

Mao Zedong as a Historical Personality

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In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward in August 1961, realizing that his attempted industrial-agricultural transformation of the Chinese countryside had failed and resulted in the death of millions of peasants, Mao Zedong in a self-critical mood confided to his guard Zhang Xianpeng that he had three remaining aspirations. First, he wished to spend a year each working in industry and agriculture, as well as half a year in commerce, in order to get a better grasp of the situation and to set an example against bureaucratism for other party cadres. Second, in an outburst of romantic sentiment, he revealed that he would like to ride a horse along the banks of the Yellow River and the Yangzi with a geologist, a historian and a novelist, in order to conduct “on the spot investigations” to gain a better understanding of China’s geological conditions, a field in which he found himself lacking knowledge. Yet the trip would not be conducted for scientific purposes only -- hence the historian and the novelist. He wanted to learn more about how history had shaped and been shaped by the geographic environment and to compare it with his personal life experiences. The third and final aspiration was to transform the results of these investigations into a book that would include a biographical sketch of his life. While he had relayed a version of his remembrances to American journalist Edgar Snow back in Yan’an in 1936, these stopped short of his most crucial successes: the consolidation of power within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the victory against Chiang Kai-shek’s troops during the Civil War, and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, along with the early stages of socialist transformation. While these achievements were to become part of his yet-to-be-written biography, the book was not to shy away from discussing his shortcomings: “Let the people of the whole world then decide whether I am a good or a bad person in the end. Me, I would be very satisfied if the good parts would account for 70 percent

and the bad parts for 30 percent. I do not conceal my own viewpoints; I am just this kind of person. I am not a saint.”¹

Shortly after Mao’s death, his ultimate successor Deng Xiaoping would freely quote these considerations in May 1977, on the eve of his second return to power, as he battled with the alleged “two whatevers” faction that emphasized the eternal correctness of the deceased chairman’s policy decisions and instructions: “Comrade Mao Zedong said that he himself also had committed errors... He said: ‘If someone can be assessed at a ratio of seventy percent achievements and thirty percent mistakes, this is very good already, not bad at all. If I should be assessed 70/30 after my death, I would thus be very happy, very satisfied’.”² While the “70/30 assessment” never became part of an official party document, in public parlance it has come to stand for the official evaluation of Mao as a historical personality. By the time of his death in 1976, this type of schematic evaluation had become a well-established trope with regard to judging the performance of living or historical personalities as well as important political events. Mao himself had established the equation as a rule of thumb at the Second Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress in March 1949. He had repeated it multiple times, for example when referring to the achievements of Stalin in the wake of Khrushchev’s secret speech (1956), when assessing Deng Xiaoping’s past behavior (1973), or when commenting on the political achievements of his last political experiment, the Cultural Revolution (1975). The practice of official evaluation harked back to a tradition of two millennia of Chinese historical

¹ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* [Chronological Biography of Mao Zedong, 1949-1976], vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2014), p. 15.

² Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* [Chronological Biography of Deng Xiaoping 1975-1997], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2004), p. 159.

writing that had continuously passed moral judgment on historical personalities as a guide for future political action.

The following overview will place changing evaluations and self-perceptions of Mao Zedong in historical context by analyzing three topics. The first section, *Mao Zedong as History*, highlights facets of his personality that had a lasting influence on political developments. The second part, *Mao Zedong and History*, traces Mao's policies against the background of his complex engagement with China's tradition and envisioned socialist modernity. The final section, *Mao Zedong in History*, returns to the question of historical evaluation. It analyzes different standards of measurement to reveal the changing cycles of ascribing historical merit.

Mao Zedong as History

The historical-geological project and the accompanying biography never materialized and Mao Zedong did not commission any other account of his later years. Even Cultural Revolutionary hagiographies generally consisted of unofficial reprints regarding his childhood and youth taken from Snow's *Red Star over China*. References to his post-1949 career tended to be very general or emphatically emotional. Little was known about the personal life of the seemingly omniscient ruler inside the old imperial palaces of Zhongnanhai, except for rumors. Therefore, public interest remained high, even after Mao's death. Starting in 1989 with Quan Yuanchi's "Mao Zedong. Man not God",³ which was based on interviews with Mao's former bodyguard Li Yinqiao, a wealth of Chinese publications have appeared that shed light on even the most mundane aspects of Mao Zedong's personality. The officially sanctioned spread of "Mao-

³ Quan Yuanchi, *Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong* [Mao Zedong. Man not God], (Beijing: Zhongwai wenhua chubanshe, 1989).

literature”⁴ served the aim of countering the larger-than-life cult image of the late Chairman by commenting on his eating habits or his inattentiveness to questions of adequate clothing or social etiquette. As of the mid 1950s, Mao was famous for holding meetings with foreign ambassadors in his sleeping gown, as well as for conducting Politburo sessions in his private quarters, while lying on his huge bed littered with historical works and recent policy documents. Not even questions regarding his bowel movements were deemed below public interest. The Western equivalent of this literature was represented by the memoirs of one of Mao Zedong’s personal physicians, Li Zhisui, published in English with heavy editorial assistance in 1994. While the memoirs have been rightly criticized for claiming that Li was a witness to or even consulted by Mao on basically every major policy decision, they nevertheless offered insights into the workings of “Group One”, as the cocoon of Mao’s personal attendants and staff was termed,, notably absent from Chinese Mao-literature. These most famously included Mao Zedong’s promiscuous sex-life in his later years, his lack of personal hygiene as reported by Li Zhisui (“I wash myself inside the bodies of my women”⁵), as well as the bouts of depression that had first appeared during periods of inner-party rivalry in the mid-1920s and were to return sporadically after major political disappointments such as the defection and death of his chosen successor Lin Biao in 1971.

This shift in biographical writing about Mao, with its inclination toward gossip and the non-political aspects of Mao Zedong’s personality, has in part shrouded the facets of his character that made him a skilled political leader in the first place, who secured longstanding loyalty and admiration among his followers, even beyond his death. It also fails to explain, how

⁴ See Thomas Scharping, ‘The Man, the Myth, the Message. New Trends in Mao-Literature from China’, *The China Quarterly* 137 (March 1994), pp. 168-179.

⁵ Li Zhisui, with Anne F. Thurston, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, translated by Tai Hung-chao (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 364.

a formerly idealist middle-school teacher came to view violence as a crucial means of achieving political success and grew increasingly indifferent, even cynical about the human toll that his policies caused.

Mao Zedong was not born a psychopath back in 1893. He grew up in the last years of the waning Qing dynasty as the eldest son of a fairly well off peasant family in Shaoshan, a rural hamlet located in the mountainous province of Hunan in southern China. Conflicts with his stern, dictatorial father characterized his childhood and youth, as he came of age during the tumultuous years of the early Republic of China. Mao quickly achieved a reputation among his classmates and teachers as a bold and unconventional thinker with outstanding literary skills. His early writings reveal a multitude of intellectual influences. He strove for Confucian self-cultivation, tried to strengthen his physical body in order to make up for the weakness of the Chinese body politic, studied Western philosophy textbooks, and admired political leaders and thinkers as diverse as George Washington, Kang Youwei, and Napoleon. The few contemporary self-reflective letters or scribbled reading notes reveal a passionate, nationalistic youth, who clearly placed egoism before altruism. Yet despite narcissistic tendencies, he was still capable of critical self-appraisal (“I have a very great defect, which I feel ashamed to reveal to others: I am weak-willed.”⁶) at the time. Mao would remain an avid reader and a passionate writer throughout his life. He craved any type of information available, but he despised learning for learning’s sake. Books and newspapers were important sources of information, yet they had to be complemented by personally conducted on-the-spot investigations and ultimately lead to political action. He was a political animal and wanted to realize his political ambitions rather than to simply describe the current malaise of early Republican China.

⁶ Mao Zedong, ‘Letter to Peng Huang’ (28 January 1921), in: Stuart Schram (ed.) and Nancy J. Hodes (associate ed.), *Mao’s Road to Power. Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949*, vol. 2 (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 38.

In his late twenties, after having unsuccessfully agitated for the independence of his home province Hunan, Mao Zedong came to understand the value of a tight-knit organization, united by a common ideal, to achieve political success: “We really must create a powerful new atmosphere [...], it requires an ‘-ism’ that everyone holds in common. Without an ism, the atmosphere cannot be created. [...] An ism is like a banner; when it is raised will the people have something to hope for and know in what direction to go.”⁷ Socialism became the banner he had been looking for. It has been argued that it had not been ideas of universal justice or equality that attracted Mao to the communist cause but rather the “apologia of violence, the triumph of will, and the celebration of power”.⁸ There is considerable truth to this. Mao wanted to achieve tangible results instead of simply “talking big”. However, this functional perspective underestimates the importance Mao Zedong attached to socialist ideology as such. Although during the foundational period of the CCP he had a limited understanding of socialist theory and was to immerse himself in the philosophical details of historical materialism only in the late 1930s, his ongoing engagement with Marxist-Leninist ideas crucially shaped his perception of history and politics. This held true for Leninist principles, where the concepts of the avant-garde party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the coercive function of the state apparatus (until its withering away, as envisioned by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*) provided him with important tools to frame his views on political leadership until the end of his life. It applied less to the field of Marxist economics, where Mao frankly confessed his own incompetence. Yet even in his late sixties, during the high tide of the Great Leap Forward, he would conscientiously work through standard Soviet economy textbooks. Knowing about his weak

⁷ Mao Zedong, ‘Letter to Luo Aojie’ (25 November 1920), in: Schram, *Mao’s Road to Power* 1, p. 600.

⁸ Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 94.

side, he took criticism of his failed economic policies personally and rated them as political attacks. The “little leap” of 1955/56 and the quelling of party internal critics, which included high-ranking leaders such as Zhou Enlai, is one of many examples of his reaction to criticism.⁹

There has been a long-standing and, at times, fiercely polemical debate about the question of whether Mao Zedong was a Marxist thinker at all. In 1972, Alexej Rumjancev, at the time vice-president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, in a book-length rebuttal of the philosophical foundations of Mao’s adaptation of socialist theories, claimed that Mao “did not master Marxism as an integral science but understood it only fragmentarily and in a coarse and primitive form.”¹⁰ The main point of contention was related to doctrinal purity. By having unduly emphasized the role of the peasantry, by cultivating a lavish cult of personality in his later years, and by claiming the primary importance of national conditions over international precedents, Mao accordingly had proven himself to be a supporter of “petty-bourgeois”, “idealist”, and “subjectivist” ideas; in short: he was a sham Marxist. Later researchers have continued this debate *ad nauseam*, counting the number of quotations from either the Marxist-Leninist canon or Chinese tradition in order to quantify their relative importance in Mao’s thinking.¹¹

Recent scholarship has come to re-emphasize Mao’s continuing acceptance of the underlying key elements of Marxist-Leninist epistemology. Given his doctrinal inferiority to

⁹ Andrew Walder, *China under Mao. A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 153.

¹⁰ Translated from the German edition, Alexej M. Rumjanzew, *Quellen und Entwicklung der Ideen Mao Tse-tungs* [Sources and Evolution of Mao Zedong’s Ideas] (Berlin: Dietz, 1973), p. 23.

¹¹ For an overview see Nick Knight, *Rethinking Mao. Explorations in Mao Zedong’s Thought* (New York: Lexington, 2007).

those competitors for power, who had either studied in Moscow or who had mastered foreign languages, Mao placed particular attention on local circumstances (“No investigation, no right to speak!” he would say) and the necessity to adapt Marxism-Leninism to national conditions. This “sinification” of socialist theory freed him from having to bow to other sources of authority or universally applicable standards of measurement and turned what came to be termed “Mao Zedong Thought” into a flexible guiding principle that left considerable leeway for tactical compromise, most clearly visible in his championing of “new democracy” and coalition government in the 1940s.

However, power politics was not the only factor behind Mao Zedong’s call for local adaptations. He had painfully experienced the limited value of schematically transplanting foreign experiences to the Chinese domestic setting. The Comintern advice to organize the numerically minuscule Chinese proletariat in the cities turned out to be an unrewarding strategy for the CCP, especially as the National People’s Party (GMD) under Chiang Kai-shek in April 1927 killed and imprisoned its former United Front allies. The same applied to many of Josef Stalin’s interventions in Chinese domestic politics, for example when forbidding the CCP to take advantage of the capture of Chiang Kai-shek during the 1936 Xi’an incident, when Mao opted for execution but ultimately had to bow to Stalin’s authority, who did not believe the Chinese Communists were capable of leading a socialist revolution yet. While Mao accepted Stalin’s supremacy as leader of the world communist movement, he was often deeply frustrated about the lack of support provided by the Soviet Union. Things came to a head during the negotiations about the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty in early 1950, when Mao threatened to leave without having reached an agreement if he would not be treated with sufficient respect. It was only after Stalin’s death that Mao defended him against Khrushchev’s criticism in 1956 as an “outstanding Marxist-Leninist fighter”, to be assessed at a 70/30 ratio.

The intense struggles against external enemies as well as leadership rivalries within the CCP shaped Mao Zedong’s attitude toward violence. According to Mao, the success of a

political movement depended on solving a key question: “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?” The distinction remained at the heart of Mao’s understanding of politics, irrespective of periods of alliances and coalitions.¹² He had experienced and supported the use of violence during investigations into the problem of peasant mobilization in his early party career. His famous Hunan investigation report from February 1927 featured many of the elements he would later continue to champion: by way of creating and publicly humiliating a limited number of enemies, often previous elites, public passion could effectively be roused and, ideally, be channeled for political purposes. The ensuing revolutionary atmosphere was an effect Mao craved to sustain.

According to Mao, revolution was “not a dinner party” and sacrifice for a higher good remained a crucial tenet of his rhetoric. It has been argued that Mao, unlike Stalin and Hitler, did not revel in brutality, but rather stressed an approach christened “curing the sickness to save the patient”. While Mao did not display openly sadistic traits, he became increasingly oblivious, even cynical, about the value of human life. This holds true for the struggle with inner-party rivals, for example during the Futian incident in Jiangxi in late 1930, when several thousand communists were tortured and killed, or his bragging about having had ten times more scholars killed than the infamous first emperor of China. For the sake of agitation and mobilization he valued the passion aroused by public acts of violence. This is best documented for the early 1950s, when he not only personally ordered executions (“If in some regions some corrupt individuals need to be killed in order to mobilize the masses, a few can be killed”),¹³ but actually

¹² Michael R. Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics. A History* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹³ *Mao Zedong nianpu* 1, p. 463.

established regional “killing quotas”.¹⁴ He also consciously used the threat of violence or his indifference to human suffering in order to unsettle supposedly complacent, bureaucratic, or even revisionist communist party leaders, such as when claiming the ultimate victory of socialism, even if half of the world population would perish in the course of a nuclear war. Metaphors of violence also pervaded his vocabulary in other policy fields such as the economy. These, however, should not always be taken at face value. As a ruler, Mao was ruthless in his dealings with political allies and enemies alike. He loved to upset party comrades and foreign adversaries by making unpredictable utterances that made it hard for others to pin down his actual standpoint.

The bleak view of human life as struggle, rendered human relationships subordinate to political struggles. This also held true for his personal life. His wife Yang Kaihui, whom he had left behind in Changsha when he fled to the mountains, and whom he had already replaced by marrying He Zizhen, was shot by GMD troops in 1930, as were several other close relatives over the course of the next years. Only four of his ten children by three wives would live to adulthood, with his eldest son being killed during the Korean War, and his second eldest being driven to insanity due to the ordeals of his childhood. We have to imagine the aging Mao Zedong as an increasingly isolated person, comforted by a number of personal attendants. Unlike during his youth, Mao did not cherish friendships or relationships based on equality when he became a political leader. The climate of suspicion and distrust, which pervaded the party and state organs especially as of the late 1950s, was an immediate consequence of his style of leadership and mirrored the rhetorical trope of the Chinese emperor’s self-description as “lonely ruler” (*guaren*).

¹⁴ Yang Kuisong, ‘Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries’, *The China Quarterly* 193 (March 2008), pp. 102-121.

Mao Zedong and History

When then CCP secretary-general Jiang Zemin visited the United States in November 1997, he delivered a speech at Harvard University and presented the local library with a special gift: A multi-volume copy of Mao Zedong's comments on China's twenty-four traditional dynastic histories. This "rich heritage of philosophy" should provide US academics with help in "understanding and drawing useful lessons from Chinese history".¹⁵ Three decades after his *Selected Works* and especially the *Little Red Book*¹⁶ had come to represent the essence of Mao Zedong's contribution to the development of anti-imperialist and socialist theory, the reading notes were to signify the wealth and continuity of Chinese patriotic heritage, not least by way of reproducing them (at least in case of costly state presents) as a thread-bound facsimile of the Qing dynasty *Wuyingdian* edition in large font, as originally used by Mao between 1952 and his death.

Mao Zedong's relation to Chinese history in particular and traditions more generally, even socialist ones, was far from straightforward. Historical figures such as Napoleon had fascinated him early on and the question of whether great men or the masses were to be considered as creators of history remained a constant issue, despite his acceptance of the fundamental laws of historical materialism, which placed social classes at the center of historical change. He came to adopt Georgii Plekhanov's view of a dialectical relationship between leaders and the masses. Some outstanding individuals accordingly were capable of both synthesizing past developments and recognizing present social needs within the framework of a determinist historical worldview. According to Plekhanov, great men existed,

¹⁵ Steven Erlanger, 'China's President Draws Applause at Harvard Talk', *New York Times*, 2 November 1997.

¹⁶ Alexander C. Cook, *Mao's Little Red Book. A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

yet this type of individual “is a hero not in the sense that he can stop or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of this inevitable and unconscious course. Herein lies all his significance; herein lies his whole power. But this significance is colossal, and the power is terrible.”¹⁷

Mao would return to ponder the role of great men in history at various stages during his political career and there could be no mistaking that he counted himself among them. However, his claim to political leadership was not accepted uncontested. He was first sidelined by Comintern representatives or party leaders like Li Lisan, Qin Bangxian, and Zhou Enlai, later by a group of Moscow-trained cadres. These so-called 28 Bolsheviks around Wang Ming claimed authority in terms of their theoretical grasp of Marxism-Leninism and emphasized their close relation to Stalin. Mao Zedong’s slow rise to power proceeded in piecemeal fashion. He became a master of political infighting and intrigue, as well as a seasoned guerilla commander, whose strategic and military skills outranked his rivals, most obviously during the disastrous flight from GMD encirclement, christened by Mao in December 1935 retrospectively as the “Long March”.

This period is highly illuminative for understanding Mao’s perception and instrumentalization of history. In a famous poem entitled “Snow”, written in February 1936, which came to be published only ten years later in the context of coalition talks with the GMD in Chongqing, Mao rated the great emperors of old, such as Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, or Genghis Khan and found all of them lacking either in literary style or poetic imagination: “All are past and gone! For truly great men, look to this age alone!” While Mao would later claim that “great men” here referred to the proletariat, contemporary critics had little doubt that the

¹⁷ Plekhanov, Georgii, *Lun geren zai lishi shang de zuoyong* [On the Role of the Individual in History] (Moscow: Waiguowen shuji chubanju, 1950), pp. 43-44.

metaphorical reference concealed a far-reaching, vainglorious claim to leadership.¹⁸ The fact that he was still tutored in the intricacies of literary Chinese, the style of expression cultivated by the ruling elites of the Chinese empire, and additionally was a talented poet himself, was to contribute to his lofty image as philosopher-king. The classical idiom lent itself particularly well to ambiguous statements and lyrical expressions that left most of his fellow party-leaders, who often had received little more than primary school education, either in awe of Mao's erudition or guessing, what his actual intentions were. By cultivating an aura of ambiguity, Mao Zedong enjoyed the liberty of watching others trying to make sense of his statements and, as the situation unfolded, to either assume control or quietly retreat from positions that turned out not to work favorably.

While history, in the case of the poem, provided the canvas, against which the present could be positively compared, he also engaged in a more systematic analysis of Chinese history, most famously in his essay *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*. Although he adopted the Marxist framework of class struggle as the crucial mechanism propelling history forward and applied catchphrases such as “feudalism” to vast stretches of time,¹⁹ he devoted particular attention to analyzing “national conditions” (*guoqing*), a phrase Deng Xiaoping would also heavily rely upon decades later. Mao therefore placed great emphasis on peasant insurrections in Chinese history, calling them “the real motive force of the

¹⁸ See Geremie R. Barmé, ‘For Truly Great Men, Look to this Age Alone: Was Mao Zedong a New Emperor?’, in Timothy Cheek (ed.), *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 248-253.

¹⁹ On the adoption of Marxism in Chinese historiography during the years see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History. The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

progress of Chinese history”.²⁰ However, given the absence of an advanced social class and the correct leadership of an advanced political party, the peasant wars only had come to strengthen the dynastic cycle. With the invasion of foreign imperialists, China had accordingly transformed into a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country in the wake of the opium wars, which after the Xinhai revolution (“old democratic revolution”) now needed a “new democratic revolution” under CCP leadership.

Despite his emphasis on China’s particular national condition, Mao was careful to speak out against an essentialist view of Chinese traditions and insufficient study of socialist theory. In an anecdote he would frequently retell in the 1960s, Mao mentioned that during the Long March he had been accused by fellow party members of not having grasped key aspects of Marxism-Leninism and of solely conducting his military strategies based on Sunzi’s classical treatise *The Art of War* and the Ming-dynasty novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Mao retorted that he had not even read the works of Sunzi at this point, with the exception of a few fragments at school; and who could earnestly believe that warfare could be conducted based on a novel?²¹ He would read the classical works on Chinese military theory shortly after, alongside Clausewitz as well as Japanese and Soviet treatises, combing them effectively in his military writings of the late 1930s.

Most famously he would spell out his views on war and tactics in *On Protracted Warfare* in 1938, in which he among others propagated asymmetric, mobile warfare against a stronger enemy such as the Japanese invaders and the importance of political agitation among the soldiers to create revolutionary consciousness. Despite current setbacks for the Chinese forces, he believed history to be on his side. The oppressive and dictatorial nature of Japanese

²⁰ Schram (ed.), *Mao’s Road to Power* 7, p. 283. The reference to China’s specific national conditions is on page 301.

²¹ *Mao Zedong nianpu* 4, p. 504.

politics would give rise to internal and external contradictions that would bring forth alliances among suppressed classes and nations of the world and ultimately result in Japan's defeat.²² These insights continued to characterize Mao's perception of conflicts in the international arena, although he would shed the belief that a period of "perpetual peace" was within reach. He would thus liken US imperialism to a "paper tiger" several times in the mid 1940s and 1950s or define the Soviet Union as "socialist imperialist" nation in the 1960s and 1970s. Imperialism and brute military strength in the long run would always loose out to a just cause such as socialism, which by rallying national and international support of the oppressed would ultimately achieve victory.

He famously illustrated the need for perseverance with a story taken from the classical text *Liezi* entitled "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains", about how an old man had embarked on a seemingly impossible venture of removing two mountains in his garden, conscious of the fact that within his lifetime this task would not be completed. But there would be future generations to carry on this work. This dedication in the original story moved celestial beings to help him remove the mountains. In a brilliant move that found immediate resonance with the largely illiterate Chinese audience, Mao declared the two mountains to represent "imperialism" and "feudalism", which would have to be removed not by celestial beings but by "the people" under CCP leadership.

Chinese history thus provided him with a reservoir of characters and stories, which he used to exemplify his current aims. Yet, these traditions needed to be reinterpreted, such as in the case of a series of major articles drafted by his political secretary Chen Boda in the 1930s on major philosophical traditions in Chinese history. Otherwise, former legacies could become ideological shackles which had to be undone by force, as Mao Zedong demonstrated in the Hunan investigation report, where not only the castigation of social elites had been depicted but

²² Schram (ed.) and Hodes (ass. ed.), *Mao's Road to Power* 6, p. 328.

also the destruction of religious heritage. Here influences of the May Fourth heritage of iconoclasm and the striking down of the Confucian tradition remained potent.

As the *Liezi* story reveals, the ability to frame historical events convincingly in a larger narrative that gave meaning to specific incidents and made the present appear as the logical outcome of overarching historical forces counted among Mao's most outstanding leadership skills. The "Long March" is another case in point. Instead of rendering the horrendous loss of men and material as what it was, a defeat, he transformed it into a tale of extraordinary endurance of a chosen people against foreign and domestic enemies:

Speaking of the Long March, one might ask, 'What is its significance?' We say that the Long March is unprecedented in the annals of history, that the Long March is a manifesto, a propaganda team, a seeding machine. 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? [...] No, never.²³

The linkage between national revolution and the historical necessity of the communist victory, which also included a reinterpretation of Chinese tradition, proved to be a highly potent narrative. Mao Zedong would continuously elaborate on and systematize this linkage as a series of necessary steps to finally attain socialism. This narrative and its multifold later applications, for example by having carefully chosen model heroes compare the bitterness of the past with the "sweetness" of the socialist present, provided a forceful means of persuasion that even after decades continued to shape memories of the recent past.²⁴ Mao perfected his story-telling craft, backed up with disciplinary force, during the Rectification Campaign in Yan'an, when his texts

²³ Schram (ed.) and Hodes (associate ed.), *Mao's Road to Power* 5, p. 92.

²⁴ Gail Hershat, *The Gender of Memory. Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

and viewpoints came to constitute the party's standard narrative.²⁵ Classical anecdotes and recent incidents of heroism or international solidarity such as the example of Canadian physician Norman Bethune were rephrased effectively to spread socialist ideals. Even in the late 1990s, many people who had grown up in the Maoist era were still able to recite these stories by heart. However, the problem of whether the new content fundamentally altered the messages provided by the older narratives and aesthetic forms themselves remained unresolved. Prior to the Cultural Revolution Mao would call for a thorough revolution of traditional forms in the field of opera, yet many cultural continuities remained.²⁶

History also served as a means to establish Mao Zedong's intra-party predominance. By the late 1930s, Mao Zedong had secured Moscow's backing and established himself as the party's primary theoretician and political leader, although he was only to be elected party chairman in 1945. In the context of competition with Chiang Kai-shek for national leadership, his erstwhile competitors like Wang Ming had bowed to his claim of dominance and fellow party leaders like Liu Shaoqi or Zhu De helped to fashion a leader cult around Mao Zedong that offset key elements of Leninist organizational control.²⁷ This victory was also enshrined in the party's first resolution on party history, propagated in April 1945, which defined a series of line struggles committed prior to Mao's leadership. Although he still publicly claimed that China

²⁵ David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁶ Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution. Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, 'From Leninist Party to a Charismatic Party: The CCP's Changing Leadership, 1937-1945', in: Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 339-387.

lacked “a great man”,²⁸ like Marx or Lenin, and that especially he would have to immerse himself further in the study of Marxist-Leninist theory, Mao Zedong used the resolution as a means of retelling party history in teleological fashion, as a series of line struggles that ended with the adoption of correct policy measures under his leadership. The destiny of China as a nation thus was indissolubly linked with Mao’s personal claim to leadership and lifted him above the constraints of party discipline. In the early 1940s, a model of charismatic leadership emerged, which centered on Mao Zedong as the party’s most prominent symbol.²⁹ The potency of this symbolism could not be easily offset or routinized, especially after the victory in the civil war, as Mao Zedong turned from revolutionary to ruler. Yet only during the Cultural Revolution would Mao use his cult as an instrument to mobilize the populace against bureaucratic party rule as such.³⁰

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the CCP had accomplished a historical achievement. The narratives of national unification and resistance against foreign aggression had mainly served their purposes. Now the tasks of building a modern, socialist nation and debates on the complex present and envisioned future assumed priority. Historical topics occasionally resurfaced, as political conflicts or contested works of art questioned the dominant party narrative. It was after Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956, which questioned Stalin’s historical legacy and contributed to the ensuing rift between China and the Soviet Union, when history became a crucial issue for Mao Zedong again. Mao

²⁸ Schram and Cheek (eds.), *Mao’s Road to Power* 8, p. 742.

²⁹ Gao Hua, *Hong taiyang shi zenyang sheng qilai de. Yan’an zhengfeng yundong de lailong qumai* [How the Red Sun Rose. A History of the Yan’an Rectification Movement] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000).

³⁰ Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult. Rhetoric and Ritual during China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

increasingly came to ponder his historical legacy and perceived the danger of a Khrushchev-style report and complete policy reversal after his death. The policy failures of the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Great Leap Forward also led to an increasing feeling of vulnerability on the domestic front, which Mao countered with increasing separation from his erstwhile colleagues and reliance on non-constitutional bodies of governance that solely catered to his wishes. The narrative that as of mid-1962 came to dominate his speeches emphasized the continuing importance of class struggle to fend off revisionist tendencies. Given the victory of the revolutionary movement, this argument was much less convincing to a larger audience than the previous call for national resistance against Japanese aggression. Charges against the Soviet Union and domestic enemies had to be exaggerated and again, Mao relied on historical metaphors to communicate his political aims.

The example of the upright Ming-dynasty official Hai Rui perfectly illustrates the instrumental dimension of what Mao Zedong termed “using the past to serve the present”. In 1959, he had advised party members to follow Hai Rui’s example and to speak the truth, even if this meant “tearing the emperor from his horse”, an only half-ironical self-referential description. Once criticism of the disastrous policies of the Great Leap was voiced, most prominently by Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai, Mao changed the signals. He stubbornly clung to the correctness of his policies and on spurious grounds punished those who had criticized him. He would also twist historical metaphors. When the figure of Hai Rui resurfaced at the outset of the Cultural Revolution, it was in a polemical essay. The essay charged those who still upheld Hai Rui with historical distortion, by claiming that the Ming official could speak up on behalf of the peasants while representing the land-holding gentry society, thus transgressing his class boundaries and impeding open class struggle. Critical questions about how the CCP leadership, many of which (including Mao) came from well-off social backgrounds, managed to transgress the limitations of their own social heritage, were deemed heretical during the Cultural Revolution. It was only Mao who held the privilege of interpreting

history and judging historical actors. Criticism was to be directed at the targets specified and within the narrative realms staked out by Mao.

With the outset of the Cultural Revolution, Mao had come to perceive two main dangers for the future prospects of socialism in China: the continuing weight of tradition, especially remnants of bourgeois or feudal thinking, and the emergence of bureaucratic rule from within the party ranks. Both in turn became key targets of the campaign, with symbols of Chinese traditions or carriers of classical learning bearing the brunt of the onslaught in the early stages. Using his cult of leadership, Mao galvanized the masses to attack the “Four Olds”. His shock troops, the Red Guards, went on an iconoclastic rampage, destroying supposedly feudal heritage in order to establish a socialist future in complete accordance with Mao Zedong Thought, the contours of which remained hazy at best. While providing easy targets for mobilization, history and historical objects shifted to the background as party leaders came under attack. The objects, if not looted or taken into possession by Cultural Revolutionary leaders and connoisseurs such as Kang Sheng, were stored in government repositories and later partly restored to their previous owners. Some of these artifacts also provided the basis of state collections, such as in case of the Shanghai Museum.³¹

The politicized use of historical metaphors characterized Mao’s rule until the end. He would temporarily single out specific individuals, schools of thought, or particular works for praise, such as the first emperor of China and the school of legalism, or proclaim unlikely comparisons between past and present, such as between Lin Biao and Confucius. A body of loyal supporters would provide the relevant articles linking current political leaders with historical events, suggesting linkages at some deeper level only to be perceived by the “Great Helmsman”, Chairman Mao. Yet, despite his attempts to secure his historical legacy during his lifetime, the instrumental usage of history and cultural symbols to obtain political goals resulted

³¹ Denise Ho, *Curating Revolution. Politics on Display in Mao’s China* (forthcoming).

in a thorough disillusionment among party members and the populace regarding the sagacity of at least parts of Mao Zedong's policies.

Mao Zedong in History

Mao had been keenly aware of the fact that with the Cultural Revolution he had placed a wager on his political future that might cause severe damage to his reputation among contemporaries and later generations. But, as he famously stated in a letter to his third wife Jiang Qing, which only exists as a later redacted copy, he was willing to take this bet. He perceived a revisionist threat to socialist rule in China and, not without reason, feared the reestablishment of capitalist modes of production after his death. If the fashioning of a leader cult around his persona was the only way to mobilize the populace to support his aims, he acceded to its creation, while remaining aware of the fact that he would not be able to live up to these inflated expectations. In the letter, Mao also quoted an entry of the *History of Jin*, a work he would consult right up to his death. He commented on the eccentric third-century poet Ruan Ji, one of the illustrious seven sages of the bamboo grove, who defied all social conventions. Ruan had derided the founding emperor of the Han, Liu Bang as a “lackey”, who had only assumed the throne because “there were no true heroes at the time”. Mao famously applied the evaluation to his own rule, when describing the shifting tides of self-confidence: “I always believed that if there are no tigers in the mountains, the monkey may become king. I have become this type of king.”³² These self-doubts, however, only temporarily tarnished his self-appraisal, as he found himself to be predominantly constituted of “tiger-spirit” with some minor monkey attributes. Mao further anticipated that after his death, his legacy might be repudiated and vilified. Yet, he

³² Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (Hg.), *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Mao Zedong's Post-1949 Manuscripts], vol. 12 (Peking: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), p. 72.

remained assured that his writings would always provide sufficient ammunition for true revolutionaries and that reactionary rule was bound to fail in the long run.

Questions on Mao's historical status commenced right after his death in September 1976. After the radical faction around Mao Zedong's wife had been purged, short-term party chairman Hua Guofeng tried not to question Mao's historical role due to his own frail claims to legitimacy. Deng Xiaoping, on the other hand, who had been expelled by Mao in early 1976, had to break the absolute truth claim attached to Mao's sayings, if he wanted to reclaim power. As Deng regained influence, the party leadership decided on a two-pronged approach to deal with the historical legacy of Mao Zedong and his policies. While the "Gang of Four" and military leaders associated with Lin Biao were tried by a special court on grounds of attempting to hijack state-power and persecuting hundreds of thousands of innocent people,³³ Mao in an official resolution on party history was held accountable for severe political and ideological errors but not for criminal acts. The resolution of June 1981 was drafted by a small group around Mao's former secretary Hu Qiaomu. Key aspects were settled upon after several personal interventions by key leaders such as Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping. While Deng perceived the implementation of the Four Modernizations to be the most pressing task ahead, he was clearly aware of the fact that without a comprehensive evaluation of Mao as a historical actor, the CCP faced the danger of following the path of the Soviet Union in the wake of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies in the mid-1950s, leading to domestic and international turbulence. He therefore impressed three main tasks upon the drafting committee: first, to firmly establish Mao Zedong's place in history and to uphold and further develop "Mao Zedong Thought". Second, to evaluate the correctness of major policies including the respective responsibility of leading party cadres. And finally, to reach a basic conclusion on the past that would stand the test of

³³ Alexander C. Cook, *China's Cultural Revolution on Trial. Justice in the Post-Mao Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

time and allow the current leadership to focus on present issues without having to deal with recurrent problems and personal feuds dating from China's revolutionary history. The resolution was to offer a conclusion "in broad strokes and not with too many details".³⁴ It represented an attempt at wiping the historical slate clean once and for all and to provide party and populace with a standard narrative on how to judge the recent past.

After an extended discussion process, which at a time included over four thousand political and military cadres, who in part came to voice harsh criticism of both Mao and his policies,³⁵ the resolution affirmed Mao Zedong's historical merits and the continuing importance of Mao Zedong Thought, now understood as the party's collective wisdom, as guiding theory. While after 1957 Mao was said to have increasingly deviated from the "correct" path of Chinese socialism and the Cultural Revolution represented an outright disaster, the resolution emphasized that although Mao was clearly to blame for these policy failures, others, including the current leadership, were to share responsibility. On the whole, Mao's errors were outweighed by the contributions he had made to the Chinese revolution both in terms of policy formulation and implementation.³⁶ He thus was to remain a crucial figure in party history, not infallible but of outstanding stature.

³⁴ *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Selected Writings of Deng Xiaoping], vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 292.

³⁵ Compare Guo Daohui, 'Si qian lao ganbu dui dangshi de yi ci minzhu pingyi' [An Instance of Democratic Criticism and Discussion of Party History by Four Thousand Old Cadres], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* 4 (2010), <http://www.yhcnqw.com/html/qlj/2010/49/F998.html>.

³⁶ The text of the resolution is 'On Questions of Party History. Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China', *Beijing Review* 27 (6 July 1981), pp. 10-39.

The resolution to the present day provides the framework in China for how to judge the recent Chinese past. Yet despite the limitations on publishing critical research on the Maoist era in China that were instituted in the wake of the 1981 resolution, historical evaluation has been much more complex than might be expected. Especially since the 1990s, a plethora of different opinions has been voiced, not least facilitated through publication channels in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Recently, the Bo Xilai affair has revealed once again the twisted legacies of the Maoist era, when nostalgic memories of a supposedly egalitarian era were used to mobilize those left behind by China's economic reforms. Then Premier Wen Jiabao in March 2012 even felt the need to warn against the possible reoccurrence of movements similar to the Cultural Revolution. By November 2013, the CCP officially interdicted the use of pre-1978 historical examples to criticize the present and vice versa.³⁷ The document presents another attempt at freezing the ambiguous legacies of the Maoist era through an officially mandated *Schlussstrich*.

Historical writings in other parts of the world have gone through different cycles of ascribing blame and merit to Mao Zedong.³⁸ In Western media, a crucial role is currently played by bestselling biographies and histories of the early People's Republic of China, which present Mao as a demonic psychopath, who created a system of totalitarian suppression and enslaved the Chinese populace through a rule of terror. In many ways, the narratives of Mao as monster serve the aim of destroying a latently romanticized image of a modern-age Chinese philosopher-king among Western audiences, which is said to have lingered, even among educated elites,

³⁷ Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao yanjiushi, „Zhengque kandai gaige kaifang qianhou liang ge lishi shiqi“ [On how to correctly assess the two historical periods before and after Reform and Opening-Up], *Renmin Ribao*, 8 November 2013, p. 6.

³⁸ Compare Charles Hayford, „Mao's Journey to the West. Meanings made of Mao“ and Alexander C. Cook, „Third World Maoism“, in: Cheek (ed.), *Critical Introduction*, pp. 313-331 and pp. 288-312.

since the late 1960s. Despite the conscious distortions of historical sources, these portrayals have stimulated critical discussions about the life and legacies of the former CCP chairman. Depending on the political standpoint, Mao Zedong has left sufficient evidence to be portrayed as a ruthless tyrant, as champion of social justice, as national leader, or as gifted poet. He was, in his own words to Edgar Snow in 1970, a “lone monk with a leaky umbrella”, the first half of a traditional couplet that continues with a pun on the homophonous characters for “hairlessness” and “lawlessness”. While neither the contemporary translator nor Snow understood the allusion, Mao was saying that he felt increasingly unrestrained by social norms or the criteria of future biographers.

Mao Zedong was a highly complex and at times contradictory historical personality, who came to deliberately shroud his views in ambiguous analogies to retain political leverage. Without doubt, he was China’s most important leader in the twentieth-century and, simultaneously, responsible for more casualties in peacetime than any other leader in world history. He facilitated China’s return as an important actor on the international stage and discredited the very idea of state socialism he had intended to uphold for future generations. Historical verdicts are never final, as each generation continues to debate its identity by way of relating to the past. It is doubtful, however, that Mao’s wish for a predominantly positive assessment after his death will prevail without state censorship in China. The lofty rhetoric of great democracy and mass mobilization does not restore the countless lives that were ruined or ended because of Mao Zedong’s policies to create a future utopia.