

Mao Zedong and China IN THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORLD

Mao Zedong and China IN THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORLD

A
Concise
History

Rebecca E. Karl

Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society

EDITORS: Rey Chow, Michael Dutton, H. D. Harootunian, and Rosalind Morris

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2010

TO MY NEPHEW, CHRISTOPHER,
AND MY NIECES, TEPI, CHANNA, SOPHIA, AND NORA:
with love and in hope.

© 2010 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ☺

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Warnock Pro by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear
on the last printed page of this book.

Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	ix
1 China in the World in Mao's Youth	1
2 From Liberal to Communist, 1912–1921	9
3 Toward the Peasant Revolution, 1921–1927	21
4 Establishing Revolutionary Bases: From Jinggangshan to Yan'an, 1928–1935	35
5 Yan'an, the War of Resistance against Japan, and Civil War, 1935–1949	51
6 Stabilizing Society and the Transition to Socialism, 1949–1957	73
7 Great Leap and Restoration, 1958–1965	99
8 The Cultural Revolution: Politics in Command, 1966–1969	117
9 The Cultural Revolution: Denouement and Death of Mao, 1969–1976	139
10 Reform, Restoration, and the Repudiation of Maoism, 1976–Present	159
Notes	185
Bibliography	191
Index	193

Preface and Acknowledgements

Say "Mao Zedong" in China or among China scholars anywhere and there is a ready-made argument. The disputes over Jung Chang's and Jon Halliday's recently published *Mao: The Unknown Story* provide just one example. According to many reviewers of that book, the story therein told is unknown because Chang and Halliday substantially fabricated or exaggerated it into existence. According to others, Chang and Halliday have finally exposed Mao in all his naked cruelty to a hitherto credulous world. Whichever side one takes—and there are more than these two alone—the polemic gets polarized, the rhetoric heated, and the arguments intolerant. In China, it is even worse. Attempts to reassess portions of the Mao period—particularly by taking the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) seriously—bring accusations of desires to bring Maoism back to life, of wishing to negate the post-Mao Dengist reforms and return the country to poverty and global irrelevance, and of being anti-Chinese.

As Mao Zedong and his legacy for China are fought over by scholars and laypeople alike, certain parts of Maoism are now detached from their revolutionary meaning and historical context and reborn as fundamentalist capitalist tenets. Business schools routinely teach about "guerilla marketing," a strategy supposedly derived from Mao's theorization of "protracted war." Mao as kitsch and commodity floods the consumer market, available on eBay or at any roadside stand in Chinese tourist spots. As the scholar Michael Dutton wrote of this phenomenon in 1998, "Mao sells, but what he sells today is the very new idea of everything being for sale" (*Streetlife China*).

The current text joins the scholarly fray implicitly and becomes yet

today or for his world. I am optimistic, though, something of his philosophy, passion, and historical method can be retrieved for a rethinking of our present.

I also want to thank others, without whom this would have been a less enjoyable project. Deborah Karl gave me good advice; after all these years, I should just learn to listen to her. I am grateful to my initial readers, on whom I relied to tell me what required elaboration and what was *just too much*. Joanne Filley read with humor and sympathy the early chapters. F. David Bell read the entire text with a critical and knowing eye toward my tendency to excess. My mother, Dolores Karl, removed many writing infelicities, while also reading carefully for coherence and accessibility. However much I've depended on them, everyone mentioned above and below is absolved of responsibility for what remains.

Several of my graduate students and colleagues assisted in crucial ways. He Xiang taught me what I know of Mao's poetic practice. Zhu Qian traveled with me to China in May 2007, recorded the interviews there, and transcribed them for me. Her good humor, intelligence, and enthusiasm for food made the trip a joy and a learning experience. I thank Harry and Kristin for their house and the isolation I needed to finish writing. And I am grateful to Maggie Clinton for finding books in China for me; sharing my monastic retreat; and enduring weird cats and bold mice as I worked through the final chapters.

I want to express gratitude to Professor Wang Hui at Tsinghua University for sharing his time and insight with me; to Sabu Kohso in New York for years of political camaraderie, and wonderful perspicacity on things near and far; and to Wu Hongsen, the best friend a person can have. I am deeply sorry that Mr. Wang Yuanhua, one of the most extraordinary people I have had the good fortune to know, died before this book could be published. While he would never have agreed with me on many things in it, we would have enjoyed a good-natured argument about them, followed by lunch and great conversation about a number of other things. His passing truly marks the passing of an era. I will miss him and his energy.

Finally, thanks to my editor, Reynolds Smith, who got this book peer-reviewed and into production quickly. To the readers, particularly Wang Ban, I am grateful for the suggestions and encouragement. And to those at Duke University Press involved in the production of the book, especially Mark Mastromarino, I am grateful for the hard work and creative energy invested.

I

China in the World in Mao's Youth

Mao Zedong was born on December 26, 1893, in China's south-central Hunan Province, in a small village called Shaoshan. Located in a fertile rice-growing valley at the foot of Mount Hengshan, the village is about eighty-one miles southwest from the provincial capital, Changsha. Although Mao's birthplace was a quiet rural backwater, the political and social situation in China at the beginning of the twentieth century was becoming increasingly fraught.

Free Trade, Opium, Tea, and Silver

At the time of Mao's birth, China was ruled by its last imperial dynasty, the Qing. The Manchus who founded the Qing had swept into China in the seventeenth century from their base in Manchuria to overrun the native Han-Chinese Ming Dynasty. Initially a robust dynasty, the Qing had entered a long decline by the early 1800s as the empire was repeatedly assaulted by aggressive foreign powers (led by the British) who were attempting to force China into free trade agreements the Qing resisted.

The assault on China's territorial integrity and political sovereignty began in the mid-nineteenth century with the infamous Opium Wars. These conflicts were fought between China and Britain, primarily. Trade between those two countries had thrived in the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, however, the British could find nothing that the Chinese wished to purchase from them in large enough quantities to offset the in-

politics—vague, at best—were mostly informed by his personal opposition to his father rather than by any intellectual analysis of China's ills. By the same token, his readings in classics had not attracted him to the ideal of a Confucian gentleman as a personal or social role model. And, while his interest in the anti-dynastic and anti-Confucian debates of the time, as well as his spotty introduction to Western thought, had given him an inchoate sense of socio-political excitement, none of this had developed into any sort of firm ideology. In this sense, contrary to what some interpreters have claimed, Mao's early views did not indicate the political theorist that he was later to become.

In other ways, Mao changed little. His personal habits were ingrained early and never faded, no matter how high and mighty he later became. He was contemptuous of flush toilets and toothbrushes (washing his mouth with tea leaves), and he habitually burped and broke wind loudly. He always wore shabby, patched clothes, with complete disregard for outward appearance. Mao held on to his rural habits throughout his life, often regarding his more cosmopolitan and "modern" associates with suspicion and disdain. Some time after he left the close provincial community of his childhood, he came to articulate his rural personal habits as an expression of political purity.

2

From Liberal to Communist, 1912–1921

The 1911 Revolution and Aftermath

Just a few months before the October revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty, Mao moved from Xiangtan to Hunan's provincial capital, Changsha. He was one of the first in his school to support the revolution by cutting the long tail of hair—the queue—that all boys and men wore. For 260 years, this had been an enforced sartorial symbol of fealty to the Manchu Qing; removing it was subject to the death penalty. When the 1911 ("xinhai") revolution broke out, Mao joined the local revolutionary army and served as a soldier in Hunan, although he saw no action. With the first salary of his life, he paid others to haul water for him (probably because he had endured enough hauling of buckets on his father's farm), bought food, and used the remaining money to purchase a variety of journals and newspapers. Through this new practice of daily newspaper reading, Mao avidly followed the fortunes of the revolutionary armies around the country. He later claimed that it was also at this time that he first encountered the concept of "socialism," although if so, it did not leave any immediate impression.

A few months of soldiering was plenty at this point for Mao. Believing the revolution to have been successfully completed after the emperor's abdication in February 1912 and the ascension to power of General Yuan Shikai, Mao went back to school to broaden his education. It took him several tries to find an appropriate venue. A short stint at a vocational school for soap making

Republican Revolution were attempting to regroup in the South—there were few who could articulate any solution either to the dire political or the long-term cultural issues that China faced. In this fragmented situation, more and more intellectuals came to view the Russian Bolshevik solution—which called for a centralized party of committed activists who could lead society toward a common goal—as an attractive one.

At this point, even as Mao was in Changsha writing on Miss Zhao and other matters of everyday and social concern, the Soviet-sponsored Communist International (the Comintern) decided to foment interest in the establishment of a Communist Party in China. Surveying the scene from Moscow, Comintern agents determined that Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, and their followers at Beida were likely candidates for such interest. They also identified a group of intellectuals in Shanghai who could possibly form the nucleus of a Communist Party. The Comintern search fortuitously converged with a social-intellectual context also urgently in search of a solution.

Mao, for his part, had also been moving towards Bolshevism, as he came to understand the Russian Revolution more thoroughly and as he became disillusioned with both anarchism and liberalism. By mid-1920, aided by his friend Cai Hesen's letters from France analyzing communism's virtues and explaining the basics of Marxism, Mao declared his support for the "total solution" and common ideology embodied in Bolshevik Communism.

Under the influence of all this internal and external activity, small communist groups began to form around the country. Mao headed the one in Hunan, and Yang Kaihui, not yet married to Mao but the beloved daughter of his favorite teacher, also participated. Finally, in July 1921, these groups began to merge into a national organization, when twelve delegates from the various small cells met secretly in Shanghai to establish the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the direction of the Dutch Comintern agent known as Maring (Hans Sneevliet). Mao attended the Shanghai meeting. The two ostensible founders of the CCP, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, did not attend. The twelve delegates, it turned out, represented a total of fifty-seven self-identified communists.

The formal founding of the CCP was a totally unremarkable event in a country rife with political and social chaos, fragmented under the leadership of innumerable militarist warlords, and with urban areas controlled by foreigners. Yet, with the founding of the CCP, Mao returned to Hunan, and the other delegates returned to their home provinces, where, in their

respective locations, everyone was to start to learn systematically the very Marxism that was presumably the ideological basis for the Communist Party. At the same time, the delegates were charged with recruiting new members, expanding into the working classes, and putting the CCP on a firm ideological and social foundation.

A theoretical and practical paradox immediately emerged with the founding of the CCP. Marxist revolutionary theory calls for the working class—the proletariat—to lead a social revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism and seize state power. Yet, China in the 1920s was an overwhelmingly agrarian society, with only small pockets of industrial manufacturing dominated by Western and Japanese capitalists located in the coastal treaty port cities. The question immediately presented itself: How were Chinese Communists to reconcile a revolutionary ideology that presumed an industrial social structure with the reality of Chinese society, which was composed of primarily impoverished peasants? Who was to lead this revolution? And against whom was the revolution to be targeted?

Communist Revolution and China—A Mismatch?

China in the 1920s was divided amongst rapacious militarist warlords who ruled over disparate territorial satrapies in the inland areas. The coastal cities were under the rule of the Western and Japanese powers. There simply was no centralized or unified Chinese state. Against which social forces—domestic and imperialist—was a Communist Revolution to be launched? The question at its most abstract as well as its most practical became: How could a national Marxist revolution be mobilized in a country that lacked the social elements of a Marxist revolution and a central state apparatus, and where foreign imperialism played such

wedded to the United Front, advising the CCP to continue to work for national unity. By the time the Comintern and Stalin in Moscow realized the scale of disaster and betrayal befalling the CCP, it was much too late to save anything but their own skins. Comintern agents fled China forthwith.

The painful task of regrouping, rethinking, and revitalizing got under way among the remaining Chinese Communist Party members. Henceforth, this process was to take place primarily amongst the poorest and remotest of the peasants, amongst whom the remnants of the CCP were encouraged to gather. Communists in urban areas were hunted down like wild animals. Li Dazhao, erstwhile Beida professor and one of the co-founders of the CCP, attempted to take refuge with Soviet embassy officials in Beijing. They handed him over to GMD soldiers, who executed him. Made scapegoat for the disasters, Chen Duxiu was ousted as the Party Chairman. While Party Central continued to operate clandestinely out of Shanghai's French Concession area—for the moment, out of the reach of Chinese law enforcement—most surviving Communists dispersed to the countryside and went underground.

From the very bleak view of 1927, all seemed lost.

4

Establishing Revolutionary Bases

FROM JINGGANGSHAN TO YAN'AN, 1928–1935

On the northwest side of the Jinggangshan Mountains in Jiangxi Province, just east of the provincial border with Hunan, stands a remote and forbidding promontory known as Huangyangjie. Overlooking the site is a monument, a poem of Mao's engraved on it. The poem—which every Chinese schoolchild used to be able to recite—commemorates an important victory won in August 1928 by Mao and the embryonic Red Army. This ragtag bunch of Communists was in the process of establishing a revolutionary base in the area amidst the ongoing disaster of Chiang Kaishek's White Terror. Pushed farther and farther from urban centers by pursuing militias, the Red Army—trained as a mobile guerilla force—was compelled to stand and fight in the summer of 1928 against a superior enemy. Mao's verse describes the heroic encounter:

At the foot of the mountain, our flags and banners can be seen,
At its peak our drums and bugles are heard to respond.
The enemy troops besiege us thousands strong,
We stand alone and will not be moved.
Already our defense was like a stern fortress,
Now do our united wills form yet a stronger wall.
The roar of gunfire rises from Huangyangjie,
Announcing the enemy has fled in the night.¹

5

Yan'an, the War of Resistance against Japan, and Civil War, 1935–1949

Upon arrival in Yan'an, Mao and the CCP were faced with rebuilding the Communist movement while administering a sprawling territory sparsely inhabited by a mostly subsistence-level peasant population. The conditions of life were characterized by a semi-desert environment with poor natural resources and little surplus agricultural production. There was no access to capital for investment, few urban centers, and little industrial capacity. To this unpromising region, the CCP brought its army, battle hardened but exhausted after a year of fighting its way across China, as well as a tiny number of educated people with medical, scientific, and cultural expertise. On this material and social basis, Mao and the CCP set about constructing a viable socialist-inspired polity, economy, and culture.

Yan'an became the unlikely location where the socially transformative practices of and ideological rationale for Marxist revolution in China were articulated, implemented, and honed. In part for this reason, the Yan'an period holds a hallowed place in Chinese Communist Party history. Policies implemented here developed into the real-life crucible of Chinese revolutionary practice. Yet, Yan'an also became a mythologized time and place recalled for its spirit of plain-living camaraderie and its relatively nonhierarchical communal ethos of sharing. Forged out of the morale and sensibilities of Long March veterans, Yan'an was supposedly uncorrupted by considerations of individual wealth or aggrandizement. In CCP lore, "Yan'an" represents an extended

