# Mao Now

*China's transformation in the 30 years since the death of Mao Zedong has been breathtaking. But it will not be complete until the nation comes to terms with Mao's complex legacy.*

BY ROSS TERRILL

In the early 1990s, a story circulated among Chinese taxi drivers about an eight-car traffic accident in Guangzhou that resulted in injuries to seven of the drivers involved; the eighth, unscathed, had a Mao portrait attached to his windshield as a talisman. The story fueled Mao fever (*Mao re*) in China, with shopkeepers offering busts of Mao that glowed in the dark and alarm clocks with Red Guards waving Mao's little red book at each tick of the clock. Mao temples appeared in some villages, with a serene portrait of the Chairman on the altar. Transmuted uses of Mao continue today. Nightclub singers in Beijing croon songs that cite Mao's words. Youths dine in "Cultural Revolution-style" cafés off rough-hewn tables with Mao quotations on the wall, eating basic peasant fare as they answer their cell phones and chat about love or the stock market.

This nonpolitical treatment of Mao Zedong (1893–1976) is an escape that fits a Chinese tradition. When floods hit the Yangzi valley and farmers clutch Mao memorabilia to ward off the rushing waters, it is reminiscent of Chinese Buddhists over the centuries clutching images or statues of Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy, to keep them safe and make them prosperous. Following the eclectic nature of Chinese popular beliefs, Mao is added to the panoply of faith.

But where is Mao the totalitarian? Each of the major nations that experienced an authoritarian regime in the 20th century emerged in its own way from the trauma. Japan, Germany, Italy, even Russia departed politically from systems that brought massive war and repression. China, still ruled by a communist party, has been ambiguous about Mao. Although Mao's portrait and tomb dominate Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing, Mao himself—unlike Stalin in Russia or Hitler in Germany—has floated benignly into a nether zone as if somehow he was not a political figure at all, let alone the architect of China's communist state.

The cab drivers, farmers, pop singers, and shopkeepers are really only following the lead of the Chinese Communist Party, which does not quite know how to handle Mao's legacy. New history textbooks approved for initial use in Shanghai have largely brushed Mao out of China's 20th-century story. China has abandoned Mao's policies but not faced the structural and philosophical issues involved in Maoism—and probably won't until the Party's monopoly on political power comes to an end. Yet unless China gets the Mao story correct, it may not have a happy political future.

The moral compass of the Mao era has gone, unregretted. But moneymaking, national glory, and a veil over the past in the name of "good feelings" are not enough to replace it. Can a society that lived by the ideas of Confu-

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cianism for two millennia, and later by Mao's political athleticism, be content with amnesia about the Mao era and the absence of a believed public philosophy?

In a recent biography, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2006), Jung Chang and Jon Halliday pile up evidence that Mao was a monster to eclipse Stalin and probably Hitler and Lenin as well. "Absolute selfishness and irresponsibility lay at the heart of Mao's outlook" from his teens to his dotage, say the authors. In a second influential volume, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (1995), Mao's physician Li Zhisui portrays the Chairman as exceedingly selfish, jealous, and promiscuous. Soon after his book came out, Dr. Li came to speak at Harvard, and I showed him around the campus. "Three words did not exist for Mao," the gentle doctor remarked as we strolled. "Regret, love, mercy." These two books—both written from outside China—explain the Mao era in China as essentially the consequence of having an evil man at the helm.

**Mao's image is seen everywhere in China—silk-screened on T-shirts, printed on clock faces, and, in this case, molded in solid gold—but discussion of his 27-year reign and its legacy is rare.**

Certainly Mao's rule was destructive. Tens of millions of Chinese died in the forced collectivization of the Great Leap Forward of 1958–59, victims of Mao's willful utopianism and cruelty. Millions more died, and tens of millions had their lives ruined, during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Practicing brinkmanship toward India, Taiwan, and the Soviet Union, Mao declared that a loss of hundreds of millions of Chinese in a nuclear war would be a setback China could readily digest.

Yet "bad man" does not adequately sum up Mao and his legacy. To believe so would be to embrace the moral absolutism of communism itself, with its quick verdicts ("enemy of the people," "hero of the proletariat"), and to repeat the manipulations of official Chinese imperial history, in which even a flood or earthquake "proved" the evil character of the emperor. Were the "good men" around bad man Mao blind to his failings for so many decades? Were the hundreds of millions of Chinese who bowed before Mao's portrait and wept at the sight of him out of their minds?

Mao made history; at the same time, history made Mao. In addition to looking at Mao's failings as a human being, we must look at the structures and pressures that turned whim into tyranny. At the ideas Mao wielded. At the evaporation—in Mao's case, as in that of several other dictators—of youthful idealism and exactitude. Above all, at the seduction of a "freedom"

bestowed from above by a party-state that believed it knew what was best for the citizenry.

In a letter he wrote in 1915, Mao said, "Jesus was dismembered for speaking out. . . . He who speaks out does not necessarily transgress, and even if he does transgress, this is but a small matter to a wise man." Immediately we face a puzzle: Young Mao was an ardent individualist. In his years at the teachers' training college he attended in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, Mao's credo became the self-realization of the individual. "Wherever there is repression of the individual," he wrote in the margin of a translation of Friedrich Paulsen's *System of Ethics* (1889), "wherever there are acts contrary to the nature of the individual, there can be no greater crime." His first published newspaper work, written in 1919, was a plea for the liberation of women, a passionate nine-part commentary on the suicide of a young woman in Changsha moments before her arranged marriage.

Mao at 24 saw the Russian Revolution of 1917 as an outbreak of freedom for the individual that lit the way for China. A young female friend objected, "It's all very well to say establish communism, but lots of heads are going to fall." Mao, who had recently read Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, retorted, "Heads will fall, heads will be chopped off, of course. But just think how good communism is! The state won't bother us anymore, you women will be free, marriage problems won't plague you anymore." Although these words hint at Mao's later callousness about human life, it is striking that he viewed Lenin's revolution in terms of the "marriage problems" of individual women.

The anarchism of Peter Kropotkin, the author of *Mutual Aid* (1902), had a strong hold on Mao until he was nearly 30. A great virtue of the Russian anarchist, Mao felt, was that "he begins by understanding the common people." Anarchism in Mao's perception was linked with Prometheanism; Friedrich Nietzsche was also among his early enthusiasms. The Promethean individual would prepare for his heroic role by taking cold baths, running up mountains, and studying books in the noisiest possible places. This prefigures the fascism to come in Mao's Cultural Revolution, just as fascism in Europe owed a debt to Nietzsche. At the time, however, Mao's individualism was nurtured by the influence of a Chinese professor at Changsha who had imbibed the idealist liberalism of T. H. Green, the late-19th-century British philosopher.

Mao was a rebel before becoming a communist. The psychological root of his rebelliousness was hostility to his father, and, by extension, to other authority figures. The political root was dismay at China's weakness and disarray in the face of foreign encroachment, shared by most informed Chinese of the period. Mao's chief use for the steeled individual was as a fighter for justice and China's salvation. "The principal aim of physical education," he wrote in 1917 in *New Youth* magazine, "is military heroism." The authoritarian strain in Mao's individualism was already present.

Eventually, Mao's respect for individual freedom collapsed. There were four causes. One was the powerful current of nationalism in early-20th-century China; the cry to rescue the nation eclipsed the cry for the self-realization of the individual. A second was the large role of war in China from the 1920s to the '40s. Pervasive violence made political debate a luxury and favored repression. A third was Mao's embrace of Marxist ideas of class, central economic planning, and communist party organization. Fourth was the hangover in Mao's mind and Chinese society generally of a paternalistic imperial mentality.

In the end, Mao Zedong, facilitated by Stalin, put the population of the world's largest nation under a regimen that combined Leninism, the paternalism of early Chinese sage-rulers, and, by the 1960s, a hysteria and military romanticism that amounted to fascism Chinese-style.

The imperative of national salvation was the first factor working against Mao's attraction to freedom. Mao was mildly attracted to a movement comparable in spirit to Europe's Enlightenment that sprang into existence in China in 1919. Named May Fourth (after the date of an initial student demonstration), it aimed at modernizing China by embracing quasi-Western ideas of individualism, democracy, and science. Liberated individuals would rescue China. But May Fourth soon split in two, a left wing jumping to Marxist collectivism and a right wing sticking with individualism. Leftists, including the 27-year-old Mao, founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921.

Bolshevism helped Mao be progressive and anti-Western at the same time. Opposition to the West was necessary to many young Chinese leftists, despite the appeal of Western ideas, because of British and other foreign bullying of China since the Opium War of 1839–42. From

Lenin, Mao learned that social justice and national salvation could come as one package. Leninism—and to a lesser degree Marxism—joined anarchism, nationalism, and individualism in the ragbag of Mao's political ideas. It was Lenin who showed Mao his road to power. Anti-imperialism was going to be for Mao, as it was for Lenin, the framework for revolution. But this anti-imperialist—soon anti-Japanese—nationalism that Mao injected into the Chinese Revolution negated individual freedom.

In the 1930s, Mao argued to the semicriminal secret society Gelaohui (Elder Brother Club) that its principles and the CCP's were "quite close—especially as regards our enemies and the road to salvation." Of course, the threat of enemies was the central point. In his appeal to non-Han "minority" peoples during the Long March of 1935–36, when Mao emerged as the CCP's top leader as the Communists retreated before Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces, Mao challenged Mongolians to "preserve the glory of the era of Genghis Khan" by cooperating with the Communists. Pressing the Muslims to support him, he told them that this would ensure the "national revival of the Turks." Of course, Chinese nationalism had turned Mao into a trickster. After the wars with Japan and Chiang Kai-shek were over, there would be no common cause with the Gelaohui, no freedom for the Mongolians or the Muslims of Xinjiang.

The violence that continually rippled through China was another force militating against individual freedom. After the death in 1925 of Sun Yat-sen, a leader in the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911 and a founder of the Nationalist movement, the gun was prominent in Chinese public life. Sun's wavering leadership gave way to warlordism, a violent rupture of the tenuous coalition of Nationalists and Communists in 1927, and growing incursions by Japan beginning in 1931. Guns were to freedom as a cat is to mice. From the time Mao used force to confiscate the holdings of Hunan landowners in 1925, when he was just one of many CCP leaders, his political life cannot be understood aside from violence, both the wars he waged and those waged against him. As he sought to organize farmers in a remote mountain region, he remarked, "The struggle in the border area is exclusively military. The Party and the masses have to be placed on a war footing." Mao spoke of "criticizing the Nationalists by means of a machine gun."

A third enemy of freedom was the class, organizational, and economic theory Mao drew from Marx and Lenin. Here Mao's story is similar to that of Stalin, Castro, and others. Class theory has intrinsic distortions; people often do not act as members of an economic class. Class labeling became especially inimical to freedom when Mao was forced to rely on farmers rather than workers as the key class in China's revolution. Anyone who pointed out this departure from Marx's theory of proletarian revolution was stamped out as a renegade.

Eventually, class became little more than a convenient way to demarcate friends and enemies of the moment. Hence, longtime colleague and expected successor Liu Shaoqi was "discovered" by Mao in the 1960s to be a "bourgeois" who had "sneaked into the Party." Never mind that Mao and Liu had worked together as leftist organizers on and off since 1922.

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Within a year of the founding of the CCP in 1921, Mao also fatefully embraced Leninist authoritarianism, and with it Lenin's argument that an elite revolutionary vanguard must guide the rank and file. He accepted the secrecy, duplicity, and absolute party loyalty of communist discipline. Individual autonomy, honoring the truth, friendship, the long bond with Liu Shaoqi—they all meant little by comparison. With Leninism also came a cult of personality stemming from the vanguard theory; a logical further step was to posit a supreme leader who, in turn, would play a vanguard role for the party elite. Mao's cult began in the dusty hills of remote Yanan, north of Xian, where he led a

settled life following the Long March, and seriously studied Lenin's writings for the first time. The later defense minister Lin Biao spoke of Mao in 1938 as a "genius"; in 1941, former classmate Emi Xiao called him "our savior." Mao could have no further doubt that he was a "hero" in the May Fourth leftist mold, able (as he later put it) to "teach the sun and moon to change places."

By the 1960s, Chinese arriving at urban work units would bow three times before a blown up image of Mao's face, asking for guidance with the day's labors. Before going home, they would bow again before the portrait, reporting to the Chairman what they had accomplished since morning. The wisdom of Mao's thoughts made the blind see and the deaf hear, said the official media. On airplanes, the flight began with a hostess holding aloft a copy of *Quotations From Chairman Mao,* then reading a selected maxim to the passengers. (I recall, on a flight from Beijing to Xian, a shrill voice delivering the startling quote, "Fear not hardship, fear not death," just before the engines started up.) Leninism had again, in Mao's case as in Hitler's and Mussolini's, shown a certain hospitality to fascism.

Mao's commitment to the communist command economy was likewise antithetical to freedom. One thinker who saw the flaws of central planning clearly long ago was Friedrich von Hayek, who spoke in the 1940s of the "synoptic illusion." There simply is no one point, Hayek argued, where all the information bearing on an economy can be concentrated, observed, and effectively acted upon. Rather, it is dispersed, changes constantly, and only comes into play in the bids and offers of market participants. Freedom shriveled as Mao extended the command economy in the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. The demands made on the grassroots were irrational for the reasons Hayek named. The grassroots, in turn, falsified reports going up to Beijing, as local officials were afraid to tell Mao the truth about the bleak results of his social engineering. The next step was to punish the class enemies who, Mao concluded, must have sabotaged the beautiful socialist vision of the Great Leap Forward.

As an old man, Mao seemed to enjoy calling himself "emperor." He found influences from China's imperial history both appealing and useful for bolstering paternalistic rule. This was a fourth reason for Mao's weakening attachment to individual liberty.

Mao's eventual role as a supreme leader above even the Party gave expression to his father's impact. Mao in old age became everything his father had been—and found young Mao incapable of being. Mao Shunsheng did not like to see his son reading a book; Chairman Mao came to scoff at book learning. Mao's father made his son work in the fields against the boy's will; Chairman Mao sent tens of millions to the countryside to do just that. Mao's father had been in the army; Mao made military virtues the yardstick for the nation's values. People became props in Mao's collective pageant.

In the last two decades of his life, Mao became a changed leader, half modern Führer and half ancient Chinese sage-king. As the autocratic impulses of his father and other antifreedom forces shored each other up, the façade of his socialism decayed and his relationship to the CCP changed. Mao fought two phantoms he could never vanquish: the failure of socialism to take on the splendor he expected of it and the refusal of the CCP to be simply a Mao Party. These disappointments made him more arbitrary. "Revisionism" came to be the term Mao applied to the alleged betrayal that produced his disappointments. But Mao never clearly defined revisionism; hence, he never found a way to eliminate it. He knocked down many revisionists, but never revisionism.

One could say in Mao's defense that after 1949 he had priorities higher than freedom. These included organizing a vast country, stabilizing the currency, producing steel and machine tools, and balancing Soviet and American power. And as a practical matter, the dictatorial Soviet Union was willing to give him aid, whereas America was not.

Yet Mao's impulse toward freedom was crippled at its heart. What is freedom for the individual? One viable form is freedom to act as you please as long as you do not inhibit a like freedom for others. A second notion is that an individual is free to the degree she is able to realize herself. The mature Mao believed in neither of these two concepts of freedom, though he was closer to the second than to the first. He knew the kind of citizens he wanted in China. It was not for each person to realize himself, but for all to become suitable building blocks for Mao's Chinese update of Sparta. He egregiously confused

**Red Guards dispense revolutionary justice to an "enemy of the people" in a poster from the Cultural Revolution of 1966–67.**

the remolding impulse of Confucius with the functions of a modern state. "Can't you change a bit?" he once asked a roomful of intellectuals with "bourgeois" tendencies. But was it Mao the Confucian teacher talking or Mao the dictator of a police state?

"Opinions should not be allowed to become conclusions," Mao declared. In the abortive Hundred Flowers drive of 1956, he realized that some cut and thrust was necessary as a safety valve against the rigidity of his rule. But only Mao knew the difference between a flower and a weed. The blossoms were to swell and open according to a formula the gardener held in his pocket. Mao wanted the impossible: open debate to keep the system lively, yet with the outcome of the debate fixed in advance. "I told the rightists to criticize us in order to help the Party," Mao said pathetically to his doctor. "I never asked them to oppose the Party or try to seize power from the Party."

Mao's practical achievement was to unite China and demonstrate to Asia that China after 1949 was a force to be reckoned with. Other Chinese leaders in Beijing have built on that achievement. But Mao's social engineering efforts were largely canceled by Deng Xiaoping after Mao's death in 1976. In subsequent years, the totalitarian party-state became an authoritarian party-state. Under totalitarianism, it is said, many things are forbidden and the remaining

things you must do; under authoritarianism, many things are forbidden and the remaining things you may do. Today, the retention of power and economic development, rather than the pursuit of ideological phantoms, is the drive around which the political process arranges itself. With Mao's "new" Chinese man gone, the "old" Chinese man of family values and entrepreneurial spirit seems alive and well.

The passing of totalitarianism has brought into view some tentative realms of freedom, including partial property rights and the beginnings of autonomy for lawyers, journalists, and other professionals. Above all, there now exists for most people the freedom to ignore politics. Yet the institutionalization of the new space opening up for Chinese citizens has barely begun.

As I write, Beijing has jailed three intellectuals on trumped-up charges behind which lie the sin of speaking indiscreet words. Ching Cheong, chief China correspondent of a Singapore newspaper, got five years for "spying," but really for getting a fee to speak at a seminar run by a think tank that Beijing dislikes. Zhao Yan, a researcher for *The New York Times* in Beijing, got three years for "fraud," but really for feeding the *Times* information on some mild political tensions within the Chinese government. Chen Guangchen, a blind self-taught lawyer, faces four years for "gathering a crowd to disrupt traffic," but really for annoying officials in Shandong Province by representing victims of sterilizations and forced abortions that were carried out contrary to Beijing's own regulations. The rule of law seems far off, and equally so a free press and much-needed federalism. The intended intimidation in these three cases is an all-too-clear residue of the Mao era, when citizens never knew where they stood in relation to authority.

One might have expected Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, and the current president, Hu Jintao, to put in place structures that, following the Deng era, took account of the new relationship between politics and economic and cultural life. But this has not yet happened.

We return to the "solution" of having Mao float into folklore as a modern-day Yellow Emperor, whose photo on the windscreen will ward off traffic accidents, and who can serve as a fashion model for green silk pajamas, as I recently noticed in a Shanghai department store. Such "Maoism" is the twitching of a society whose post-Mao leaders have brought economic advancement but political stagnation. Mao's totalitarian leaps knocked illusions out of generations of Chinese, but also soured them on public-spiritedness. By the destruction entailed in his revolution, and particularly his Cultural Revolution, Mao took away China's past.

China has moved beyond Mao as a builder of socialism. But China should never move beyond the grim lesson of how Mao could begin in idealism yet become an oppressor. It is easier and safer, of course, to criticize Mao as an evil person, or simply to draw a veil over him, than to broach the problem of the political system he introduced to China.

Philosophically, a value to be retained from Mao is that a society does require shared moral values. He was correct to see a good society as more than gadgets and cars. Talking with the French writer André Malraux in 1965, Mao ridiculed Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin's statement at the 23rd congress of the Soviet Communist Party that "communism means the raising of living standards." Snorted Mao to the Frenchman, "And swimming is a way of putting on a pair of trunks!" But Mao's proposed moral compass was a high-minded fraud. The Chinese farmers were "poor and blank," he said. On the blank page of Chinese humanity, Mao the sage-king would sketch wonderful designs!

Today, young pro-market Chinese who devour Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* and books on American business are leaving Mao in the dust and embracing an antistate Chinese tradition (best known in the West through Daoism). They would like—but will not get—a China without politics. A new public philosophy, when it comes, as it must, will draw on China's humanistic traditions as well as the best of the experience of the People's Republic. Procedurally, a new moral compass will come from below as people express themselves politically, not, again, as a diktat from a father-figure above. "When societies first come to birth, it is the leader who produces the institutions," said Montesquieu. "Later it is the institutions which produce the leaders." Later still, in a democratic era, the voting public sustains the institutions that, in turn, frame those leaders who are given the short term authority to lead. ■