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Review: Mao Tse-tung: The Man and the Symbol

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## Review Article

### Mao Tse-tung : the Man and the Symbol

*Mao Tse-tung: The Man in the Leader.* By LUCIAN W. PYE. [New York: Basic Books, 1976. 346 pp. \$12.95.]

*Mao Tse-tung and China.* By C. P. FITZGERALD [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976. 176 pp. £3.50.]

Coinciding with the news of the chairman's death, two new books have appeared to re-evaluate Mao Tse-tung's historical significance and place a headstone on his long illustrious career. Both are generous in their evaluations: A. L. Rowse says in his foreword to FitzGerald's book that Mao is "by far the greatest man in the world today – probably the greatest in this century," and Pye concurs that "by all standards, Mao Tse-tung belongs in the company of the few great political men of our century." One measure of his immediate significance is that Mao Tse-tung has become the symbol of his nation, not only for his compatriots but for most of the rest of the world. The resulting ambiguity makes his assessment quite difficult. As a mere human, Mao was presumptively entitled to all the foibles and follies of the flesh. But as father of his country he has become a vehicle for the collective identifications, hopes and ideals of his countrymen, and a negotiable currency in the international public opinion market representing a radical Third World challenge to the conventional wisdom of "modernization." How does the man square with the symbol? Can one whose profession entails performing a public role embodying every civic virtue realistically be expected to comport himself with the same exemplary qualities off stage? (The private lives of our screen personalities would suggest not!) These two biographies offer contrasting answers to this question. C. P. FitzGerald is primarily concerned with Mao as a symbol of the rise of the People's Republic of China, and he utilizes Mao as a central reference point without seeking to penetrate deeply behind the public veneer. Lucian Pye, on the other hand, presents us with a full-fledged psycho-biography in which he attempts to unveil the "man in the leader."

In *Mao Tse-tung and China*, C. P. FitzGerald has brought his classic *The Birth of Communist China* up to date, devoting more than half of this slim volume (five of nine chapters) to the post-1949 period which was omitted from his earlier study. FitzGerald writes with a vivid, muscular and engrossing prose style; into less than 200 pages

of text he has managed to distil half a century of complex political developments without bewildering the reader or oversimplifying the events he describes. The book is evidently pitched to the general reader, lacking footnotes or bibliography and providing a brief (but adequate) index. This is not to say that FitzGerald has nothing to offer the China hand – his comparison of the Japanese experience in China with the American misadventure in Vietnam is suggestive, his explanation of the relationship between Lin Piao and Confucius and his speculations on the succession prospects all very interesting.

To be sure, there are a few minor inaccuracies and the inevitable moot interpretations. Does the inference that Mao was not “uncontested master of policy” in 1939 really contravene “the official view” (p. 29)? Though it is true that he was among the first (after P’eng P’ai) to evince interest in the peasant question, surely it is going too far to say that Mao “virtually repudiated” Stalin’s policy for China at ChingKangshan in 1927 (p. 59). And although the account of the Sian episode contains an excellent description of Chiang Kai-shek’s dilemma,<sup>1</sup> according to the reports of Snow, Chang Kuo-t’ao and Otto Braun (Li Teh), Mao was hardly as composed and judicious at that point as FitzGerald suggests; in fact, his initial reaction was one of glee, calling for Chiang’s execution following a mass trial. Finally, FitzGerald’s interpretation of the causes and origins of the Cultural Revolution leaves certain questions unanswered. On the one hand insisting that “the Cultural Revolution was not a spontaneous outburst, but a carefully planned and very audacious political manoeuvre” (p. 111) requiring “skilful planning and logistics” (p. 116), FitzGerald adopts Jerome Ch’en’s earlier argument<sup>2</sup> that the PLA participated in the co-ordination of a nation-wide conspiracy. On the other hand he also insists, in my view correctly, that “It is at least very doubtful whether the notion that he [*viz.* Mao Tse-tung] lost all influence over the regime and its policy can be sustained in the light of the facts” (p. 112). This explanation leaves a motivational hiatus that FitzGerald fails to fill: Mao’s purpose was “to eliminate his opponents from power” (p. 111), and yet if his own supreme position remained secure, what moved him to depart from regular channels and throw the nation into turmoil in order to secure their elimination? FitzGerald himself remains somewhat nonplussed (p. 126).

The chairman’s possible motives for launching the Cultural Revolution have of course puzzled many people besides Professor FitzGerald. It is to answer such questions that Professor Pye’s book was

1. Chiang could not end the civil war for fear of legitimating the CCP and thereby providing the Japanese with an anti-Communist pretext for all-out invasion, and the KMT could not hope to withstand such an invasion without resorting to guerrilla warfare, FitzGerald argues. But guerrilla war entails arming the peasants and inspiring them with a reason to fight, presenting great social dangers to the class of small rural landlords upon which Chiang’s power rested, FitzGerald, *Mao Tse-tung*, p. 38.

2. Jerome Ch’en, *Mao* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 40.

intended, using a psycho-analytic key to unlock the door to Mao's "spirit." Departing from the usual emphasis given to the formative impact of his authoritarian father (in Mao's own autobiographical account as recounted to Snow first and foremost), Pye tends to discount the father and regard Mao's mother as the main animus of his revolutionary career. By abandoning her prized first-born male child to devote attention to his younger siblings, she arouses rage in him that he disguises through idealization of his mother, and a resentment of his siblings that he disguises through idealization of an impersonal ideological fraternity he could never bring himself to practise toward his own brothers. This early indulgence followed by abandonment leaves him haunted by persisting fears of intimacy and of the possibility that others might exploit his feelings, a fear that throughout his life made it necessary for Mao to abandon others before they were able to abandon him. Like other revolutionary leaders concurrently analysed by Bruce Mazlish, Pye's colleague at M.I.T.,<sup>3</sup> Mao abruptly terminated relationships of intimacy and substituted for these a mock-intimate relationship with a distant mass that could not threaten him or demand reciprocal emotional commitment. "The subsequent history of Mao's falling out with his colleagues is in fact the history of the Chinese Communist movement" (p. 272). That Mao's underlying animus was not revolt against repressive paternal authority but rather the sudden termination of maternal indulgence explains his appeal to western radicals, who likewise protest irrationally against being thrust from indulgent middle-class families into the hard, impersonal world of "secondary associations."

Pye's thesis is bold, arresting and original, and the profession owes him its gratitude for completing a project that has been long called for but heretofore never attempted, and in the process opening many vitally important questions for discussion and further research. He admits "quite frankly" that much of his evidence is "quite speculative" (p. xii), but to his credit Pye has always stated his views directly and forcibly without fear of controversy. His "mother-centred" interpretation is indeed based on slender evidence (a strained construal of an early poem, and generalizations from western psychology on the effects of sibling birth-order on character development), so its major support must come not from the evidence but from its consistency with the dominant traits of Mao's adult character. Mao always exhibited the restless contrariness of a marginal individual who prized his privacy but resented being excluded, resented, and yet coveted authority, and Pye has captured his abundant ambivalences very well. Despite such "contradictions," we can probably agree that Mao's was a combative, rebellious and dominating character, and there is some evidence indicating that such "belligerent" character types tend to originate in a father-absent

3. Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

family constellation.<sup>4</sup> In one of his most interesting asides, Pye traces Mao's characteristic style of combat all the way back to his early encounters with his classmates and teachers (pp. 154–55), thereby providing a partial answer to the question of the origins of the Cultural Revolution we alluded to earlier.

However, in at least two other respects Pye's characterization and diagnosis of Mao seems shy of the mark. Perhaps under the influence of Mazlish, he hypothesizes that Mao had an "ability to move other people's feelings while always guarding his own" (p. 15 *et passim*). Yet far from "shielding his affect," Mao struck most of those who met him as moody and mercurial, "a man of considerable depth of feeling."<sup>5</sup> As Pye himself notes on page 29: "Those who met Mao were often startled to learn that in the flesh he was a man of strong words and emotions." Pye sustains his hypothesis in the face of this evidence by interpreting Mao's emotional displays as simulated performances calculated to evoke specific reactions from his audience. This may be true, but Pye's evidence on this score is conspicuously weak: the rapidity of Mao's mood swings does not belie their authenticity, and his love of theatre is too widely shared in Chinese culture for this to betoken anything at all. My own impression is that Mao sought to present a public *persona* of confident composure and that his emotional outbreaks tended to be limited to critical situations among a relatively small circle of colleagues. An alternative interpretation more consistent with the available evidence might be that Mao was indeed genuinely "emotional," and that he consistently rejected curbs on emotional expression for himself or for those with whom he identified, having learned very early that even in an unequal contest he could wring concessions that would otherwise be denied, by pushing the situation towards an emotional crisis his more inhibited adversary would regard as intolerably threatening. In point is the fact that the expressive and instrumental functions of emotion are by no means mutually exclusive.

The portrait of Mao as a man unable to sustain close relationships (resulting in frequent purges at the level of policy), who therefore displaces his affect to impersonal aggregates (resulting in a mobilizational style) seems intuitively more compelling,<sup>6</sup> and yet even here Mao's

4. Saul Friedlander and Raymond Cohen, "The personality correlates of belligerence in international conflict: a comparative analysis of historical case studies," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (January 1975), pp. 155–87. The psychodynamic explanation of this correlation is that when male children encounter social pressure to behave in a masculine manner in the absence of a masculine role-model, they tend to exhibit compensatory aggressiveness.

5. Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 95; see also Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (New York: Knopf, 1943), pp. 168–70. These sources are cited by Pye, it should be noted, but he reinterprets them.

6. Robert E. Lane notes in an entirely different context that "a need to be liked which is somehow complicated and restrained by a fear of intimacy tends to work itself out in the form of bidding for the affection of distant

record is mixed. His willingness to use others and then abandon them promptly and ruthlessly on a strictly expedient basis seems to characterize most effective politicians on either side of the ideological spectrum; certainly the pattern of inner-Party factional struggle and purge preceded the rise of Mao, and will probably succeed his demise. As a matter of fact, Mao's accession to power was followed by a period of elite solidarity without parallel in Party history. Until the Cultural Revolution it was interrupted only by the Kao-Jao purge of 1954–55 (which according to most analysts reflected a dispute affecting Liu Shao-ch'i and Chou En-lai, not Mao),<sup>7</sup> and the fall of P'eng Teh-huai in 1959 (on which there was immediate elite consensus). Since 1966 Pye's picture becomes more plausible, but this may not be a consequence of an enduring character defect but rather a reaction to more immediate and particular developments, such as the bureaucratization of the revolution, anticipatory succession struggles provoked by Mao's age and debility, and other manifestations of the growing tension between the institutionalization and the personalization of authority.

In addition to, and underlying, these substantive questions, Pye's study brings to light three methodological problems with which those of us interested in the future of psychocultural research on China should try to come to terms. The first is the old problem of psychological reductionism. While anticipating this problem, Pye's book still manifests two forms of reductionism: social/political events are reduced to psychological causes, and adult experience is reduced to childhood causes. The first form of reductionism reduces policy to personality, resulting in a Mao-centric model of politics in which it is implicitly assumed that Mao was an absolute despot surrounded by sycophants: "Grasping at mere hints of Mao's intentions, colleagues have always stepped forward to champion a new policy or a new campaign, declaring it to be the will of the Chairman and thereby elevating themselves" (p. 270). Given such a power constellation it makes sense to submit the Supreme Leader to deep psychological scrutiny while consigning his colleagues and followers to more superficial treatment, but it is wise to bear in mind that this power constellation is still assumed rather than demonstrated, and that a different conception of the power

groups, safe because they can be seen more as symbols than as persons. What goes into this intimacy complex is another matter, but some element of unacceptable hostility is a very likely ingredient, hardly known to the cook who prepares this dish for his own table." *Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind* (Chicago: Marham, 1969), p. 123. That this observation could be made of an American university student suggests that the underlying motive is both psychologically cogent and fairly widespread.

7. A recent study suggests in fact that Kao Kang was a consistent "Maoist." Cf. Roy F. Grow, "Soviet industrial strategies and Chinese politics," paper presented to the 28th Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Toronto, Canada, 19–21 March 1976.



structure might result in a different psychological focus.<sup>8</sup> Even if one adopts a Mao-centric model, Mao's personality could affect political and social change only insofar as it was responsive to political and social needs and demands; although Pye concedes this point in the abstract, he devotes little attention to the specific social issues that Mao articulated and successfully symbolized. In the analysis of symbolic leaders psychological interpretations might well be supplemented by some form of "social reductionism" that "traces" the public manifestations of the leader to the demands, supports, and cleavages of his constituency.<sup>9</sup>

The second form of reductionism is based on a sort of reverse inference that begins with a description of Mao's character, proceeds to reconstruct certain childhood experiences in logical anticipation of that character, and then to deduce from these formative experiences certain characteristic action patterns. Such patterns are discernible in the lives of all men and it is useful to recognize them and interesting to speculate about their causes. This form of analysis might however be supplemented by a more *developmental* approach that showed how Mao changed during different stages in his life, constantly in touch with and reacting to his environment. Thus certain aspects of his personality may have contributed to his success before 1949, whereas subsequent changes in the environment brought out other facets of his personality that help to account for his conflicts with colleagues, the sporadic and seemingly impulsive nature of his participation in the policy process after 1949, and so forth. Such an approach might also be more sensitive to Mao's *cognitive* style, which would reflect the way he attempted to provide for his cognitive *and* emotional needs as a decision-maker. How did he organize and use channels of information, analysis, and advice; what types of people did he rely upon for satisfying cognitive and emotional needs?<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Pye has a tendency, incidentally also evident in his theoretical discussions of "political culture,"<sup>11</sup> to conflate the psychological with the cultural and the cultural with the natural. This leads

8. Some of these alternative conceptions of the power structure are noted in Michel Oksenberg, "Political changes and their causes in China, 1949-1972," *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. XLV, No. 1 (1974), pp. 95-114.

9. Erik Erikson provides the best synthesis of psychological and sociological interpretations in contemporary biography. See especially his *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962); also *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969).

10. Alexander L. George, "Assessing presidential character" (Review of James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*), *World Politics*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (January 1974), pp. 234-83, esp. p. 245.

11. Lucian Pye, "Introduction" in *Political Culture and Political Development*, by Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba (eds.) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 9; see also his article "Political culture" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1968), Vol. XII, pp. 218-25.

him occasionally to confuse the levels of his analysis – as in his references to Mao’s “idealization” of battle, as if this were peculiar to the chairman and not a common cultural theme. Or his observation that the Chinese equate being good with being deserving of love, unconsciously seeking to regress to a state of childhood dependency (p. 251), as if this were peculiar to Chinese culture and not characteristic of human nature. Where culture is distinguished from personality it often seems to be static, providing a normative context that casts those who seek to change it in a bad light: thus Pye chides Mao for violating traditional cultural norms such as filial piety or fraternal loyalty that Mao might be expected to have discarded on ideological (if not practical) grounds. In short, future psychobiographies should include a more coherent conceptualization of the relationships between personality, human nature and political culture.

Thirdly, questions may legitimately be raised about Pye’s use of evidence, even in a field in which the rules of inference are still quite flexible. His exploitation of available primary and secondary source materials is competent and thorough, but his use of that evidence is sometimes rather forced. From the fact that Mao “barely mentioned the existence of his grandfather” (p. 75) is it really plausible to infer that not only Mao but Mao’s parents were unfilial? Mao’s abandonment of his brother Mao Tse-t’an at Kiangsi in 1934 is cited to illustrate his callous disregard for family, but how safe is this inference in view of the fact that Mao was still excluded from the leadership at this time and very likely had little to say about troop and personnel assignments? With a bit more scrupulous attention to exceptions and qualifications Pye might have avoided many easy criticisms of his generalizations. Given Pye’s worthwhile ambition to provide an interpretation of action that includes some reference to underlying unconscious motives, speculation is inevitable, but its risks could have been minimized by concentrating on those episodes and relationships for which there is abundant and compelling evidence, rather than meditating at length upon Mao’s possible reactions to the birth of his unmentioned siblings.

Lucian Pye has written an important and stimulating book, well worth the attention of the community of contemporary China scholars. The above criticisms should not necessarily be taken to imply that his fascinating thesis is mistaken, only that it should be taken as a preliminary set of hypotheses rather than a fully tested theory, and that a good deal of additional empirical research remains to be done on the issues he has raised. Fortunately, Mao is perhaps the only leading Chinese Communist figure about whom adequate personal information exists to make such psychological analysis feasible and potentially rewarding.

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