



The Great Helmsman

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Source: *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Vol. 4, No. 4 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 106-119

Published by: [Wilson Quarterly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40256003>

Accessed: 20/10/2010 08:58

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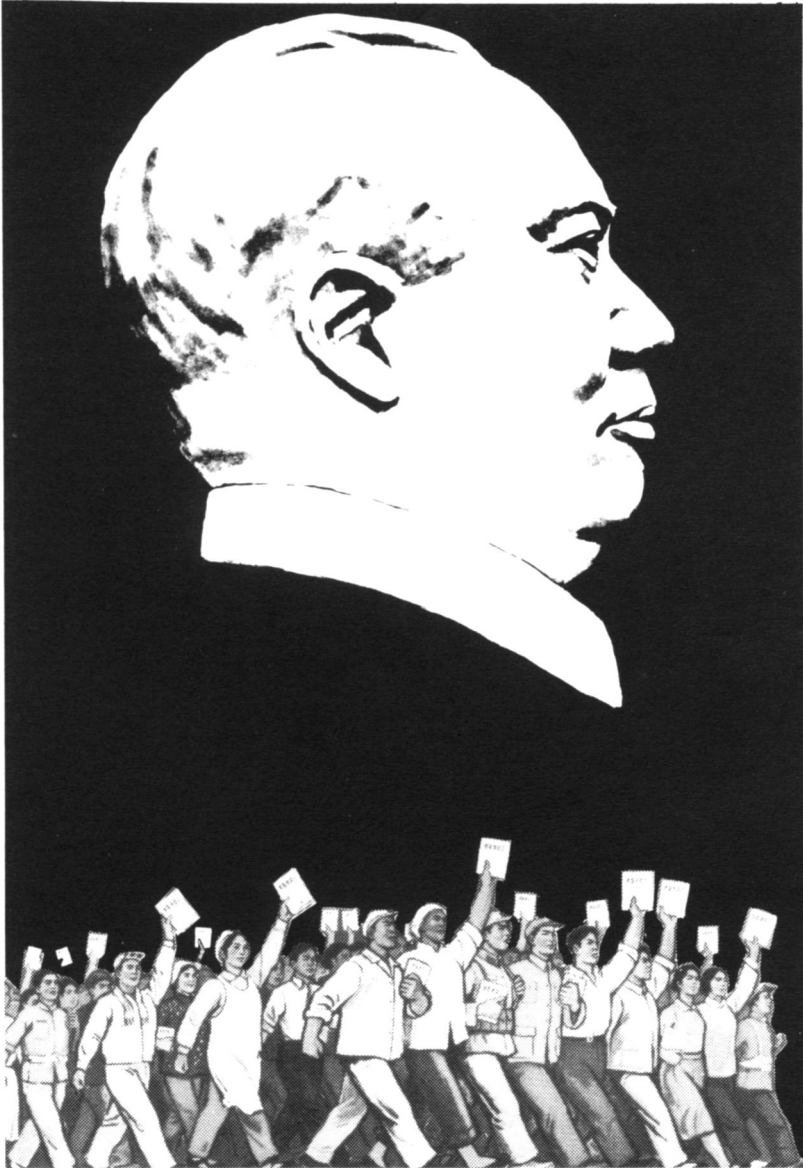
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La Cina dei Cinesi by Gino Nebiolo, Priuli & Verlucca, publishers.

"Everybody reads the works of Mao" is the title of this 1967 poster. Times change. The once ubiquitous portraits of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) have been removed from most of China's public places — including the Great Hall of the People, or parliament building, in Beijing (Peking).

Mao's China

Mao Zedong died in 1976 after leading the Chinese Communists to victory and ruling the People's Republic for 27 years. His "New China" has long fascinated Western scholars. Now Mao's record is being scrutinized anew, notably by his successors in Beijing. Was Mao, in fact, a brilliant social architect? Did he actually forge an egalitarian society? Is the "Chinese model" really an example to other poor Third World nations? In academe, the answers used to be yes. Here, journalist Dick Wilson takes a fresh look at Mao's character and political style; demographer Nick Eberstadt reconsiders Mao's economic performance; political scientist Harry Harding re-examines American Sinologists' benign interpretations of the chaotic Cultural Revolution; and six Chinese refugees, interviewed by scholar-diplomat Michael Frolic, describe the world Mao made.



THE GREAT HELMSMAN

by Dick Wilson

As every Chinese schoolboy knows, Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) was born into a poor peasant family and grew up amid the hunger and degradation of daily existence in late imperial China. Though he never went to a university, he became headmaster of an elementary school in provincial Changsha in 1920, and a major political force in his native Hunan province. From there, he went on to become the supreme ruler of a quarter of mankind for a quarter of a century, an unprecedented feat in human history.

Mao brought to this role extraordinary talents. A dynamic

and charismatic leader, he developed a political creed for China during the 1940s that seemed Marxist and yet not "extreme"; imported, but somehow Chinese. Later, during the '50s and '60s, Mao basked in the applause of foreign scholars, politicians, and journalists for his apparent success in finding indigenous solutions to the problems of revitalizing an exhausted society, solutions based on self-reliance, hard work, and an imaginative interpretation of communist doctrine.

"To Fight Is Pleasure"

Yet Mao's 27-year reign, from his triumph over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949 to his death in 1976, ultimately left China in a state of confusion, doubt, alienation, and economic disarray. Millions of his countrymen had been killed for political reasons; millions had starved to death; millions more had had their liberties disproportionately curtailed. And for what? For a rate of economic growth that has been only modest, on average, and remains highly erratic from year-to-year; an educational system damaged almost beyond repair; a bitterly divided ruling party; and a citizenry suspicious and withdrawn.

Mao, his former colleagues now declare, was a brilliant guerrilla leader during the early days of the revolution, when the outnumbered Communists took on, first, the better-organized forces of Chiang's Kuomintang (Nationalist) Party, and, later, the better-equipped Japanese invaders. He, above all, led his comrades to victory in the 1946-49 civil war. He was also, they concede, a valuable helmsman in the initial attempt during the early 1950s to steer the Chinese revolution along conventional Soviet lines.

During the final two decades of his life, however, he seemed to go wild, launching nationwide campaigns without consultation or preparation. The Hundred Flowers campaign (1957) offered intellectuals freedom of speech but then punished them for their heresies. This was followed by the backyard iron smelters of the Great Leap Forward (1958-59), which brought economic

Dick Wilson, 51, is editor of The China Quarterly. Born in Epsom, England, he was graduated from Oxford University in 1951 and went on to study at the University of California, Berkeley. He was editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review from 1958 to 1964. Among his many books are The People's Emperor, Mao (1980), The Long March 1935 (1971), and Anatomy of China (1966). He is currently writing a biography of Zhou Enlai. This essay is drawn in part from a lecture delivered at the Washington Center of the Asia Society.



Since 1949, for various reasons, China has fought with many of its neighbors—and, in 1950–53, with the United States in Korea. Note: In 1979, the Chinese dropped the Wade-Giles method of alphabetizing the Chinese language in favor of the pinyin system. Thus, for example, Chungking, in Szechwan, became Chongqing, in Sichuan. This map uses Chinese, not Western, place names: Xizang (Tibet); Guangzhou (Canton); and China's two great rivers, the Huang (Yellow) and the Chang (Yangtze). Shanghai is still Shanghai.

disaster, and then by the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when Mao waged open war against his own party and kindled an upsurge of anarchism whose effects are still being felt.

Why was Mao unable to work with his colleagues in the party leadership? What facets of his personality led to this tragedy? It is important to recall Mao's early experiences. At school in his native Hunan province, he was clearly a determined lad. In 1911, he was one of two student protesters who cut off their queues as a gesture of defiance against the effete Imperial Manchu rule—and forcibly sheared off the pigtailed of 10

others who had promised to do so but then got cold feet. He told his boyhood friend Siao Yu in 1921: "In order to reform a country one must be hard with oneself, and it is necessary to victimize a part of the people." Mao knew from very early days these harsh truths about politics and revolution.

He was a dogged fighter. His earliest known poem reads:

To fight with Heaven is infinite pleasure!
 To fight with earth is infinite pleasure!
 To fight with men is infinite pleasure!

In 1919, when a girl in his town committed suicide rather than consent to an arranged marriage, Mao condemned the society that had driven her to desperation but did not condone her act itself. "We should struggle against society in order to regain the hope that we have lost," he wrote in the local newspaper. "We should die fighting." He was never wounded, but he did spend his life in battle—fighting the Kuomintang in the 1930s, fighting the Japanese in the '40s, fighting the earth for its grain in the '50s, and fighting human nature to make it more collective and less selfish in the '60s.

At school, he insisted that his beloved *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the 14th-century Chinese classic, was literally true. When a teacher explained that it was a fictionalized version of history, thus contradicting Mao in front of his school friends, Mao complained to the headmaster. When the headmaster took the teacher's side, Mao petitioned the mayor. After that, Mao left the school.

Mao was enormously proud. He never tired of boasting to his school friends of the essay on which he had been given the very rare and distinguished mark of 105 out of 100. Chen Yi, Mao's foreign minister from 1958 to 1972, once recalled how, in 1949, the other Chinese Communist Party leaders wanted to make amends to Mao for their inadequate, sometimes wavering, faith in his (successful) strategy during the Revolution. Mao would not allow them to apologize. Chen Yi advanced this as an example of Mao's modesty, but it is actually a parable of pride: Mao would never again leave himself vulnerable to colleagues whose lack of trust had wounded him in the past.

His ambition equaled his pride. Mao was always fascinated by power. During classroom debates over the famous characters of Chinese history, for example, young Mao defended as expedient the tyranny of Emperor Liu Pang (reign: 202–195 B.C.), who, to strengthen his hold on the throne, executed all of his generals and old friends, and their families.

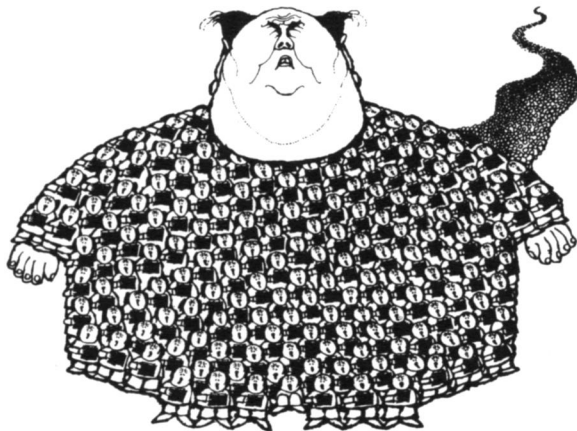
In 1921, Mao spent an evening drinking with a fellow dele-

gate at the first Chinese Communist Party Congress. They discussed who in Chinese history had become great by his own efforts, to which the answer came, only two: the first Han emperor and Sun Yat-sen, the father of the new Republic of China. Mao banged his fist on the table and cried excitedly: "I will be the third." Twenty-eight years later, just before entering the capital to proclaim the People's Republic, Mao jocularly remarked, "As soon as we enter Beijing [Peking], I'll be an emperor." (Indeed, he soon thereafter took up residence in Beijing's Forbidden City, site of the imperial palaces.)

An early and persistent trait in Mao's character was a stubborn refusal to bow to authority. He argued endlessly with his father, and once cursed him in front of guests. Mao was forced to kowtow in apology, both publicly and privately, but he would bend only one knee. In 1936, he flatly told American journalist Edgar Snow that "I learned to hate my father," a remarkable statement, especially for a Chinese. Time and again, Mao was rejected by his intimates and peers and nursed resentment against them as a result. MIT political scientist Lucian Pye suggests that the first instance of this could have been at the tender age of three, when Mao's younger brother arrived to compete with him for their mother's affections.

Even more important was the fact that his schooling was delayed because of his poor circumstances in a remote village. By the time he began attending a real public school, he was a good five years older than most of his classmates, bigger, better developed, and obviously out of place. Inevitably, he was laughed at by his classmates, by the teachers, and by the students of his own age in upper classes. He endured this humilia-

This Swedish cartoon from the 1960s portrays Mao as a dragon made up of millions of Chinese, each chanting a quotation from "the little red book."



Courtesy of Ewert Karlsson, Sweden.

tion in order to get an education.

Again, when Mao first moved to Beijing and tried to audit university lectures on political philosophy, he was rudely snubbed. The professor who stopped speaking in mid-sentence when he learned of Mao's status, had, as Mao later put it, "no time to listen to an assistant librarian speaking southern dialect."

Mao was handicapped by his Hunanese speech, which was almost unintelligible to the Chinese of Beijing. He shunned radio broadcasts. During French President Georges Pompidou's 1973 visit to China, Mao observed that the French Ambassador, who was with them throughout their discussions, spoke French like Napoleon. To this Pompidou noted rather severely that Napoleon had spoken with an Italian accent. "Yes," Mao replied, "and people laughed at him."*

"Just a Monkey"

In spite of these rebuffs, and perhaps as a response to them, Mao in a kind of reverse snobbery retained to the end his frugal peasant habits, eating the simplest of food, wearing patched and frayed clothes, and sleeping on a hard wooden bed.

Mao did on occasion betray feelings of diffidence and self-doubt. After the collapse of the Great Leap Forward in 1959, he lamented that he was "a complete outsider when it comes to economic construction." At the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he wrote to his wife that he felt like the monkey in the Chinese legend who called himself king when the tigers were away. "I have become a king in this way," he told her, "although I am just a monkey."

But he was more likely to confess errors with bravado and petulance, and without a shred of intellectual sincerity. "Even Confucius made mistakes" was one of his most revealing lines. On another occasion he asserted: "I do not care about being alone. The truth is always on the side of the minority. Even if the entire Politburo and Central Committee are against me, the Earth will go on rotating."

He was unsure of the loyalty of his comrades. In 1941, he complained that only three leaders were loved by the Communist Party cadres: his lieutenant Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai), Wang Ming (the Kremlin-backed rival for the party chairmanship), and Peng Dehuai (the brilliant general who, years later,

*It is interesting that the experience of coming up from "the sticks" with a "southern dialect" and being laughed at (always a powerful incentive to achieve and command) in the metropolitan capital was not confined to Napoleon and Mao. The Georgian Stalin went through the same experience, and even Hitler spoke German with a soft Austrian accent. Could there be here the germ of a new theory on the origins of modern dictatorship?

MAO AND THE RUSSIANS

Adhering to orthodox Marxist theory, the Russians long underestimated Mao and the Chinese Communists, believing Chiang Kai-shek's bourgeois Kuomintang (Nationalist) Party to be the inevitable, if transient, heir to postfeudal China. Indeed, just after World War II, even as China edged toward renewed civil conflict, Joseph Stalin signed a treaty of friendship with the Kuomintang. (He was not so neighborly a year later, when Soviet armies occupying Manchuria stripped the region's factories of industrial equipment valued at \$1 billion.)

Past differences were put aside after Mao's unexpectedly swift victory over Chiang in 1949. Stalin granted diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic within 48 hours of its birth in 1949; a few months later, he played host to Mao in Moscow. He was not impressed with the Chairman. He told aides that Mao "doesn't understand the most elementary Marxist truths." Even so, a 30-year Treaty of Friendship and Alliance resulted. The Chinese got a surprisingly modest amount of aid — some \$1.5 billion between 1949 and 1960 — in exchange for (temporary) Soviet control of Manchuria's ports and railways and forfeiture of the Chinese claim on Outer Mongolia. The bear's embrace was tight: From 1952 through 1955, the Soviet Union accounted for more than half of China's minuscule foreign business.

But to Mao, aid and trade were never as important as ideology. After Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's personality cult in 1956, Mao decided the new Russian leader was a "turnip communist" (that is, red only on the outside). Nevertheless, the charges against Stalin may have led Mao to his own reassessment; in 1958, to the astonishment of "the Soviet elder brothers," Mao downgraded the Kremlin's "heavy" model of industrial development in favor of the Great Leap Forward.

In 1960 came the split: China launched an open propaganda attack on Soviet-style communism. In response, Khrushchev angrily withdrew all Soviet technical advisers, who, to the lasting bitterness of the Chinese, simply abandoned semicompleted projects and took their blueprints home. By the end of the decade, the schism turned violent, with a series of bloody clashes along the Sino-Soviet border. To the Russians, Mao became nothing less than "a traitor to the sacred cause of communism," as the Soviet military newspaper *Red Star* put it.

Mindful perhaps of the Chinese proverb that advises the wise leader to "use the far barbarian to defeat the near barbarian," Mao turned to his old foes, the Americans, for protection from his erstwhile allies. Telling his colleagues that "the ghost of John Foster Dulles has now taken up residence in the Kremlin," in 1971 the Chairman invited Henry Kissinger to visit Beijing.

during the Great Leap Forward broke ranks with Mao and wound up on a farm near the Russian border).

His intimates found him remote. The personal losses he suffered—most of his family and friends were killed by his enemies—might account for some of his coldness, but even Mao's childhood friend Emi Siao commented: "None of us have really understood him. I have known him longer than anyone else, but I have never got to the root of him." And his last wife, Jiang Qing (Chiang Ching), who after Mao's death was denounced as ringleader of the "Gang of Four," confessed to the American sinologist Roxane Witke that she did not really know her husband.

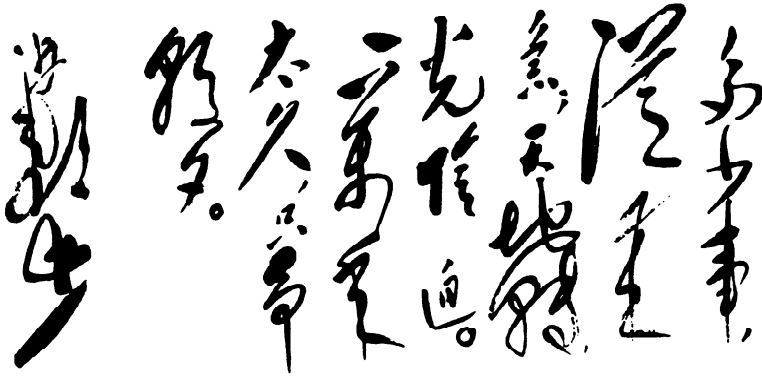
Obviously a career of such length and dazzling originality has its share of mistakes as well as successes. But Mao could learn from his mistakes, and one of the many wise opinions he used to deliver was about preferring men who had tried and erred over those who had never tried at all.

Making a Cat Eat Pepper

His subtly altering policy toward the thorny question of land reform during the 1920s and '30s was a test case of how discretion may be nurtured by experience. The problem: weighing the political advantages of wholesale land redistribution against the disadvantages of so alienating the landed classes as to jeopardize the entire local economy. On this issue, which was central to the early Chinese revolution—Mao once told the American reporter Anna Louise Strong that "A people's war . . . is not decided by taking or losing a city, but by solving the agrarian problem"—Mao did display on the whole good judgment, rarely pushing landowners too hard.

Mao's post-1949 balance sheet is worse, with a string of horrendous mistakes on a huge scale: the Hundred Flowers, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution.

Until those campaigns, Mao's strong points as a leader outweighed his weaknesses. His outstanding quality was ingenuity and resourcefulness. The joke that the surviving Shanghai capitalists used to retail at their dinner tables in the 1950s, possibly a Chinese version of a Soviet joke, put this expressively. China's "big three" at the time—Mao, his deputy Liu Shaoqi, and Premier Zhou Enlai—were having an argument on how best to administer pepper to a cat (that is, how to engineer voluntary but distasteful social change). Zhou suggested that they wrap the pepper in meat so that the cat would eat it unknowingly, but Mao vetoed this as deceitful. Liu then proposed stuffing the pep-



Mao's 1963 poem, "Reply to Kuo Mo-jo," rendered in his own hand. This excerpt, written top-to-bottom, right-to-left, reads: "So many deeds cry out to be done/and always urgently!/The world rolls on,/Time presses./Ten thousand years are too long./Seize the day, seize the hour!" (The three characters on the extreme left form Mao's signature.) During his 1972 visit to China, President Richard M. Nixon quoted these lines in a speech.

per down the cat's throat with chopsticks. No, said Mao reproachfully, that would be violent. The two lieutenants turned to Mao: How would he do it? Simple, he said, we'll rub pepper on the cat's arse, then he'll lick it off and swallow it, and be happy that he is permitted to do so.

Mao was, in fact, a past master of getting things done with the minimum of violence. He was also adept at isolating his opponents and critics and disarming them through his favorite tactic of siding with one opponent against another, or playing the end against the middle. The classic example of this strategy is his alliance in 1937 with the class enemy (Kuomintang) against the national enemy (Japan).

It is in this light that his dealings with his own immediate colleagues—especially with Zhou and Liu—are best understood. Neither Liu nor Zhou was a serious threat to Mao's leadership. Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) had been the urban organizer (Mao was active in the countryside) during the earliest days of Communist revolt; during the 1940s they pooled their resources to ensure a Communist government. If Liu had any doubts about Mao's position as supreme leader, Mao disarmed them with flattery and the offer of a formal post as deputy.

Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) never laid claim to the number one position. He was the only Chinese Communist leader who came from the upper classes; even his very gracefulness and good

manners were held by some to be contemptible. He was also saddled with remorse over mistakes he had made while running the party in 1934–35, when his rather conventional military campaign against the Kuomintang proved unsuccessful. After voluntarily handing over the baton during the Long March, he supported Mao faithfully for the rest of his life, always taking the second, or sometimes third, position. Yet Mao always withheld his trust from Zhou, even when his deputy lay dying in 1975–76, and he did not appear at Zhou's funeral.

Small wonder that Lin Biao, the defense minister, who attempted a coup against Mao in 1971, when he was Mao's deputy and chosen successor, once said of his master: "Do you see anyone whom he supported initially who has not finally been handed a political death sentence?" The same thought was feelingly voiced by General Xu Shiyong soon after Mao's death, when he reportedly observed that Mao had "libeled as class enemies all those in the party who had dared make suggestions to him."

In the final two or three decades of his life, Mao's theory of governing rested on his own presumed infallibility. There was reasoned discussion with associates, certainly, but if the consensus came out against him, Mao—always a bad loser—usually refused to accept the verdict and sought allies elsewhere. In his last years, Mao became obsessed with the so-called Ten Line Struggles, a sordid and often unnecessary series of internal party fights to promote his own dictatorial leadership.

Too Much, Too Soon

He was not, however, a good implementer. Indeed, after 1949, when the fighting was over and the building began, he may have become jealous of the better skills of Zhou and Liu in this regard. Time and time again, the actual organization of social change had to be left to these two, while Mao either traveled around the country interfering at the lower end, or else remained at the shoulder of his colleagues in Beijing, urging, criticizing, and complaining.

In drawing up a balance sheet, one has to consider the cost of Maoism. Millions of Chinese died in the various campaigns that Mao pursued after 1949, and millions more suffered injury or persecution. One of Mao's sympathetic streaks, of course, was his insistence on the essential corrigibility of class enemies. Endless memorandums went out from his office to the field on how much better it was to argue an opponent or a class enemy, such as a landlord, round to your own way of thinking. That way you would acquire an ally.

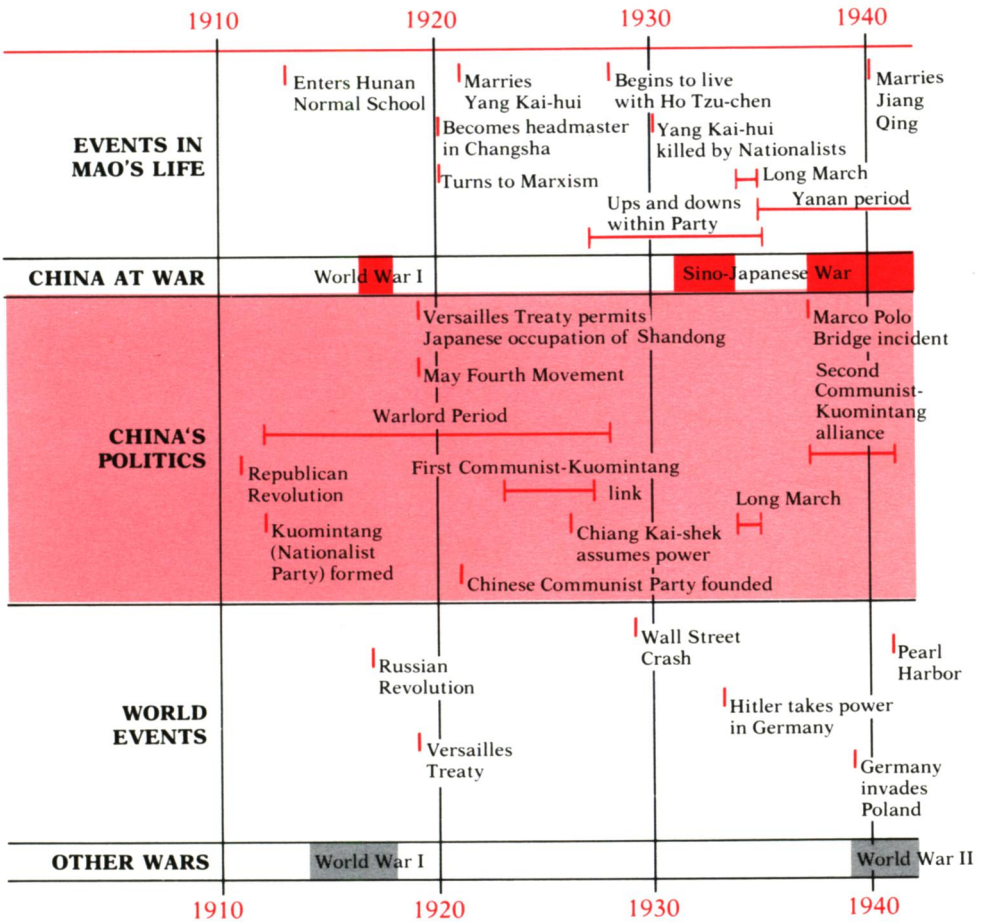
But few others in the Communist Party were as persuasive as Mao on this point. (A riveting orator, Mao enlivened his speeches with earthy proverbs and poetic images, few of which survived the bureaucratic editors of Mao's *Selected Works*.) And Mao was a realist. He knew the intensity of the political forces he was unleashing in Chinese society. He knew the grim logic of the kind of revolution he was engaged in and recognized that blood would be shed. The question we might now ask is: Were the results really worthwhile? This is something that the Chinese will come to a conclusion about in their own way.

Mao Zedong was a great force. In spite of his grim errors, and to some extent because of them, he will be remembered as one of the giants of our century. To the Chinese, he will remain a titanic figure. For others, he offered a unique example by de-Europeanizing Marxism: In Mao's thought, Marxist ideology and Chinese civilization met and transformed one another. At the center of that transformation stood the peasantry—ignored by Western Marxism and despised by urban China, but loved by Mao. (The evidence suggests, however, that Mao the Chinese revolutionary had originally seized upon Marxism less as a goal than as a useful—and fashionable—weapon. In his guerrilla days, he was inspired less by abstract theories of communism than by the swashbuckling adventures of the Robin Hood-like heroes of old Chinese sagas such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; in the *Selected Works*, only 4 percent of literary references are to Marx and Engels, against 22 percent to Confucian sources.)

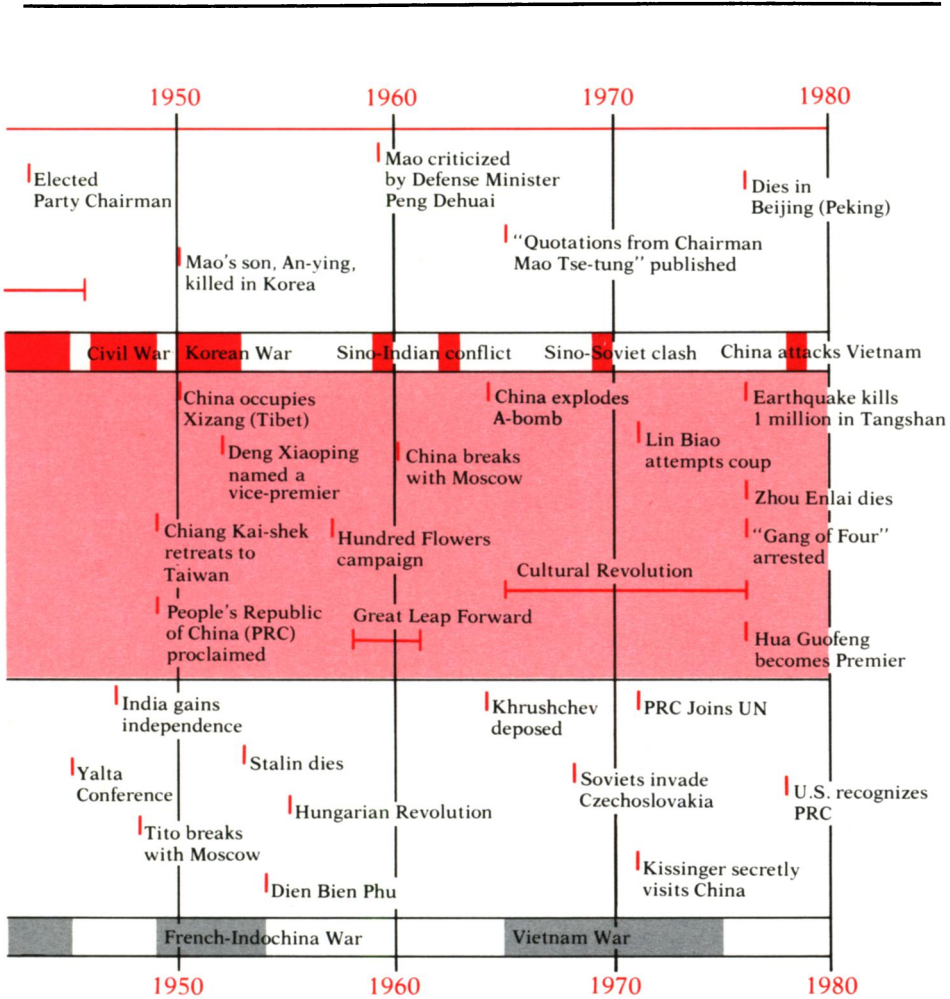
Mao began by offering his party a brilliant leadership that finally overcame all its foes and brought him to the throne of China's imperial dynasties. Then, for a few years, he presided over a regime that pursued a broadly Soviet model of communism with only minor modifications. Finally, during the last two decades, he broke out of the Soviet harness and endeavored to pull China up by its bootstraps using revolutionary techniques of unparalleled scope and scale.

But he tried to do too much, too soon, and with too little preparation and consultation. The early promise foundered on the shoals of personal insecurity and mistrust, and Mao's final two decades of leadership were tragic. If only he had known when to retire!

MAO, CHINA, AND THE WORLD, 1910-80



NOTES: Mao Zedong was born on December 26, 1893 . . . 1919: The Versailles peace conference allows the Japanese to occupy former German "concessions" in Shandong province. On May 4, a Beijing student protest sparks the anti-imperialist "May Fourth Movement," which the Communists now view as the true start of the 20th-century Chinese revolution . . . 1923-27: Communists are allowed to join the Kuomintang, in which Soviet advisers are temporarily influential. The collaboration ends when Chiang Kai-shek occupies Shanghai and massacres local Communists. In 1937, the two parties again put aside their differences, this time to form a "united front" against the Japanese invaders . . . 1930: Mao's first wife, Yang Kai-hui, is tortured and killed by the Nationalists. Mao soon legitimizes his union with Ho Tzu-chen, with whom he has been living



since 1928. But within a few years—in 1937 or 1938—Mao divorces Ho and takes Jiang Qing as his mistress, marrying her in the late 1930s or early 1940s . . . 1934–35: Denounced by senior Communist Party authorities in 1927, 1930, 1932, and 1933, Mao finally wrests control of the party from its pro-Moscow leadership during the Long March . . . 1935–47: During the “Yanan period,” Mao tightens his hold on the party as its influence spreads across north China . . . 1937: A clash outside Beijing between Japanese and Chinese troops on July 7 (“the Marco Polo Bridge incident”) leads to a full-scale Japanese war against China . . . 1971: Though formally designated Mao’s successor in 1969, Defense Minister Lin Biao allegedly leads a coup attempt in September 1971. Unsuccessful, he dies in a plane crash in Mongolia while fleeing to the Soviet Union.