivity on his part. The influence
of colleagues occurred within the framework of promoting revolutionary tasks; the influence of the masses occurred within the process of popular mobilization. Despite the impression given by later canonizations of his thought, Mao's typical argument relies not on the intellectual appeal of a brilliant idea but on the urgency and practicality of a specific measure for popular mobilization. It is particularly clear in his earlier writings that a great deal of the quality of Mao's political thought comes from lessons from the masses gained in the processes of investigation and mobilization. It is also evident from Mao's conflicts with party leadership before 1935 that the process often mistakenly individualized as a power struggle between Mao and the "Twenty-eight Bolsheviks" who controlled the CCP from 1931 to 1935 was more importantly a process of a new political style emerging collectively (with Mao as its chief exponent) from the experience of revolutionary government in Jiangxi.

Mao's active reliance on colleagues, the masses, and changes in the objective political situation allows the study of his political thought to be more than biographical delving into the personal idiosyncrasies and brilliance of a leader. Such interdependence makes the popular question of Mao's individual innovations within Chinese political thought, Marxism, or social science both less significant and much more difficult to answer. By concentrating on Mao, this study inevitably gives a misleading emphasis both to his role in the events discussed and to his originality in politics. But if the problem of who holds the copyright on a particular idea is left aside, Mao's writings analyzed in context become a fascinating window to the politics and thinking of his China. Not only did the significance of Mao's China and his own personal weight within that sphere increase enormously, but his writings became the core of the official ideology—the orthodox definition of the meaning of the revolution. Thus the attempt to acquire an intimate understanding of the dialectical development of Mao's politics and thinking is also an approach to the roots of contemporary China's most prevalent self-understanding.

1 Mao before Marxism

Considering the small quantity of Mao's writings prior to his identification with the Chinese Communist Party and the relative insignificance of his precommunist political activities, the "early Mao" has received an unusual amount of attention from both Western scholars and Chinese biographers.

The three most prominent Western scholars who base their interpretations of Mao on circumstances or writings of this period differ widely in what they consider significant. Richard Solomon's psychological interpretation stresses biographical and autobiographical accounts of Mao's struggles with his father to indicate the root of a basic urge to struggle against authority.¹ Mao's revolution is thus the collision of this urge with a traditionally docile political culture. Frederic Wakeman's wide-ranging study History and Will attempts to establish the significance of Mao's thought by coordinating a presentation of the Chinese and Western thinkers who influenced Mao's intellectual development.² Certainly Mao has stated that he read and was influenced by these thinkers in his youth.³ But Wakeman's intellectual historical approach and Solomon's psychological perspective both presuppose that the continuity between Mao's youth and his maturity is more important than any discontinuity or development. Stuart Schram, the major translator of Mao's pre-Marxist works into Western languages, has proposed the more complicated thesis that the ideas presented in Mao's early works submerge during his Marxist period (1922–1965) and surface again with the Cultural Revolution.⁴ The truly Maoist periods in this view are youth and old age, when his own ideas were not subservient to Marxist ideology.

Chinese interest in Mao's early life has produced two very