



Australian
National
University



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

Mao Zedong: Ten Years After

Author(s): Lowell Dittmer

Source: *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Jul., 1986, No. 16 (Jul., 1986), pp. 113-118

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2158778>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University and The University of Chicago Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*

JSTOR

MAO ZEDONG: TEN YEARS AFTER

Lowell Dittmer

China recently celebrated the first decennial of Mao Zedong's death, providing a fitting occasion to reconsider his contributions to Chinese politics. The penetrating and timely articles and review essay assembled here do so from a variety of different viewpoints, indicating the range of controversy still surrounding Mao's role, as well as several points of emerging consensus. After a brief critical review of the arguments set forth in each essay, I shall make some more general remarks on Mao's contribution to China's political development and its continuing reconstrual.

Nick Knight's article, with its review of previous discussions of 'Maoism' and methodological critique of such controversies, offers a useful point of departure. Knight focuses on two 'great debates', the first involving Wittfogel and Schwartz and focusing on the originality of Mao's contribution to the Chinese revolution, the second involving a younger set of scholars in a discussion of Mao's contribution to the Marxist-Leninist tradition.

There are interesting and sometimes paradoxical connections between these two debates, as the liberals of the first confrontation find themselves under assault from radicals in the second, who echo some of the themes of the conservatives in the first – for example, both insist that Mao was a *bona fide* (if not 'orthodox') Marxist-Leninist. The precise points of Mao's alleged deviation differ in the two debates, but both hinge on the question of originality vs adherence to Marxist-Leninist doctrine (another early *China Quarterly* debate, pitting Schram against Cohen, revolved around the same issue). Although Knight seems more interested in reclaiming Mao for the pantheon of Marxist-Leninist deities than in underlining the creativeness of his adaptation of theory to Chinese conditions, his principal concern is with the inherent futility of such controversies. Such debates avail nought, because they are 'empiricist', contends Knight, drawing upon the writings of Eco, Althusser and other European thinkers for epistemological support. Empiricism relies upon experience as a 'privileged level against which knowledge claims are assessed' (as in 'practice is the sole criterion of truth?') – a circular and self-defeating procedure, according to Knight, for any such confirming observation of 'reality' presupposes prior theory to activate the search for confirmation. There is usually no meeting of the minds in such

THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF CHINESE AFFAIRS NO. 16, JULY 1986

arguments because of the lack of a 'universal and neutral realm ... to which appeals can be made for validation'; both parties search for evidence to bolster their original positions, resulting in a 'stand-off'.

Whereas Knight's argument, if thus pursued to its logical conclusions, would lead to a bootless solipsism (redolent of the old debate over the existence of 'other minds') where few would wish to follow, it is perhaps useful to remind us of the ineluctable subjectivity of the search for truth and the ambiguity of the corroborating evidence. Actually, there is a surprising degree of accord in the descriptive accounts of Mao's contribution in such discussions (which is not perhaps so surprising in view of the fact that these, after all, are China scholars). Where disagreement tends to surface is in the attempt to orient Mao within the vaster firmament of Marxism-Leninism. This calls for both China scholars and students of Marxism to extend themselves somewhat.

Graham Young, drawing largely upon previously published studies of Mao's theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, has written a thoughtful analysis of Mao's views on class struggle that in fact provides a fairly comprehensive overview of late Maoist thought. Young finds that Mao had not one but three theories of class struggle, the first based on a conception of enemy classes as remnants from the period preceding socialisation of the means of production, the second based on the notion that classes could regenerate themselves under socialism by taking advantage of such superstructural relics as 'bourgeois right', and the third embracing the Djilasian idea that a 'new class' could arise on the basis of the power and privileges accruing to the Communist political elite. These three theories of class each had somewhat different political implications, the contradictions among which remained veiled until the Cultural Revolution drew them out. For example, a 'remnant analysis' of class struggle conceived of socialism as a fully stabilised mode of production in which enemy classes lingered via filial reproduction, whereas both other theories conceived of socialism as a dynamic, transitional phase that could generate its own bourgeois or quasi-bourgeois classes; remnant analysis would thus focus criticism on the former 'five black' (or 'seven black') classes and their offspring, whereas the other theories would legitimate criticism of cadre children and other emergent beneficiaries of the revolution. Whereas remnant analysis focuses narrowly on legal ownership (or previous legal ownership) in distinguishing between socialist and non-socialist classes, the other two theories tend to focus more on correct leadership, attitudinal change and 'line struggle'. Thus the factional chaos and inconclusive outcome of the Cultural Revolution can be attributed at least in part to an underdeveloped theory of continuous revolution, which allowed organisational incoherence to ensue upon the collapse of disciplined hierarchy.

Young's point concerning the ambiguity of the theory underlying the Cultural revolution is surely well taken, and his tripartite reordering of the theory of class struggle should prove heuristically useful. But the distinction between the second and third theories did not appear to me altogether clear, nor do their factional implications (i.e. indicated enemy target groupings) seem to differ. It is also perhaps possible to reconcile 'remnant' and 'emergent' theories of class by arguing that new bourgeois elements represent bourgeois cultural residues – though the implications for action would still remain significantly different. An analysis of Maoist theories of class struggle would seem to call for some analysis of the theory of contradiction, and how the handling of contradictions among the people and between the people

and their enemies articulates with class conflict, which is missing here. Whereas Mao must ultimately assume responsibility for his own apotheosis (which he could certainly have more effectively discouraged), Young's conflation of Mao's Thought with Lin Biao's propagation of a 'cult' appears to me questionable in view of Lin's purge by Mao himself, allegedly in part due to his mystification and vulgarisation of Mao's Thought. Aside from the obvious point that Lin was now acting in his own interest rather than Mao's, there does seem to be an intrinsic difference between the use of ideology as a vehicle of popular emancipation and the memorisation of set quotations under the auspices of a lockstep military dictatorship. Finally, it would have been interesting and not entirely irrelevant to see Young extend his analysis of class struggle into the post-Mao reform era.

Brantly Womack's contribution is so extended, both into the post-Mao period and back into the pre-Liberation period, thereby providing ample longitudinal purview for his analysis of 'Where Mao Went Wrong'. The answer to this question Womack locates chronologically in 1957, concurring with the verdict of the June 1981 Resolution on CCP History. Whereas Knight is eager to reclaim Mao for Marxism, Womack regards Mao as a good Maoist but poor Marxist, attributing his later misfortunes in part to a dogmatic construal of Marxism-Leninism. Mao's works are not really to be placed on the shelf next to Hegel, Croce, or Perry Anderson, according to Womack; Mao manifested his true genius in coping with problems of revolutionary leadership, soon finding himself out of his depth, both theoretically and practically, when he attempted to erect his own system. Yet the folly of Mao's 'Stalinist dogmatism' was made impervious to negative feedback by Mao's 'authoritarian optimism', consisting of a boundless personal self-confidence, compounded by a monopolisation of the mass media that prevented any indication of dissatisfaction or doubt from becoming publicly visible. Womack draws no ideological line between early (pre-1957) and late Mao, arguing that political circumstances in the late 1950s conspired to trigger hitherto latent dogmatic and authoritarian-optimistic tendencies: socialisation of the means of production had been triumphantly completed, Khrushchev's repudiation of Stalin (and the emerging Sino-Soviet dispute) eliminated the obvious blueprint of China's future, and Mao's personal authority had become unchallengeable – all of which left Mao free to be Mao.

Womack's argument is insightful and compelling, winning my concurrence with most of his central points. A few minor qualifications might still be noted. So far as 'dogmatism' is concerned, the care taken to shield the reputations of Dazhai and other revolutionary models certainly showed an unwillingness to expose key symbols to empirical verification. Nonetheless, one can not but be struck by Mao's flexibility in adapting faulty radical policies (even while sheltering radical symbolism) in the aftermath of both the Leap and the Cultural Revolution, extending in the latter case to the rehabilitation of many of the cadres who would ultimately contribute to his undoing – indeed there were so many policy zigzags in the course of the early 1970s that the credibility of his programme suffered. In comparing the posthumous fate of Mao's legacy to that of Stalin, it would seem that at least one of the reasons for Mao's diminished impact has to do with his greater pragmatism and humanity. To characterise Mao as an uncritical Stalinist thus seems a bit extreme, though the two did share a 'dogmatic' concern for shoring up the achievements of their respective socialisms against the corrosive force of revisionism *qua* reform.

So far as 'authoritarian optimism' is concerned, while Mao was clearly unrealistically euphoric during the heyday of the Leap, his motive for launching the Cultural Revolution seems to have reflected profound anxiety and even pessimism about the future of the revolution, a gloom that seemed to deepen during his ailing twilight years. One might infer from Mao's episodic involvement in the policy process, his alternation of public visibility with reclusiveness, that he was somewhat manic-depressive. In pointing to Mao's admitted weakness for an 'imperial revolutionary style', Womack shares with Young a tendency to dwell on his manic phases without taking due account of this ambivalence, which, for example, never let him rest with a given succession arrangement. It also prevented him from ever finding a stable balance between authority and rebellion. Thus, to my knowledge, Mao did not 'denigrate mass creativity', nor could mobilisation during the Cultural Revolution be said to 'turn Mao's Thought on its head'; Mao's populist impulses were recurrent throughout his career, if sometimes short-lived.

I think that Womack is correct in seeing a fundamental continuity between early and late Mao, tracing the Cultural Revolution back to the campaigns of the 1950s or the *Zhengfeng* of the 1940s, for example, and noting such consistent underlying themes as the need for struggle. Nevertheless, the transformation he underwent in 1957 was perhaps profound enough to be deemed a genuine change of course, albeit one prompted by the external political context. For example, without perhaps ever renouncing the struggle to enhance production, Mao did begin in the course of the Great Leap to take a far more critical stance toward any enjoyment of its material reward (here I would respectfully differ with Womack), giving rise to a populist tendency to confuse poverty with revolutionary virtue, prosperity with revisionism. Why he did so must remain more conjectural, but I think it had to do with the incipient Sino-Soviet dispute (and Khrushchev's espousal of 'goulash communism' in contrast to Chinese 'pantless communism'), as subsequently reinforced by the failure of the Leap to meet extravagant early expectations of material abundance. In any case, this confusion fostered a persistently troubled relationship between production and continuing revolution that was to plague the last two decades of Mao's chairmanship.

Looking to the future, I find Womack's endorsement of 'modernisation' as a functional substitute for revolution or socialist transformation somewhat simplistic and question-begging, in view of the myriad economic forms this term has clothed. The perception of a 'crisis of faith', and the attempt to create a 'socialist spiritual civilisation' both suggest that this sense is quite widespread.

In any assessment of Mao's efficacy as a practising political leader (as distinct from a systematic Marxist philosopher), Teiwes's review of his tempestuous relationship with Peng Dehuai assumes special relevance, for Peng's purge was to mark the end of a long period of consensual leadership. Based on the new material brought to light in Peng's memoirs and Domes's biography, as well as his own interviews, Teiwes paints an essentially unflattering picture of Mao as politician: vindictive, vain and heartless.

Why did the relationship between the two old warriors, who once held each other in high esteem, disintegrate? Dismissing such plausible issues as military modernisation, Peng's handling of the Korean campaign (where Mao lost a son), or collusion with the Soviets (which receives no serious consideration here), Teiwes locates early sources of tension in such apparently obscure episodes as the four

crossings of the Chishui River during the Long March, and Peng's unauthorised Hundred Regiments Offensive in 1940, which was then exacerbated by Peng's involvement in the Gao-Rao affair of 1954-55. But the crux of the matter was Peng's challenge to Mao's exposed position in the avant-garde of the Great Leap Forward. Based on the mild, deferential tone of Peng's letter to Mao, Teiwes questions Domes's conclusion that Peng deliberately challenged Mao's leadership, finding Peng guilty only of attempting to initiate a course correction. Deeply committed to the Leap's lofty aspirations and unable to concede fallibility when publicly confronted, Mao reacted with withering fury and ruthless counter-offensive tactics, whereupon Peng's support abruptly collapsed, and he was consigned to a political oblivion from which he would receive no reprieve during his lifetime.

Teiwes argues that Peng's purge marks a watershed in Chinese politics, a shift from 'rectification according to the norms' to unregulated elite factionalism. However, unless this distinction merely counterposes the norms of 'inner-Party struggle' to political reality, it calls for a more complete picture of the Gao-Rao affair, as well as the Yan'an *Zhengfeng* movement, than has appeared heretofore. These precedents suggest that the 'norms' perhaps never fully prevailed – during *Zhengfeng* in particular, factionalism seems to have been rampant. Though Teiwes discounts Domes's factional interpretation of Chinese elite politics in favour of a 'Mao in command' model, the Peng Dehuai episode suggests that both may have been right, with Peng's case functioning as a threshold from the former to the latter. Although Peng addressed Mao deferentially in his letter, that obviously rankled; he considered himself Mao's equal, alluding resentfully to the imbalance between Mao's forty days' criticism of Peng (in 1944) and Peng's eighteen days' criticism of Mao (in 1959). For Mao's part, he exhibited a sort of Alexandrian syndrome. An increasingly self-important Chairman turned against those who dared to speak the truth to him on the same footing, seeking solace and support from flattering courtiers (whom he also, however, distrusted).

Mao's impact on Chinese politics will probably be reinterpreted for as long as that impact is politically significant – and it remains considerable ten years after his death, both among reformers who have redacted their own 'new text' and among the 'leftists' who resist this construal. To Deng Xiaoping and his 'practice faction', the 'living soul' of Mao Zedong Thought consists of the mass line, 'seeking truth from facts', and independence – of class struggle, Mao's 'key link', the less said the better. Mao's notions of a regenerative bourgeoisie, of 'struggle between the two lines' within the Party, of 'continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat', have been essentially repudiated, thereby removing this source of theoretical embarrassment and political anarchism. Mao's deep concern with distributive justice, as translated into economic egalitarianism and a smothering ideological conformity, has likewise gone by the board. The posthumous interpretation of what Mao was wont to call 'self-reliance' (*zili gengsheng*) thoroughly discounts the old economic indices therefore (eschewal of loans, investment, or very much trade) in favour of 'opening to the outside world', compensating with a more heavy-handed appeal to Chinese nationalism. The post-Mao leadership has thus in effect sought to preserve only those aspects of Mao's legacy which are utterly flexible, while dismissing those to which he attributed immortal importance.

Yet the official post-Mao version of Mao's thought does not yet exhaust its intellectual impact, however much that may be its intended function. Scholars should

endeavour to form their own judgments about the extent and direction of that impact, even while taking political reinterpretations (and the new evidence they disclose) into account. An emerging consensus, both within China and abroad (and also joined by the four scholars represented here), supports the posthumous repudiation of Mao's central focus on struggle, on the continuing need for a Promethean spirit. Not even the surviving Maoist 'whateverists' have showed much enthusiasm for mass mobilisation, and their own purges proceeded *in camera*.

Avoidance of confrontation dovetails nicely with the traditional value of harmony, and bids well to promote economic stability (if not political democracy) by reinforcing established authority. Yet Mao's anarchic spirit is perhaps not totally defunct, even after suppression of the Democracy Wall. Without acknowledging ancestry, it seems to have transmigrated into the critique of bureaucracy and cadre corruption – an issue that seems to evoke genuine popular appeal. Authorities still reprovingly allude to 'egalitarianism' as an impediment to the introduction of performance-based material incentives, particularly among the urban proletariat. Mao's attempt to decentralise power to the local levels has never been successfully reversed, and more recent reforms have only exacerbated this trend.

Mao's Thought is no longer a source of positive political innovation in China, by and large. Yet even after having spent its vital force, it lingers like a troubled ghost to haunt the reformers.

Washington D.C.
November 1986