Death of a revolution?

China After Mao

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History rarely gives civilizations a second chance. The record of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Mohenjo-Daro, the Incas, the Khmers, Spain, Turkey, Britain, and many other nations suggests that civilizational excellence is impermanent and, once lost, remains beyond resurrection. Of all these great societies China appeared the most enduring. For close to two thousand years, from the Han Dynasty at the turn of the Christian era to the early Ch'ing Dynasty about two hundred years ago, the Middle Kingdom was one of the best governed and most advanced countries on earth. Cultural and technological achievements combined to make China a superpower among states for a longer period than that experienced by any other major nation. Eventually, however, the norms of history prevailed. Foreign intrusion and internal confusion brought decline throughout the nineteenth century. By the time China entered the twentieth century the Confucian order had collapsed—its greatness an historic memory, its claim to empire a semantic fiction.

For almost fifty years thereafter warlords and republicans, invaders and Communists fought over and dismembered an inert China. Natural disaster and human tragedy seemed to conspire in these events. In 1949, after two exhausting and largely overlapping wars, one against Japan and the other a prolonged civil conflict, a Communist regime led by Mao Zedong reunited the mainland. The People's Republic is now thirty years old. In three convulsive decades, in which vaulting philosophic demands have alternated with responses to reality, China has achieved much in the way of national cohesion, global prestige, economic stability, and social progress. As it sets its targets for the next generation, the first post-Mao government is planning a determined effort to make a future worthy of the Chinese retrospect. In promising to remodel China, to seek national and international greatness, the current leadership attempts a task infrequently accomplished in the experience of nations: to recapture a civilizational position held in the past. Once again China challenges history.

The size and potential impact of this undertaking make the Chinese effort unique. No government has ever attempted to rule so large a citizenry—about a billion people representing around 23 per cent of humankind. To govern this number in the mid-nineteenth century would have been to engage in global government, for that was then the total world population. Even more striking are the scope and thrust of Chinese policies. The recent past and the planned future are a relentless assault on individual personality and national tradition. Mao sought to create a "New Socialist Man"; his more pragmatic successors seek to wrench China from its traditional social and economic moorings in an accelerated dash to modernization. These are extraordinary aspirations in any situation. But to attempt to recast the oldest continuous culture on earth, and to do this with limited resources, takes more hubris than mortals have ever summoned before.

A discussion of contemporary China must begin with the personality, work, and political heritage of Mao Zedong. By his formidable contribution to the creation of revolutionary China and his impact on its development, and because of the efforts of the current regime to undo his legacy and reinterpret his vision, Mao remains at the center of political crosscurrents in the People's Republic. To place his career in historical perspective we should recall its four defining features:

- As the single most important ideologue and activist in the Chinese Revolution, Mao amply deserves the title Father of Modern China. Given the length of his rule, he governed and personally influenced far more people than anyone else in human experience. In the twentieth century the only other political leaders
who have been major forces for over fifty years were Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek, and neither operated on Mao's scale.

- Most leaders enter history because of very few critical events, decisions, or actions. Lincoln attained immortality because of two (preservation of the Union and emancipation of slaves); Lenin because of three (establishing the Bolshevik party in 1903, pressing for revolution in October, 1917, and consolidating the Marxist state in the turbulent civil war/postrevolution years); Roosevelt because of three (implementing the New Deal, taking America into World War II, organizing Allied war strategy); and Churchill because of one (resistance to Hitler). Mao will enter the history books for any one of at least a dozen major decisions. These include establishing the Communist party of China, leading the Long March, managing events concerned with the guerrilla war against Japan and the Civil War, entry into the Korean War, collectivizing Chinese agriculture, initiating the Great Leap Forward, promoting the split with the Soviet Union, and developing rapprochement with the United States.

- Although Mao was by far the most important figure in the Chinese political hierarchy from 1949 until his death in 1976, he never had a complete monopoly of power—unlike, for example, Stalin in the Soviet Union. Others contested his views and occasionally were able to curb his strength. Thus, a good part of his energies was absorbed by the struggle to preserve his position or reassert his influence. He was rarely able to concentrate exclusively on implementing his ideas.

- When the People's Republic was established in 1949, Mao was fifty-six. The most serious struggles of his career and his major achievements appeared complete; ahead lay a few years of national leadership and then retirement. Yet his greatest moments and toughest tests came in the last three decades of his life, at a time when human frailty and declining faculties are normal occurrences.

From the experiences of his long and strenuous career and from those concepts of Marxism he accepted, Mao constructed a revolutionary vision to which he sought to mold China. Mao believed in the perfectibility of human nature. By revolution and by education it was possible, he believed, to transform and improve individual character, to eliminate personal greed and the desire to enhance oneself and one's family. A community ethic could be substituted. Revolution, for Mao, was not an act of political change but a combination of four advancements. Only a joint and simultaneous revolution in public institutions, human consciousness, political life, and personal style would produce the truly revolutionary society and new dimensions of personality. Contradictions and obstacles would hinder the true, integrated revolution. Some of these had to be resolved by force, others by education. Force involved mobilization of the masses against the enemies of the revolution; education involved massive programs in which dedicated cadres would help the masses to a new consciousness by liberating themselves from their past. The goal was creation of a classless society in which Maoist man would selflessly serve the community, gaining reward from moral and revolutionary satisfactions.

However, powerful Chinese leaders, especially those concerned with the bureaucracy and the military and technical sectors, had a different revolutionary concept—a vision of an industrial-technical revolution focused on the urban areas and on elite cadres. This perception has as its goal the creation of a powerful state, in which science and technology will underwrite industrial modernization and so uplift a poor and backward nation. Educated administrators would lead this effort, technical competence and material incentives would enhance progress, ideological purity would be a second consideration. To these opponents of Mao's way, modernization was the revolution. They echoed the sentiments of the later Lenin: "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country." These concepts were anathema to Mao, to be rooted out whenever they influenced government policy. Persevering in this effort until his last days, Mao frequently intervened to check the pragmatism of "capitalist-roaders" and expel them from the government and party hierarchy. When necessary, he plunged China into confusion and attacked and destroyed the instrument of his creation, the Communist party. Following the convulsive Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's, Mao's ideas appeared to have finally become entrenched in China.

But, once again, in the mid-1970's, opposition led by Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping began to dispute his grand design and propose more practical national programs. In late 1975 a saddened Mao wrote a last poem to his then dying comrade and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai:

Loyal parents who sacrificed so much for the nation, never feared the ultimate fate. Now that the country has become Red who will be its guardian? Our mission, unfinished, may take a thousand years. The struggle tires us, and our hair is grey. You and I, old friend, can we just watch our efforts being washed away?

On September 9, 1976, at the age of eighty-two, Mao died in Peking. A month later his wife and the "Gang of Four" were arrested and Mao's philosophic vision was interred. China passed from a republic of ideology to a republic of technology.

It is almost three years since the death of Mao. No Communist nation, not even the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, has experienced such radical change in so brief a time. In philosophy, policy, and method of governance the break with the recent past is dramatic. By restoring to high office those who were discharged by Mao and by posthumous recognition of contributions by the disgraced victims of the Cultural Revolution and earlier
upheavals, the new regime implicitly rejects both Mao's judgment of people and his techniques of dealing with them. De-Stalinization, Chinese style, is the order of the new regime.

In domestic policies the changes have concentrated in four areas. First, downsizing Mao. This involves a selective approach to Mao's legacy—careful not to denigrate him personally but suggesting that his vision for China is not adequate to meet present needs. On December 24, 1978, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist party declared:

Without his outstanding leadership and without Mao Tse-tung's thoughts, it is most likely that the Chinese revolution would not have been victorious up to the present. It would not be Marxist to demand that a revolutionary leader be free of all shortcomings and errors. It would also not conform to Comrade Mao Tse-tung's consistent evaluation of himself.

In an historical replay Mao is now accorded similar treatment to that received by Lenin since his death in 1924—his body and mythic stature are preserved and used as a national symbol; national policies rarely reflect his philosophy and priorities.

The second thrust of the new leadership is toward major modernization for China. Three and eight-year plans focus on immediate needs and a long-range outline envisages a modern, technological economy by the year 2000. Four areas of priority are industry, agriculture, national defense, and science-technology. Efficiency and higher productivity are key themes, and an intensive pace of advance is to be sustained by major imports of capital, technology, and production skills. Self-reliance, a highly regarded Maoist goal, has been abandoned in this new leap forward. The initial cost of these programs is estimated by Chinese planners to require about $600 billion by 1985, most of which will come from external financing. Material incentives—pay increases, bonus rewards, better prices—now replace moral and revolutionary exhortations as inducements. Conventional education with technological specialization has been reintroduced to replace the antiprivilege and antielitist curriculum. Trade, technology exchange, and financial agreements with foreign nations and multinational corporations have proliferated. Students are now receiving training abroad.

A third concern is the reversal of the balance between rural areas and cities. Mao concentrated much of his energy on programs for the countryside and the peasantry, sending almost twenty million urban youth to live on the communes in the eight years before his death. This rustication drive has been suspended, and economic projections suggest that although 80 per cent of China's population lives in the countryside, the cities will be the focus of the modernization strategy. A fourth element in domestic policy concerns political freedoms. China remains very much a one-party system with Marxist themes as its motif. However, guarded liberalization of political and cultural expression has been encouraged under the rubric of "full democracy."

In foreign affairs the changes are evident in both style and content. China vigorously supports NATO and increased arms expenditures by the United States and Western European nations; proclaims that it wants to learn from capitalist economies and takes many of their features for the People's Republic; and endorses United States positions in the Persian Gulf, parts of Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and Pacific regions. Chinese leaders travel the world denouncing Soviet expansion and proposing alliances against Russian "hegemonism." Invasion of Vietnam is justified by a need to teach Russian allies a lesson. Relations with industrial economies, especially Japan, are rapidly advanced without much reference to ideological considerations.

In looking outward after almost three decades of political introversion, China pushes two principles to an extreme: first, absorption of economic ideas and capital and, second, opposition to the Soviet Union. This, paradoxically, is an indirect tribute to capitalism and a rejection of Marxist internationalism. Taken collectively, these policies have profound potential consequences for both the People's Republic and the world. A billion Chinese living in relative poverty is a national tragedy; a modernized China with a powerful military and industrial base—and a dynamic economic, strategic, and ecological impact on our planet—could cause serious global problems.

The alchemy of modernization is managed, sometimes apparently contested, by China's two leading political personalities—Mao's anointed successor, Hua Guofeng, and Mao's old adversary and avowed ideological opponent, Deng Xiaoping. It is clear that Deng makes policy for China. Moving rapidly to reinstate other senior victims of Mao's displeasure, he has staffed the higher echelons of China's government with his supporters and fashioned an administration of aging rehabilitees, most of whom are in their late sixties or early seventies. Each reinstatement strengthens Deng's policies, but also downgrades or displaces generally younger cadres whose prior commitment to the Maoist doctrine has been evident. The tensions of these programs and personnel changes, while apparently muted, are clearly present.

Deng surely knows that his rapidly crafted technological-scientific revolution will soon devolve onto a younger generation—a generation that did better in the era of Mao's Cultural Revolution than they are doing today. As guardians of Deng's legacy they are suspect. While Mao sought permanency for his ideas in a successor who shared his zeal and vision, Deng's approach to the future is less personalized and more institutional. To entrench and maintain his policies beyond his time, he has developed four strategies:

- establish a long-term, national modernization program that cannot easily be dismantled. Domestic promises and international contracts are part of this
attempt to create an irrevocable commitment to modernization.

- **build a base of public support for his efforts.** Thus, modest liberalizations and improved consumer entitlements.
- **reduce the status or remove from the leadership those who are evidently less enthusiastic about his plans.** These include many younger associates of the radical Maoists (such as Wu Teh, mayor of Peking until October, 1978).
- **discredit or, at least, reinterpret Mao’s theories in order that they will not serve as a platform of resistance in some later-day Maoist revival.** Thus some elements of Mao’s thought will be selectively abstracted to support the modernization drive and other elements will be presented as archaic and inappropriate guidelines for the future.

Each of these strategies has evoked some opposition. However, this is Deng’s day—and he uses his opportunity passionately. Should he falter or his plans fail, there will be many to pick his policies apart and to challenge his attempts to root them in national institutions.

Where will China’s current efforts lead? Perhaps history provides some clues and perhaps the question should be rephrased, placed in historical terms: Is Deng’s “New Long March” a Meiji Restoration or a Thermidor? After a long period of insularity, in which foreign contact was rejected, the Meiji Emperor Mutsuhito embarked on the brisk modernization of Japan in 1868. Restrictions on foreign trade were removed, Western technology and technical education underwrote swift industrialization. By the early twentieth century Japan was competing with Europe and America for the export markets of the world. Modernization was permanent, enduring, and irreversible. After World War II Japan developed a liberal political democracy and has sustained it for almost three decades. In contrast, after the extreme radicalism of the French Revolution came the Thermidor—Robespierre’s innovations and Reign of Terror giving way, in 1793, to a phase of modernization and the restoration of the civil liberties proclaimed in 1789. This temporary respite was followed by Napoleon’s authoritarian regime. The message of liberty, equality, and fraternity for Europe led to the ferocity of twenty years of war that ended at Waterloo.

More recent and probably more relevant is the Soviet experience. Immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks attempted to build a new socialist state based on the ideals of Marxism. The failure of these radical experiments led to the era of the New Economic Policy (NEP). From 1921 to 1927 the NEP-Thermidor was the economic order of the Soviet Union and its policies were the instrument of modernization—liberalization of domestic trade, a partially free market for farm produce, the encouragement of private agriculture, invitations to foreign investors and technicians, and restoration of small factories to their original owners. The Revolution appeared to have mellowed and its cutting-edge of radicalism to have been blunted.

The NEP, however, did not last long. It was only a transitional period between two harsh regimes. With Stalin’s rise to power in the late Thirties both the NEP program and its architects were liquidated. The thrust for modernization continued, but political and economic moderation sank beneath the weight of Stalinism.

In this context there are at least six reasons which suggest that the current Chinese situation has the characteristics of a Thermidor:

- **The present program is the dream of aging leaders and there is serious doubt as to whether they have the time in which to root their visions institutionally before they move or are removed from command.**
- **The forced pace of modernization requires vast infusions of capital. Procuring, absorbing, and repaying this scale of investment is likely to be difficult, if not impossible.**
- **There is less than total support for the program at the higher bureaucratic levels of government and party. Any setbacks will allow closet dissidents to challenge the effort openly.**
- **A relative liberalization of the political and economic atmosphere could rupture national cohesion—China may prove too large to be governed by any but the most robust methods.**
- **Mao, for all his failings, did tap a sympathetic artery in the Chinese personality—the traditional concept of a self-reliant, Sinocentric model for the world. Deng acknowledges China’s weakness and proclaims its need to learn from industrial nations. His analysis may be correct, but it is an approach alien to the prideful Chinese tradition and is likely to provoke resentment.**
- **The consequences of hasty and imitative modernization can be, in themselves, highly disruptive. The recent lessons of Iran are possible harbingers for China and other poorer nations in their accelerated quest for modernization.**

Around 800 million Chinese live in the rural regions, farmers who cannot migrate to urban areas or abroad. Their future is inextricably bound with agrarian China. If the technological class Deng seeks to create becomes an exclusive city-bound elite, these people may be alienated from the agrarian masses. And then some future Mao may rise and once again rally the peasantry in a new antielitist revolution. In the twentieth century China and the Chinese have upset everyone’s expectations. Internal efforts to modernize, Westernize, Christianize, and democratize China have failed. External efforts to unify, control, and conquer China have failed. The visions of Yuan Shih-K’ai, Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek failed. Mao’s new ideas barely outnumbered the old man. As today’s rulers chart yet another course, the stakes are higher than ever before, the destiny of a quarter of humankind is in the balance—and the jury is still out. As history awaits the verdict, we should remember Napoleon’s prophecy: “Let China sleep; when she awakes the world will be sorry.”

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