

# China in the XXth Century - A critical evaluation of Maoism in the revolution: contribution and limitations

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## Presentation

Merlin Press, the International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) and Resistance Books have recently published an important work of Au Loong-Yu on contemporary China, from the 1980s to the present, entitled *China's Rise : Strength and Fragility* [1]. Bai Ruixue was asked to present additional chapters on labor issues, Bruno Jetin on Chinese capitalism in world economy, and myself on Maoism's contribution to the revolution and its limitations.

My chapter had two main concerns: a presentation of the historical background without which recent developments would be very difficult to understand, and an attempt at evaluating the role of Chinese Maoism from its origins to the Cultural Revolution period.

The use of the word "Maoism" may sometimes be confusing. Here we refer to the Chinese Communist Party as a whole, during the long period where it was led by a team built around Mao Zedong, composed of cadres that had different political backgrounds. The CCP was a party that could not be reduced to one ("Maoist") faction alone.

On the international level, the term "Maoist" spoke of one thing inherent and common in movements labelled as such: the centrality of the Chinese Revolution. The term has been used for parties ("Mao-Stalinists", "Mao-Spontaneists") which may have had nothing else in common between them. The same could be said of all other "isms", as for example "Trotskyite" organizations, in this case indicating the importance of their historic reference to the anti-Stalinist Left Opposition and nothing more. Some of them could have been very bureaucratic or parasitic in spite of their proclaimed anti-Stalinism, while others actually upheld the fight for a militant, popular and socialist democracy.

Thus, the analysis that follows is not based on an « ideological » characterisation ("Maoist") but is a reflection on a very complex historical experience. It is this experience which carries authoritative

weight over that of Mao's writings. We shall come back on this issue at the conclusion of this article.

As to the chapter published in Merlin's book, I only added here a few paragraphs to clarify some issues better, taking into account comments made on the printed version by Alain Castan, Samy Johsua and Au Loong-Yu, to whom I am grateful.

**Pierre Rousset**, octobre 2012

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Au Loong-yu's book deals essentially with China at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is a very different China from what it was during the 1950s and 1960s. The rupture from the past is very deep. It is quite difficult to know to what extent the memory of the Maoist past will influence tomorrow's popular resistance against the requirements of Chinese capitalism and whether it will be a reference point for new political currents of the left. The factional violence of the Cultural Revolution (1965-1968) provoked a real trauma. The hyper-bureaucratic rule of the Gang of Four which followed that period, discredited for long a time a 'revolutionary' rhetoric which was all too deceitful.

It is also true at the international level. Mao Zedong was yesterday admired by many, but today he is vilified. Maoism has created its own caricature with a frenzied cult of personality and the universal virtues (later) granted to 'Mao Zedong thought'. More generally, there is a tendency for the whole experience of the revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be ignored by the new generation of militants, as if an entire chapter of history, weighed down with many deceptions, is definitively closed.

It is impossible to understand the current century by forgetting the shattering impact on the previous century of world wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions. This past should not be eradicated from our knowledge. It is rich in many lessons, some negative and others positive.

The Chinese revolution is one of the major events that have shaped the contemporary world; a revolution which was personified by the Maoist leadership, and which remains, in spite of all shortcomings, a reference point for many contemporary radical movements. We will try in this chapter to look again at the Maoism of the Chinese revolution, its contribution and limitations, by going beyond the clichés in order to help a critical understanding of the lessons of this page of history.

### **The unexpected as a context**

We have witnessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of unexpected events: inter-imperialist wars (1914...); victorious revolutions on the eastern periphery of Europe (Russia), and then in the third world (China...), and not as expected in the industrial centres of the west; Nazism and Stalinism; geopolitical blocks born out of the second World War; complexity of the 1965-1975 period; implosion of the USSR and neo-liberal globalisation.

Each time, revolutionaries have been confronted with the need to develop new thoughts. A difficult exercise, with uncertain results and debatable conclusions, but nevertheless an enriching process. It is from this viewpoint (questioning what is new...), that a retrospective examination will be carried out on Maoism and the Chinese revolution.

## The entry of Marxism in the world

It is difficult today to realise how iconoclastic was the idea of the possibility of a socialist revolution in China. Of course, there was the precedent of October 1917, which had already overturned the canons of the Second International. This precedent offered keys for understanding the dialectic of the national and social struggles in a third world country: the analysis of combined and uneven development, the theory of permanent revolution... Nevertheless, Russia was a European power, albeit in decline. Under the devastating shock of the First World War, the topicality of revolution was pan-European: Germany was one of the major stakes between 1917 and 1923.

There was certainly a debate on Marxism's relationship with the 'East' and the 'West', but the East was then Tsarist Russia! What was in question were the 'Asiatic' influences in the east of Europe and the Russian empire rather than Asia's own relation with modern revolutions; backwardness versus modernity. On the whole, the geo-political horizon of the socialist movement was still quite narrow. It suddenly broadened out because of the consequences of the Second World War, the impact of the 1917 October Revolution, the new wave of anti-colonial struggles in the third world, and the defeat of the German revolution in 1923. The latter led Moscow and the Third International to turn itself towards the East beyond Europe to avoid the isolation of the USSR.

The Chinese question became a central issue in the geopolitics of the 1920s. On the Siberian borders of the USSR, the Middle Kingdom was in open crisis. The Qing dynasty had been brought down by the first Chinese revolution of 1911. The May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919 Movement announced an encouraging renewal of progressive and anti-imperialist resistance. But the 'republican' revolution of 1911 had posed more questions about the new 'possibilities' than it had offered answers. It was only a warning shot, fired a bit too early and limited in its range to clarify the possible role of the various classes that were still off-stage. The character of a new party such as the Guomindang, which at the time of Sun Yat-sen embodied the national consciousness, was still largely undefined. To what extent were the lessons of the Russian revolution valid for China in the 1920s? It was only the dramatic experience of the Second Revolution of 1925-1927 that clarified the strategic issues, at the cost of a bloody counter-revolution.

China is at the same time another social formation, another path of civilisation, part of another geopolitical entity, - in short, the outcome of another history. At the same time, the Comintern [2] was confronted by the 'Muslim question' with the presence within the Soviet system of the republics of central Asia. This was at the centre of the debates of the 1920 Baku congress, known as the 'Congress of the Peoples of the East'.

The birth of the communist movements, and more broadly, the development of anti-imperialist struggles in the East from central Asia to China, opened a door to the world for Marxist thought. Previously, western Marxists educated within the framework of the Second International had looked at the world in a manner which could be described as 'from afar'. From now on, communists had to look at their societies and the world from a non-European point of view. The task was not that obvious as the notes of Marx on the plurality of historical developments, which can be found in the *Grundrisse*, in the preparatory work for *Capital*, and in correspondence, was unknown to most and ignored by those who knew of their existence.

This 'entry into the world' opened a particularly interesting chapter on the history of Marxism, a chapter which is not yet closed.

## Maoism: 'Chinese' Marxism?

Born in Europe and inheriting a specific history, Marxism could not be exported as it was without remaining in other places the privileged asset of a westernised intellectual elite. It was not a given that it could root itself in all societies, but where it could do so it needed to find fertile native ground; integrate the originality of social structures; speak a language that was understandable to the mass of people and therefore link itself to other cultural legacies; and find other 'sources' than German philosophy, English political economy, French historiography, or the traditions of the European workers movement...

The Maoism of Mao is often presented as 'the' Chinese version of Marxism. He can certainly legitimately claim to have worked upon a Chinese Marxism. This theme was explicitly developed from the late 1930s on, and is repeated in the official history of the CCP. Mao insisted on the need to give a 'national form' to Marxism to be able to 'apply it', to make Marxism 'concrete'. He often made more references in his speeches to the history of China, its cultural traditions, its wars and military theory, and its peasant uprisings than to European theoreticians or to the USSR. He more closely resembles a philosopher in a society inspired by Confucius than a Western one. It is nevertheless important not to confuse the 'Chinesification' of Marxism, its 'nationalisation' (what is usually called the 'sinification of Marxism') and 'Maoisation'.

Maoism is one of the components of 'Chinese' Marxism, but it has not got the monopoly. There is not 'one' Chinese Marxism, just like there is not 'one' Western Marxism, which would be incarnated by a particular political current. The 'sinification' of Marxism has all the more been a collective effort, carried out more or less consciously, because the Chinese revolutionary left was pluralist at its birth. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anarchism was influential in Eastern Asia. The relationship between tradition and modernity was passionately debated in the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, which was a place of intense intellectual debates. The Communist Party, founded in 1921 by strong personalities, was far from being a monolith. People like Li Dazao, Chen Duxiu and many others, had each in their own manner carried out the twin exercise of opening up China to Western thought and re-transcribing Marxism for that country, well before the formation of Maoism.

In the light of the role played by the envoys of Moscow in determining the political orientation of the young CCP, the need to break free from Soviet supervision was felt particularly strongly by the cadres who survived the defeat of 1927. Some, like Chen Duxiu, identified with the anti-Stalinist theses of the Left Opposition inside the Communist International. Others, like Mao, were trying to work out how to save the revolutionary military forces that had regrouped after the defeat into a few 'red bases'.

How to start again? It was by trying to answer this question that Maoism emerged between the end of the 1920s and the middle of the 1930s. It did so as the new Stalinist orthodoxy was smothering theoretical debates within the Comintern. The thesis that the whole of humanity could only experience a single form of historical development, a single succession of different modes of production, was being imposed as an unchallengeable dogma. Even in the West, it was only in the 1950s, and even more so in the 1960s with the circulation of works of Marx hitherto largely unknown, that a process of reflection on the complexity of history was restarted. It was impossible in these circumstances to open a genuine discussion on the originality of society in China in contrast to that in Europe.

The process of 'nationalisation' of Marxism by the CCP remained doubly dependant: first on the recent legacy of the Second International and then on the triumph of Stalinism in the USSR. The specificity of social formations in China had not been clarified theoretically. European concepts,

such as feudalism, were simply translated in existing terms for imperial China. The differences between these terms, the historical realities they referred to, was not clarified and the consequences, which are still being felt today, were grave. Rather than analyse the originality of their societies, most Maoist currents in the third world were satisfied with uniformly describing them as 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial'. The 'semi' at best only identifying a question without providing an answer, and minimising the implications of capitalist domination.

The official CCP policy of the 'sinisation' of Marxism was implemented while the pluralism of the Chinese left had been reduced to shadow of its former self under the impact of the counter-revolutionary repression of the Guomindang, then that of the Japanese occupation and finally the Stalinisation of the Comintern. It was also combined with the initial formulation of the personality cult of Mao. The abstract universalism of the Stalinist dogma in the USSR was intended to reinforce the cult of Stalin and the authority of Moscow internationally. The 'sinisation' of Marxism legitimised a rival cult and allowed the Maoist leadership to marginalise rival factions inside the CCP more easily, including that of Wang Ming who supported Stalin.

Thirty years later, during the Sino-Soviet conflict, the cult of Mao also took on an international dimension. Official Maoism became a dogma and an ideological commodity suitable for export, emptying from its content the theme of 'nationalisation' of Marxism. But the substantial question is still nevertheless relevant. By internationalising itself, Marxism takes on regional and national aspects in order to better root itself in different societies.

### **A creative strategic thinking**

The Second Chinese Revolution (1925-1927) was brought about by vast social movements: strikes by workers, the struggle of the poorer urban masses, uprisings of peasants, and the organisation of self-defence such as militias. But it was also characterised by the confrontation of regular armies: that of the Guomindang or warlords. After the Guomindang of Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi in nowadays pinyin transcription) turned against his communist allies and the popular movement, sections of the army rebelled and joined the red bases, the last territorial bastions of the CCP.

The 'armed struggle' appeared in China under very different forms than this formula often evokes. There was not a gradual development of small guerrilla units. There were millions of soldiers in China, and the Red Army which was created in response to the counter-revolution of 1927 initially had 300,000 privates led by political commissars but also by officers who had graduated from military academies.

How is it possible to start again following the succession of defeats from 1927 to 1935? The answer had to include a military dimension: how to save the forces of the revolution that were surrounded and threatened with annihilation by an army ten times greater in number and with superior weapons? This situation contributed in the middle of the 1930s to a complex debate on the military question inside the leadership of the CCP and led to the development of Maoism. Mao was not content to find an answer to a conjunctural situation. He drew the lessons from the experience of the Second Revolution to think through a new strategy.

**A political approach to military questions.** The Maoist leadership did not invent guerrilla warfare. It was able to refer to previous debates amongst Marxists and to the experience of the Russian Revolution. It particularly benefited from a long national history of peasant wars and a rich thinking of military matters. But it brought it up to date and integrated it into an overall perspective closely linking the basis for a popular armed struggle, the social context such as the aspirations of peasants, and the political stakes such as the national question arising out of the Japanese invasion.

The Red Army was nearly annihilated, but during the Long March, Mao was able to create a leadership team with extremely talented cadres coming from various factions of the CCP. This team gradually gave birth to the concept of the protracted revolutionary war, or protracted people's war (PPW), a new understanding when a civil war, whether it is combined or not with a war of national defence, starts a long time before it concludes with the conquest of power. It cannot be reduced to methods of operation such as mobility and flexibility, concentration and dispersion of forces, or guerrilla techniques, however important this military knowledge is. In order to be able to develop over a long period of time, it should indeed be conceived as a 'popular war'. In the context of the time, the notion of popular war immediately posed the question of the peasantry [3].

**The question of the peasantry.** The originality of Maoism is not that it recognised the importance of the agrarian questions and of the peasantry: this had already been the case in Russia. It was that it had been able to organise it directly and to root itself in rural society, not to have allied itself to peasant movements but to lead them. This was not the last time that a communist movement had been able to achieve this successfully, but it was the first, and a spectacular first at that!

One of the most interesting aspects of the Chinese experience was that it was carried out from the North to the South of the country, in regions with very different agrarian structures and where, for example, the meaning of 'rich peasant' varies considerably. It shows how traditions of collective solidarity of the village, which in China can be very big, against external enemies such as military forces, tax collectors and bandits, can slow down the class struggle within the village community and feed mistrust towards the 'strangers', even if they are a member of the Communist Party. The Chinese experience demonstrates how the elaboration and implementation of a programme of agrarian reform is an essential, but not a simple matter. This is probably just as true today as it was in the past.

The Maoist revolution was also able to think about the role of the peasantry over a long period of time, no longer just as a temporary ally mobilised against the old order. The world has changed considerably since then as the demographic weight of peasants, landless and small farmers, is considerably reduced. Nevertheless, at a time of food and ecological crisis, the political importance of the peasantry for any project of social transformation is considerable. Small scale agriculture appears indeed as an alternative to that of capitalist agro-industry which imposes its domination on consumers and producers, expropriates entire populations and destroys social networks and the environment. The struggle today for food sovereignty is an integral part of the global defence of fundamental democratic, social and environmental rights.

**The Protracted People's War (PPW).** With the concept of protracted revolutionary war, the Maoist leadership opened a new chapter in strategic Marxist thinking. It is not the least of its merits. At the beginning, nevertheless, the characteristics of China seemed to it so particular that it did not envisage that this 'road' could be taken in other countries. It played on the fact that the huge size of the country enabled it to have a vast field for manoeuvre, that the size of the population enabled it to bring together a huge number of fighters in any region, on the existence of Red Bases which constituted an original and long lasting form of territorial dual power, on the inter-imperialist rivalries in a country which had not yet been colonised and on the fragmentation of the state following the fall of the Qing dynasty which prevented the enemy from being a coherent force.

After the Second World War, the Protracted People's War was carried out in many different forms across Asia and Latin America, as well as in the Arab world and Africa. It contributed to strategic thinking which went through further developments, in particular that of the Vietnamese experience. Today, there is still an armed struggle being carried out in countries such as India, Nepal (recently), the Philippines and Colombia, and which provokes many debates within the revolutionary movement. The political-military thinking which arose out of the Maoist experience does not belong to the past.

**The national question, alliances and the united front.** The national question was at the heart of the Chinese crisis. The imperialist powers were consolidating their grip on the country, which was threatened with fragmentation into different zones of Japanese and Western influence. The invasion by Japan in 1937 was intended to make China its exclusive colony.

In such conditions, which were the forces that could achieve independence and unity of the nation? Was it the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie? It was stronger in China than in most third world countries of that time. The Chinese Revolution thereby became a great historical laboratory for study of the links between anti-imperialist struggle and social dynamics.

As early as 1926-1927, the priorities of the Chinese bourgeoisie were confirmed. It saw that the anti-imperialist uprising was opening the way for popular movements that it could not control. The counter-revolution became its priority, even if it meant for the time being giving up the struggle for national reunification.

A decade later, in the face of the Japanese invasion, the Chinese bourgeoisie was divided between resistance and collaboration. On the eve of the Second World War, the Guomindang of Chiang Kai-shek gambled on the defeat of Tokyo by the United States. By using the immensity of the Chinese territory, it tried to slow down the advance of the Japanese forces while conceding territory to gain time and wait for the victory of Washington in the Pacific theatre of operations. It was thereby preserving its forces in order to later use them against the Communist Party.

The strategy of Chiang Kai-shek could have been successful if it had not had as a rival the Maoist leadership. The latter implemented the principles of the People's War, including by sending units of the Red Army operating in the occupied areas behind enemy lines. Instead of conceding territory, the CCP was extending its field of action. This orientation was triply effective: militarily, but also socially as it became implanted in new regions, and politically as it appeared to be the best defender of the nation under conditions of emergency.

The lessons to draw from the Chinese experience are not limited to this. Between the beginning of the Second Revolution and the victory of the Third, there were several historical turning points that required important re-orientations. The question of the policy of the united front between the Communist Party and the Guomindang is one example. The very young CCP grew rapidly as it had joined the party of Sun Yat-sen, a tactic known as the 'united front from within'. But under pressure from Moscow, it did not regain its organisational independence when, after the death of Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek was preparing to crush the workers movement, and when the war for national reunification of the country was turned into a full-blown civil war. From being an ally, the Guomindang suddenly became the main enemy. It remained so for a decade.

The invasion by Japan again posed the question of a united front of the CCP and the Guomindang as there was an extremely strong desire amongst the population for unity to defend the nation. But both of the protagonists knew that despite national unity, the civil war was smouldering and occasionally erupted into bloody battles between the armies of Chiang Kai-shek and the Reds. The defeat of Tokyo in 1945 opened the way for the civil war to be resumed which was won by the Communist Party in 1949.

The Maoist legacy regarding alliances might appear to be very ambiguous if there is no concrete analysis of the sequence of events of the Chinese Revolution. The leadership of the CCP often formulated its orientation in a 'tactical' manner and sometimes even in a deceptive one. For example, under the label of the anti-Japanese united front, it praised without blinking Chiang Kai-shek, the butcher of the working class. It announced the integration of its military units into the army of the Guomindang, of course without doing so.

Some Maoist organisations use such declarations to justify opportunist policies of subordinate alliances with 'national bourgeoisies'. But the conception of the united front by the leadership of the CCP was both more interesting and more sectarian.

It was more interesting because it linked the construction over a period of time of a block of social forces able to carry out a revolutionary struggle (the popular classes) and the widening of this block to intermediary forces (e.g. students, intellectuals, impoverished petty-bourgeoisie), with a tactic aimed at dividing the ranks of the enemy (its originality compared to other political traditions).

It was more sectarian, because at the heart of this policy of alliance was the CCP and only it. In the conception of the united front as a series of concentric circles, there is only a single centre. It does not allow contemplating cooperation between several revolutionary and progressive political organisations. But pluralism, including within the revolutionary movement, has again become what it was before Stalinism, the rule and not the exception.

As a result, the majority of Maoist movements engaged in armed struggle have been more sectarian than opportunist. The truth of the matter is that the Maoists have not been the only ones to find it difficult to recognise that, due to the complexity of historical experience, the existence of a plurality of revolutionary movements is normal, and that the question of their relationship and their unity is posed.

**The model and its betrayal.** The irony is that having insisted the national specificities of the Chinese road, the Maoist leadership then erected the 'people's war' as a new orthodoxy. But every major new experience is necessarily original and therefore heterodox. And every attempt to create a new orthodoxy on the basis of such an experience will lead to misrepresenting the historical truth, and to hide its real lessons.

Of course, behind the proclamation of orthodoxy, Maoist movements have been able to 'adapt' the orientation to better respond to the conditions of their country or of their period. But that so-called orientation became a strategic strait-jacket. The Protracted People's War had to be carried out in all 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial' countries, which is roughly the whole third world. The question of revolutionary crisis, as a 'favourable moment' (a Vietnamese expression), was not to be posed in societies which are supposed to live permanently in such a state. The armed struggle was at all times presented as the main form of struggle, to which other fields of mobilisations such as for democratic and social rights had to be subordinated. The countryside was to be the privileged location for the progressive accumulation of military forces which would encircle the towns. The struggle had to go through three stages: defensive, equilibrium of forces, strategic counter-offensive.

It is impossible with this rigid conception of the Protracted People's War, leading to military gradualism, to understand the history of the Chinese Revolution and of the Red Army created with hundreds of thousands during a revolutionary crisis and in response to a counter-revolution. It is also impossible to grasp the implications of a sudden turn in the situation which dramatically changed the strategic framework, such as the Japanese invasion in 1937, and led for example to the reactivation of the united front policy towards the Guomindang. It is impossible to detect the importance of a 'favourable moment' which required the sudden acceleration of the rhythm of struggle, such as in 1945 when at the end of the Second World War there was a race between the CCP and the Guomindang to make the most of the defeat of the Japanese occupier. Finally, it is impossible to assimilate the lessons of other great revolutionary experiences such as Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria or Nicaragua, which all bear a hallmark of originality.

The Chinese Revolution and the Maoist leadership have contributed a great deal to the development



of Marxist strategic thinking. Nevertheless, by retrospectively setting in stone the 'principles' of the Protracted People's War, the CCP made it very hard to pass on the lessons of its own experience.

## **The Chinese Communist Party**

Which party conquered power in 1949? The analysis of the CCP has fed many debates, in particular within the international Trotskyist movement. The debate was often unclear because the protagonists did not attribute the same definition to 'Stalinism'. For some, it meant the submission to the requirements of the Soviet bureaucracy, but for others it took on a mostly ideological meaning.

More generally, the Chinese experience has demonstrated that the analysis of a party is not a simple matter, in particular during moments of transition and revolution. The trajectory of the Communist Party has frustrated many prognoses and contradicted many peremptory conclusions.

The CCP was supposed to become an obedient tool of Moscow after the social upheavals of the disaster of 1927. However, the Maoist leadership was able through intense internal factional struggles to maintain its capacity for making decisions autonomously, even if without breaking with Stalin. The process of Stalinisation of the Comintern, which is the subordination of its national sections, was confronted in certain countries with a strong resistance such as in China but also in Yugoslavia and Vietnam.

Defeated in the urban centres, the CCP by being deeply involved in the rural vastness necessarily had to become a peasant party. But immediately following its victory in 1949, it relocated its centre of gravity to the cities. Similarly, the CCP could have fallen into the hands of the military because of the framework of the armed struggle. However, right up to the end, as Mao said, politics leads the gun and the Political Bureau led the general staff, however great was the weight of the commanders of the Red Army.

How could the analysis of a party such as the CCP be a simple matter? It is one of the first to be born in the 'third world', steers its own course in the Third International before Stalin, is immediately thrown into the revolutionary storm of the 1920s, experiences the implications of the rise of Stalinism in the USSR, comes under the fire of the counter-revolution in China, radically changes its geographical and social implantation, moves from one type of war to another (civil, self-defence, national liberation, world-wide, and again civil), finds itself governing liberated areas of some hundred million inhabitants before conquering power in the largest country, demographically, in the world. It had about fifty members when it was created and 4.5 million when it celebrates its victory 30 years later!

No label can do justice to the complexity of such a party. 'Stalinist' or 'anti-Stalinist', 'worker' or 'peasant', 'authoritarian' or 'liberating'.....what if both were correct at the same time? The important thing is to recognise the role played by the CCP in a very difficult revolutionary struggle, but also to locate its internal contradictions and their possible evolutions.

No abstract definition can replace a concrete and dynamic historical analysis. Let's just say that in 1949, the CCP was at the same time the party of a great victorious social and national revolution, hence the depth of its links with the population, and also the new state-party within which the ruling elites will become autonomous and constitute itself as a bureaucracy. It will become, through sharp crises, the party of the bureaucratic counter-revolution before becoming the party which will steer the (re)formation of a Chinese capitalism.

## A Maoist road to socialism?

With the birth of the People's Republic, the new regime had a tremendous amount of political prestige. The time should now have been for reconstruction, but the eruption of the Korean War in 1950, which lasted till 1953, did not give it any respite. It had not wanted this war, but it had nevertheless to send a considerable amount of troops in the peninsula to stop and then push back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel the American forces. It was again a victory but achieved at a high price: over 800,000 Chinese dead and wounded.

In China itself, the repression against counter-revolutionaries hardened during the Korean War. The domination of the 'gentry', landowners and notables, in the countryside had been broken as well as that of the bourgeoisie in the cities. The state run by the Guomindang had disintegrated and its defeated armies retreated to Taiwan. There still remained individual bourgeois and notables, some of whom had more or less concluded temporary deals with the CCP as well as many local arrangements. But the classes which had previously ruled over China had ceased to exist as a coherent social force.

The regime was not content to simply claim to represent the people. In 1950, the law on agrarian reform contributed to changing the relationship of power in the village. The law on marriage radically transformed the legal status of women. With the development of a state industry, a new working class was born. It had a frugal lifestyle but benefited from important social measures such as jobs for life, health services, housing, and the possibility for its children to be recruited. To be an employee in a state enterprise became something to be envied. Access to university was opened up to popular layers. Confucian, patriarchal and socially conservative ideology was pushed back.

The regime structured itself nationally around the three pillars of the army, which intervened in production, the administration and the party, without forgetting the security services. At the heart of the state, the CCP enjoyed the monopoly of political power. In this vast country, the big picture remained nevertheless complex and the implementation of policies could vary significantly depending on the relationship of forces at a regional and local level, including between communist factions.

The Maoist leadership had not developed its own conception of social and economic transition. It based itself on the Stalinist model, which is giving priority to heavy industry, while wanting to avoid the disaster of the agricultural policy of Stalin. In its opposition to imperialism, it considered itself as an integral part of the 'socialist camp', but had not forgotten the orders, desertions and promises not kept by Moscow. The relationships between the USSR and China were marked with mutual suspicion: the seeds of the China-Soviet conflict of the 1960s had already been sown.

What could be a 'Chinese road' to socialism? The leadership of the CCP was confronted by this question in the middle of the 1950s. Stalin had died in 1953. Violent crises shook Eastern Europe in East Germany, Hungary and Poland. The 'Secret Speech' of Nikita Khrushchev at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956 in which he denounced the crimes of Stalin had provoked a shock wave. In China itself, the limitations of the implementation of the first policies became evident and new social tensions arose.

Mao was a thinker of contradictions: if there is one thing which is eternal and universal, it is the existence of contradictions. His conception of history and his vision of transition were quite different to that of the Stalinist ideology or the current Chinese leadership which sings the praises of the 'harmonious society'. For Mao, the fight for socialism was and remained the process of the class struggle. The contradictions internal to the People's Republic constituted in his eyes the main lever

for social transformation.

This point of view did not necessarily lead to a 'leftist' political line. In fact, in the middle of the 1950s, Mao believed that it was necessary to come out of the period of the 'settlement of accounts' with the counter-revolution following the conquest of power. He believed that there was a difference between the 'contradictions inside the people' which he considered to be 'non-antagonistic' and the 'antagonistic' contradictions with the counter-revolutionaries. As he was trying to liberate himself from the Stalinist model, he was trying to define a policy of balanced development which would not put undue pressure on the population. Some his most important writings deal with these preoccupations, such as the speech of the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1956, delivered at a meeting of an enlarged Political Bureau of the CCP, known as *On the Ten Great Relationships* or *The Correct Solution for the Contradictions amongst the People* (February 1957). He was relying on social mobilisations, controlled by but nevertheless outside of the party, to be a counterweight to the inflexibility of the regime while at the same time reinforcing his own influence in the leadership.

But when the Chinese leadership attempted to implement this policy, nothing turned out as anticipated. The political and cultural freedom of the Hundred Flowers of 1957 opened the floodgates for a torrent of critiques against members of the party and the privileges of its cadres. A severe repression put an end to this outburst. In its wake, the CCP launched the Great Leap Forward, which was designed to ensure the development of industry, infrastructure in the countryside and the establishment of social services within larger cooperatives. But the aims assigned to the Great Leap Forward became elevated irrationally, to the point of turning into a major economic crisis during 1959-1961. This was exacerbated by environmental problems, the breakdown of inter-regional communications, and food shortages and famines which claimed millions of victims.

Mao's writings of the time give interesting indications on its intentions. They also express the limits of his empiricism and voluntarism. He had little to say about the working class, its organizations and labour relations (that was more Liu Shaoqi's field). The way he looked at the economy (Chen Yun's field), and in particular the economy of a transitional society, is essentially political in nature. He did not integrate the fundamental Marxist debates nourished internationally by the Soviet experiment and especially the debates in the USSR before its Stalinization, taken up by Bukharin, Preobrajenski, Lenin, Trotsky, and many others.

The CCP identified itself with a world socialist perspective then incarnated by the Communist International. It made the dialectics between national liberation and social revolution its own. But, as a result of Stalinization, the Comintern ceased to be a framework for internationalist collectivisation. While many Chinese leaders had initially been exposed to the world (in France, Russia...), the Maoist movement folded back in its own territory. Deeply rooted in Chinese society, it became what can be called (for lack of a better term?) a "national communism", like the Vietnamese or Yugoslav parties. Mao somehow personified this. He didn't know any foreign language (even if in his youth he avidly read translations of foreign books and articles). He never travelled abroad, except once to meet Stalin in Moscow, just after the proclamation of the People's Republic. Zhou Enlai was the one who mastered the diplomatic field, allowing the Chinese government to be one of the driving forces behind the Non-Aligned Movement and the 1955 Bandung Conference.

At the same time, Chinese-Soviet tensions were becoming sharper: Moscow was signing with Washington and London a treaty on nuclear testing from which China had been excluded. Social tensions were rising again in China and the historical Maoist leadership divided itself sharply. In 1965-1966, the factional struggles were no longer confined to the party apparatus. Mao called for the mobilisation of the Red Guards and his rivals also called for street mobilisations. During this period, incorrectly called the 'Cultural Revolution', deep social, democratic and egalitarian

aspirations were expressed. Whole sections of the youth took the opportunity of an extraordinary freedom of action, criss-crossing the country. But chaos swept the country. 'Revolutionary movements' fought each other. Red Guard units committed terrible crimes. The party and the administration were disintegrating and it required years for them to be rebuilt. Only the army maintained its unity. Mao turned to it to restore order, and repressed the youth and radical workers who had identified themselves with his call to 'fire on the general staff', that is the leadership of the CCP.

The development of a 'Chinese road' to socialism was cut short. Historical Maoism got lost in the convulsions of factional struggles. Thrown into confusion, the social and political movements did not find a way forward. In these circumstances, the Cultural Revolution made way for a particularly hard bureaucratic dictatorship of the Gang of Four with as a figurehead Jiang Qing, Mao's wife. At the international level, the normalisation of Chinese-American relationships led in 1972 to the visit to Beijing of Nixon, the US President. The arrival to power of the 'Shanghai Group' certainly did not represent a 'left' turn.

## Of the revolution

Senile Maoism offers us only 'negative lessons'. Bureaucratic repression is equated to class struggle. The unilateral logic of the 'main enemy', in this case the USSR, is pushed in the most opportunistic manner, which is the alliance with American imperialism. This tragic ending should not overshadow the richness of the Chinese revolutionary experience. In addition to the themes touched upon previously, the following should also be looked at further.

**The social components of the revolutionary process.** With regards to the Second Chinese Revolution, notice is often taken of the large working class concentrations, and of the peasantry with regards to the Third Revolution (see above). The components of the revolution were of course more numerous, including intellectuals, students, soldiers and the impoverished masses such as tramps, itinerant workers and coolies. In a remarkable manner, the variety of these components was reflected even in the social origins of the members of the Maoist leadership. Some were born within the elites and were 'traitors to their own class' as Zhou Enlai described them, who himself came from a milieu of mandarins. Others came from a wide range of popular layers.

Chen Yi was the son of a magistrate who while in France in 1919 was a docker, then a dishwasher and then a worker at Michelin. Chen Yun came from a working class family. Deng Xiaoping came from a family of landowners. The father of Liu Shaoqi was a school teacher and that of Liu Bocheng (known as the 'One-eyed Dragon') was a travelling musician. Lin Biao came from the rural petty-bourgeoisie and Peng Dehuai from rather poor peasant milieu from which he broke at the age of eleven, becoming a tramp, 'uprooted' and living from odd jobs. Mao Zedong was born in a family of well-off peasants, while Zhu De came from impoverished peasants.

The 'semi-proletariat', 'lumpen' and impoverished masses played an important role all through the Chinese Revolution, including after 1949, with the struggle of workers in unregulated jobs during the Cultural Revolution. This struggle carries on today with the 'internal migrants', workers without official documents living illegally in the urban and industrial areas.

**The struggle of women.** The women cadres of the CCP also came from various social origins. Chen Shaomin, who came from a poor family, was a lace worker. Deng Yinchao was the daughter of a magistrate. Ding Ling came from a family of rich landowners. Kang Keqing came from an impoverished fishing family who had to abandon her, and was then adopted by poor peasants and worked from a very early age in the fields. On the other hand, Xiang Jingyu was born in a well-off

and modernist family. Yang Zhihua came from a family of silk merchants and owners of land.

The Chinese leadership, and in particular Mao, was initially much imbued with the movement of rebellion against Confucian ideology. This movement championed the emancipation of women and was very influential in progressive circles of the 1920s in the coastal regions. After the Long March, the CCP based itself in the rural areas of the interior which were much more conservative and its ideology suffered as a result. During the revolutionary struggle, village women were nevertheless organised as such not just to support the war effort but also against domestic violence.

It is particularly noteworthy that the first two great symbolic laws adopted by the new People's Republic were for the interests of women. This was the case of the law on marriage giving equal rights to women, but also the law on the agrarian reform, which allowed women to own land. When the 'spirit of the Paris Commune' was re-launched at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, the development of collective services in village communes was aimed, amongst other things, at improving the condition of women. The Democratic Federation of Women had 20 million members in 1949 and 76 million in 1956.

However, despite important progress, women did not permanently and significantly break through the 'glass ceiling' of male domination. In 1957, despite being a rather young organisation with 25% of its members under 25, there was only 10% of women. The higher up the structures of power, the less women there were. Of course, it is not just in China that this 'glass ceiling' exists, and in China like elsewhere is posed the need for an autonomous women's movement.

**The limits of the Maoist conception of popular power.** The question of autonomy of the mass organisations, in particular trade-unions, was raised during the 1950s right up to the highest levels of the party. The answer was negative. There is no autonomous movement of women (the League is run by the CCP) and no independent trade-unions.

Many writers considered that the social, economic and cultural conditions had not matured for a popular socialist democracy in China. It is not possible to reject straightaway this argument. But the lessons of the Chinese experience is that the Maoist model did not work, even though Mao had declared his intention to fight the (re)appearance of a 'red bourgeoisie' feeding off 'bureaucratism', the conservative nature of the apparatus and privileges. More accurately, what worked in times of wars and revolutions no longer worked in times of peace.

In the Maoist model, the party cadre who 'listens to the masses' must gather their grievances and transmit them to the leaderships. The 'transmission belt' of social organisations should work both ways: implement the decisions of the party but also report back the state of mind of the population. This 'transmission belt', in the end, worked only one way, leaving the leadership blind. The craze of the Great Leap Forward demonstrated the cost: many economic and social failures took place before the Political Bureau realised that the country was heading towards a catastrophe and rectified a policy which was far too 'maximalist'.

Mao was able to stress the legitimacy of the disagreements, describing them as 'contradictions within the people'. But the recognition of liberties always remained a matter of political judgement and opportunity, and was therefore susceptible to suddenly being put off by the party, as happened during the Hundred Flowers. The special regime of the war period was carried over after the victory. Liberties were not a right, whatever was written in the Constitution. Politics continues to occupy the space of the law. One can understand that in these circumstances, the demands for socialist democracy and pluralism were central to democracy movement of the early 1980s.

What the Chinese experience demonstrates is that 'socialist' or 'popular' democracy is a necessity

and not a luxury. It is a practical necessity and not just an ideal. How is it possible to give it shape in a country such as China in the 1950s? The answer is not simple, but it is nevertheless necessary to pose the question, which the limits of the legacy of Maoism does not allow.

### **From one counter-revolution to another**

Unlike the bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy does not exist as a ruling class at the moment of the revolution. It 'rises' progressively as a new ruling layer within the framework of the new state. A bureaucratic apparatus is 'crystallised' into a bureaucracy. This bureaucracy in formation codifies privileges and asserts its own collective interests. It ends up acting as a ruling class, even if it is not located within a mode of production which is distinctive to it, and in order to do that has to end the revolutionary legacy.

The process of bureaucratisation is insidious, but in the cases of the USSR and China, it is punctuated by crises of the regime which are revealing. The repression of the Hundred Flowers cut off the CCP from a part of progressive students and intellectuals. The failure of the Great Leap Forward provoked a loss of confidence between the party and whole sections of the peasantry while at the same time undermining the authority of Mao, which in turn provoked splits within the leadership. The massive repression during the Cultural Revolution led to a break between the Maoist faction and the radical left-wing students and workers who, quite rightly, felt betrayed.

The historical Maoist team broke up permanently: eight of the eleven members of the Political Bureau were sent to prison or for re-education. Nine of the ten who were responsible for the main areas of work of the Central Committee were pushed aside. Of the 63 members of the Central Committee, 43 disappeared and 9 were severely criticized. This was repeated from the top to the bottom. The CCP in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution was in ruins, and the crisis of the leadership continued with the elimination of Lin Biao. The slow reconstruction of the party and the administration brought about the right conditions for the completion of the bureaucratic counter-revolution.

The bureaucratic order was first of all embodied by the Gang of Four which had only won a Pyrrhic victory. After the death of Mao in 1976, the other factions of the apparatus took their revenge. It was the turn of Jiang Qing and her companions to be put in detention.

Following on from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, the rule of the Gang of Four, who had discredited 'leftist' positions and 'revolutionary' language, created the favourable conditions for the bourgeois counter-revolution. This had not been obvious at the time. In a different national and international context, the reforms gradually introduced during the 1980s by Deng Xiaoping would not have necessarily led to the reconstitution of a Chinese capitalism. But at that time, it facilitated the convergence of sections of the bureaucracy and transnational Chinese capital established in Taiwan, North America and elsewhere. The CCP encouraged investments of expatriates and welcomed into the party big capitalists. In turn, the CCP appeared to be in the eyes of transnational Chinese capitalists, who no longer had roots in China, as the only force able to maintain social order and guarantee the unity of the country which was still threatened with fragmentation. All this encouraged the gradual process of the transformation of a part of the bureaucracy into a bourgeoisie through initially the illegal privatisation of public assets, then subsequently legitimising the theft by changing the laws. The bourgeois counter-revolution took the form of a controlled transition to a semi-state and semi-private capitalism.

The reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping opened the road to a regressive social upheaval, as radical as the one which followed the successful revolution of 1949. The economic assets of the state were

partly dismantled and privatised. A new class of entrepreneurs was born. The old working class with a protected status gave way on one hand to technicians and skilled workers, and on the other hand to a new proletariat born out of the rural exodus and often with no rights. After having first benefited from de-collectivisation, the Chinese peasantry found itself threatened with the same process of dispossession that fell upon those of the 'third world'. As a result, social inequalities exploded. The culture of the upstart triumphed and the rich are celebrated, while the poor are once again ignored. The counter-revolution has come full circle.

**Nationalism.** The evolution of Chinese nationalism also illustrates the changes to the Communist Party. From the Opium Wars of 1839-1860 to the aftermath of the 1949 victory, nationalism has constituted an essential political and cultural framework for the resistance against Japanese and Western aggression, for the anti-imperialist struggle, for the desire for independence. At the same time it contained many variations and combinations such as between modernism and attachment to the past or internationalism and xenophobia.

In the 1920s to 1930s, the Communist Party included in its programme the right for self-determination for the peoples in the periphery of the Empire, such as in Tibet. Great Han chauvinism later strongly asserted itself as the new bureaucracy was strengthening its grip on the People's Republic - which had the framework of a national state for its existence - while Chinese-Soviet tensions degenerated into a major inter-bureaucratic conflict.

The current Chinese regime displays a crude big power nationalism with its regional ambitions. The purpose of this nationalism is also to fill the ideological vacuum left by the discrediting of Maoism. It feeds off a deep 'Sino-centrism' inherited from a long history during which the ruling dynasties considered the countries on its periphery as vassal states: China must regain its glorious past.

**The bourgeoisie from one century to another.** In the previous century, the development of the bourgeoisie was suffocated by the dictatorship of the Guomindang before being broken by the revolution. But today, Chinese capitalism benefits from the radical measures of the 1949 revolution. Without it, the country would have become a political and economic dependency of Japan or more likely US imperialism. Furthermore like in other 'third world' countries, capital would have great trouble in freeing itself from the traditional social relationships of the countryside and the weight of the 'gentry'.

### **\_'Study, Study and Study again'\_**

Let us conclude on this famous quote from Lenin. We only learn from the experience of history. Going from one unstable society in transition to another, 20<sup>th</sup> century China has gone from crisis to crisis. Its social structures have several times been thrown into chaos with the first wave of industrialisation, a very unequal 'development' from region to region, agrarian tensions, wars, revolution and counter-revolution.

If one wishes to learn from a historical experience, one must not confine oneself to the writings, "sacred" as they may be. Nor freeze the thinking of the figureheads of a revolutionary movement, no matter how impressive they may be. How, for example, can one truly read Lenin's pre-1914 works and forget that it is only after the start of WWI that he deepened or elaborated his conceptions on state, imperialism, dialectics?

Was Mao a theorist? This question has been very much debated. When Mao devoted himself to write "as a Marxist", the outcome proved unconvincing as it was marked so much by Stalinist dogma. However, it is difficult to recognize him as a cunning strategist, which he was indeed, and at the

same time consider his thinking as having no depth whatsoever. Mao thought out and did think out the long term, but he did not “refine” the concepts of historical materialism. Besides, his “theoretical” writings rarely went beyond of the tactical preoccupations of the day.

From a conceptual point of view, the studies done by Mao of the 1920s on social classes in China seem rudimentary. Nevertheless, he perceived the potential dynamics of conflicts in the rural world in a better way than first-rate Chinese Marxist theorists, who still had a very “urban” vision. This “intelligence” of the peasant question proved of course decisive for the future. On the other hand, Mao’s writings on the New Democracy present in a very formalistic fashion the sequence of stages supposed to punctuate the revolutionary process after victory. Those wanting to learn from the Chinese revolution will benefit more by studying the real course of events after 1949, rather than sticking to the official theory.

Crises bring to light the underlying reality and the contradictions working their way through a society. Modern China constitutes an extraordinary historical laboratory from which there is still a lot to learn, much more than what has been briefly touched upon here. For example: the concrete manifestation of the dynamic of permanent revolution, the complexity of the relationship between parties and their social base, what allowed the CCP to function efficiently (such as the role of experimentation, the conferences of cadres and the calibre of its militants), or what encouraged bureaucratism, privileges and the cult of personality.

The failure of the Great Leap Forward should not make us forget that the Maoist leadership was attempting to respond to real problems such as how to develop the regions of the interior without creating a massive rural exodus towards the coastal metropolitan cities. Or how to envisage people’s communes not just as production units but also the structure within which collective services can be delivered. And even the Cultural Revolution, despite the tragic chaos into which it sank, cannot be reduced to a simple struggle between factions of the apparatus or a manipulation of the masses. It was not simply a great theatrics of lies. If the chaos was so considerable and the mobilisations out of control, it is because there really were explosive social contradictions. There is always great benefit in studying the history of the ‘revolutionary movements’ of 1966-1968.

The manner in which the authorities were able to avoid social resistance in order to discard all the revolutionary legacy is also very interesting. In Mao’s time, peasants could not travel freely: they needed a permit to live in a city. This put a brake on the rural exodus, which was the official intention of this policy. Nevertheless, later, when the rural exodus actually did begin, it created a mass of “internal migrants” without documents and therefore rights. This allowed the post-Mao regime to push the working class of the state enterprises – whose quiet resistance against the reforms had not been broken – out of the productive process. To this end, the regime used the Chinese ‘migrant’ workforce, particularly in the new industrial zones. This process of substitution is well known in Europe where public sector employees, with civil servant rights, are progressively replaced with private sector employees or temporary staff. But in China, the substitution was carried out at the level of an entire section of the working class!

The emergence of China as a capitalist power owes a lot to the success of the previous Maoist revolution: liberating the country from imperialist domination, industrialisation, development of independent scientific knowledge and technologies, mass education and modernisation of society. Once Maoism was defeated, the new bourgeoisie stepped into its shoes. Having despised it, it could now be grateful for Maoism.

The big revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have lost their dynamism under the external pressure of imperialism and because of the bureaucratic cancer destroying it from the inside. They have nevertheless made a mark on the world. In particular, they have loosened the imperialist



stranglehold, opened up breaches which now benefit some bourgeoisies of the 'third world'. But the game is not over. The memory of revolutions of yesterday can still contribute to the anti-capitalist uprisings of tomorrow, even in the heart of the new emerging powers, such as China.

**Pierre Rousset**

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## **P.S.**

\* This essay was translated from my French original by Fred Leplat and proofread by Geoff Ryan.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] China's Rise: Strength and Fragility. Au long-yu with contributions from Bai Ruixue, Bruno Jeton & Pierre Rousset. Resistance Books, IIRE, Merlin Press. 2012.

[2] Comintern is an acronym for Communist International, also known as the Third International founded in 1919 and lasting until 1943.

[3] The term peasantry is used here in the broad sense, including peasants as well as landless and small farmers.