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Remembering Jack Gray

Mao in Perspective

Jack Gray

Editor's preface. *It is unusual for The China Quarterly to publish anything in unfinished form, but the provenance of this piece by Jack Gray is equally unusual. In the second half of the 20th century, Jack was one of the UK's more important figures in contemporary Chinese studies, perhaps most noted for the text he produced in retirement, Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000. What follows here is an extracted version of a set of ideas he set down in 2003–04 for a manuscript on Mao Zedong, still in note form at the time of his passing in late 2004.* It forms the core of a mini-symposium on reconsidering Mao on the 30-year anniversary of his death in September 1976. Mark Selden, Chris Bramall and Rebecca Karl offer responses to Jack Gray's views, and to the question of Mao's legacy in general.*

It was my intention, in retirement, to write a political biography of Mao Zedong. I reckoned without old age. Time's winged chariot is now clipping at my heels. Prudence suggests that I should summarize my hypotheses on Mao, so that if they prove interesting enough some younger colleague might take them up.

... It was by [the late 1960s] perfectly obvious that Mao's economic alternative had been elaborated first in documents which used little or no ideological language and which could therefore stand or fall in the plain language in which they were written. I refer to his *Economic and Financial Problems of the Border Regions*, *The High Tide of Socialism in the Chinese Countryside*, *The Ten Great Relationships*, *How to Handle Contradictions Among the People*, and the documents in which he condemned Stalinism.

... I came to the view that every event in China has three dimensions: the history of Chinese culture, socialism, and the attempts by less developed peasant countries to combat poverty. The crux of the first dimension was the problem of how to replace traditional (and communist) hierarchical relationships by a civil society (albeit perhaps a market in which the actors are collectives) and by more democratic decision-making processes. The crux of the second was how to escape from Stalinist etatism to the more communitarian ideas of socialism implicit in the May Fourth consensus. The crux of the third was China's factor proportions, with the worst man-land ratio among the major countries, a massive surplus of rural labour and little capital. These are clearly the basic questions which Mao attempted to answer. I do not believe that either the Great Leap Forward or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution can be properly understood unless all

* A full version of this article is available at www.freewebs.com/jack-gray.

three of these dimensions are taken into consideration. The Great Leap was concerned to break down centralized, hierarchical administration; to create a more community-based form of socialism; to turn surplus rural labour from a liability to an asset; and to create a sort of participatory democracy. The Cultural Revolution had the same aims, though pursued in somewhat changed circumstances ... Authoritarian governments may sometimes prepare the way for democratic institutions by changes which are not in themselves democratic. ... thus, instead of condemning each and every authoritarian regime, we should look for positive signs of the creation of any of the pre-conditions of democracy and praise and encourage them. As far as Mao and democratization is concerned, it is enough at the moment to refer to his criticisms of Stalin, almost all of which imply the need for increasing involvement of the population in both the provision and the benefits of economic growth, in an alternative system which would create some of the pre-conditions of democracy.

My interests pointed to China's commune and brigade industries, unsuccessful in the Great Leap, but from their resurrection in 1970 the driving force of an economic miracle. What made them more interesting to me was that their very existence was neglected by economists studying China. Whole books on China's economy were written without a mention of them, or with only a disparaging mention. Even the World Bank did not catch up with them until 1990. They were almost as unpopular in China as they were abroad. The Stalinists loathed them because they were not controlled from the centre. Chinese intellectuals objected to them, continuing to think of economic development in terms of the biggest and the most advanced. A Soviet economist who had been involved in creating China's first five-year plan told me that he and his fellow advisers had urged China to exploit its plentiful labour in low-tech, low capital, labour-intensive industries, but the Chinese refused; and this attitude is still influential in China. Commune and brigade industry was interesting first and foremost from the obvious economic point of view; but it also raised other questions. What were the political and social consequences of the distribution of economic decision-making to half a million villages? When I at last got to China to live in the villages and do fieldwork on the subject, I kept these wider questions of social psychology in mind.

I will now summarize my hypotheses on Mao under four succinct headings: the four main accusations made against him; his two great "failures," the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution; his consistency over the years and his elaboration of a new strategy; and his heritage to China.

The Four Main Accusations against Mao

Mao has been accused of four faults: he was an ideologue, he was a "voluntarist," he was not interested in economic growth, and he was more Stalinist than Stalin.

Was Mao an ideologue? One author found 32 different definitions of the word in 32 different dictionaries. Such a word is better avoided. The nearest I can get to a useful definition is that ideology is a system of ideas which serves to support a system of power; but the trouble is that this definition has become pejorative: *we* have a philosophy, *they* have an ideology; *our* beliefs are honest, *theirs* are hypocrisy. This will not do. There are plenty of cases in history in which the relevant “ideological” beliefs are well grounded in fact. There are others in which they are not. There are systems in which honest beliefs have become hypocritical when the system has come to support a new ruling class who in reality no longer believe in the original theory. There are systems which are purely value systems, and action towards the achievement of these values can be based on reality. And there are so many shades of difference among all these types that to apply the word “ideology” to them is nothing but a cop-out. We have to look at cases.

As already suggested, Mao’s alternative strategy of development was elaborated in a series of documents which are written almost entirely in non-ideological language. Only later were they cast in an ideological form; but once put into plain language it would not have mattered if Mao had rewritten them in double-Dutch. The question must be, were Mao’s strategies and policies merely the blind implementation of theoretical principles, or were his theoretical principles merely a rhetorical re-phrasing of strategies and policies decided upon for pragmatic reasons? I have no doubt of the answer. The strategies were pragmatic. The bottom line of his economic programme was the nature of China’s factor proportions: too little land, too little capital, and a vast surplus of rural labour. That surplus labour could be either a burden or a resource.

Was Mao a voluntarist? The word is much used by Marxists. It indicates someone who pushes change beyond objective possibilities. It might be argued that in this sense Mao was sometimes a voluntarist. However, in the West this charge came to mean that he believed that the human spirit could overcome all obstacles; but the Old Man Who Moved Mountains did not use magic, just perseverance. Mao was talking about the power of new consciousness derived from new experience; and there are plenty of examples in history of occasions when a rapid change in the climate of opinion has produced massive material results. Indeed this is what history does much of the time.

Mao’s task was to persuade Chinese peasants to relinquish their age-old worst-case planning and become entrepreneurs, albeit collective entrepreneurs. While Mao was making this point, in the West Myrdal was arguing that to get Asian peasants to lift themselves out of poverty must involve psychological as well as economic changes. They had to learn foresight, risk-taking, determination. And this is what Mao was asking for. Hence his idea of a spiral of growth in the villages beginning from simple, labour-intensive, nil-gestation investment and leading on to the modernization of rural China. It has

now happened. It has happened only since his later years, but he started it.

Was Mao more interested in ideological purity than in economic growth? Not at all. He believed that growth with equity would be faster, and so do I. The savings of a prosperous population can help to provide the capital. Their demand provides the incentive. This (as I believe my own studies of the subject can show) is how Britain's industrial revolution began. It was not based on the impoverishment of the masses. It happened when it happened because Britain had the highest level of mass purchasing power in the world, and only machines could cope with the demand. Mao's policies on the economy are expressed in economic language, not in terms of ideological purity. And it should be pointed out that his plans to decentralize the economy and to encourage light industry were supported by Chen Yun, who is usually portrayed as Mao's principal opponent on economic matters.

Was Mao a Stalinist? I can never understand this accusation. Here is the man who wrote the most comprehensive and trenchant critique of Stalinism to appear in the socialist world, and set about creating an alternative. It is Mao's alternative which confirms how serious his charges against Stalin were meant to be. For example, when Mao accuses Stalin of having prevented popular participation, this could perhaps mean much or little; but when the accusation was made by a man who had just encouraged the creation of millions of collective village enterprises, one has to take it seriously.

Mao's charges against Stalin were as follows:

1. His procurement system impoverished the peasants: "he drained the pond to catch the fish." Mao prided himself that China's procurement prices had allowed peasant incomes to increase year by year. The attempt to increase total grain procurement in 1956 was a disaster nevertheless, and Mao began to realize that without substantial rises in agricultural production and incomes little more capital for industrialization could be got from agriculture. He began to believe that by encouraging the villages to develop themselves, total national savings and investment could be far higher than was possible by procurement out of existing production.
2. "In 30 years the Soviets have failed to create a truly collective system. All they have done is to perpetuate the counter-productive exploitation of the landlords." In China during the First Five-Year Plan the costs of maintaining the local cadre force were about 30 per cent of farm income, just about the same as the rents formerly taken by the landlords. This imitation of the Soviet system Mao rejected: the first duty of the local cadre was now to secure a steady increase in production and incomes at village level.

3. Mao accepted Kang Sheng's (康生) advice that the Soviet Machine Tractor Stations merely "held the peasants to ransom," and he reasserted his belief that the agricultural collectives should buy and own the tractors. This was one of the issues which touched off the Cultural Revolution.
4. Stalin's system made popular participation in development impossible. This charge against Stalin reflects Mao's interest in consciousness, his May Fourth faith in the freeing of individual energies and his mass-line concept of development. It is perhaps at this point that his critique of Stalinism is at its most radical.
5. Stalin denied that there could be conflict in a socialist society, and thus, Mao asserted, "politics came to an end in the Soviet Union." Of course what Stalin really meant by this was that conflict in socialist society is forbidden and will be punished. Mao, on the contrary, has always insisted that conflict alone creates progress. This is an idea which should be perfectly acceptable to democrats. After all, the democratic process consists of the resolution of conflicts and the further (and endless) resolution of new conflicts, thus creating a "continuous resolution" leading to progress. Continuous resolution is the natural state of democracy. Mao's *How to Handle Contradictions Among the People* spells out his attitude. Within the revolutionary consensus there will always be conflicts of interest and opinion. Such conflicts are perfectly permissible and should be resolved by democratic means.
6. Stalin "did not understand relationships." Here the issue was, to take the most important example, between Stalin's subtraction-sum relationships between economic sectors, and Mao's conception of multiplication-sum relationships of mutual stimulation, which he adumbrated in *The Ten Great Relationships*.
7. Stalin pursued the interests of the state to the neglect of the interests of individuals and collectives. Stalin's monolithic military-industrial complex was created by suppressing the interests of the population.
8. Stalin "did not know how to make short-term interests serve long-term interests." Mao was attempting a process of development which began from nil-gestation investment, mostly of labour, leading to the plough-back of profits to raise technology to modern levels. This process proceeded through new consciousness created gradually by new experience.

These are Mao's explicit criticisms of Stalin and Stalinism; but the list could be further extended from Mao's many implicit criticisms. It is obvious enough, taking these explicit criticisms as a whole, that they all suggest more "democratic" ways of handling development. All of them, I am sure, can be accepted by those committed to democracy. All of them point to methods of operation which, within the revolutionary consensus, would bring people out of subjection and towards citizenship, and so help to create some of the pre-conditions of democracy.

It is too commonly assumed that Mao's hostility to revisionism represented support for Stalinism ... I am inclined to agree with Mao's view that to add profit to power in the hands of a Stalinist technocracy was regressive rather than progressive. Libermanist revisionism was one of Mao's "two roads"... the "two roads" was more than a slogan. It went back to the contradiction within socialist theory between Saint-Simonian etatism and the communitarian socialism of Owen and Fourier. It represents, in its various forms, a real choice, with almost 200 years of history.

Mao's Two Great "Failures"

Nothing fails like failure and Mao is associated with two great failures. They were the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Why did they fail? Too often it is assumed that they failed because they had to fail, because they were wrong in conception. I do not accept this. If I had been young and Chinese in 1958 I would have thrown myself into the Great Leap; and in 1966 I would have been out with the Red Guards, protesting against privilege and the abuse of power. I might, in either case, have ended up disillusioned; but I hope that if so, I would still have been able to distinguish between the conception and the implementation.

We still do not have an adequate explanation for the failure of the Great Leap. Some of the criticisms made of it are ludicrous. The author of *Hungry Ghosts*, for example, sneers at the Chinese for trying to make compost in revolving barrels, although many British gardeners do just that, and it is very effective. He laughs at the Chinese for using river silt as a soil improver; perhaps he is unaware that civilization began in the silt of the Euphrates. The Great-Leap backyard blast furnaces were scorned; yet two miles from where I am now sitting are the carefully preserved remains of a backyard blast furnace reputedly owned by Derby of Coalbrookdale. China in 1958, like pre-modern Britain, was still full of small, scattered, easily worked deposits of ore. There was nothing to prevent their being quickly exploited. The fault lay in the euphoria which led to the naïve assumption that it could be done everywhere, an assumption Mao was quick to condemn. And it should be remembered that when the Rural Responsibility System was instituted after Mao's death, backyard blast furnaces sprang up across China in the hands of individual peasants, and were profitable.

The small-scale, labour-intensive irrigation works have also been condemned. Some were undoubtedly done hastily and badly; but I have seen some impressive examples in China, and Western expert opinion has long favoured such small irrigation schemes as opposed to gigantic dams because they are cheap, effective, easy to mend, locally controlled, far easier on the environment, and do not involve the forced movement of people.

The fundamental idea of the Great Leap was to use surplus rural labour for local industrialization and the improvement of the agricultural superstructure. It was believed that this could be done fairly quickly and at an accelerating rate through the plough-back of profits. Hence the unfortunate "Great Leap Forward" name which was quite misleading. It is interesting (although it has been wholly neglected) that on the eve of the Leap China's newspapers predicted and warned against all the faults to which the movement later proved liable; but in the event they could not be prevented. This is what has to be explained.

Some of the factors which led to failure are obvious enough. The Leap took place after Mao's criticism of members of the Party leadership who wanted to cut back the pace of development to relieve the strains which the First Five-Year Plan had caused. Caution therefore became a political fault. There was a general failure to realize that successes on experimental plots, and similar industrial experiments, could not necessarily be quickly reproduced everywhere; even Deng Xiaoping was naïve about this. There was also too little recognition that what succeeded in one place would not necessarily succeed elsewhere. Successes of this kind, as well as the remarkable general success of the first year of the movement, led to euphoric hopes and these were fed by the press. Targets escalated. Some provincial governments played a part in this escalation in an attempt to maximize funds from the centre. The focus of the strategy was meant to be the rapid growth of light industries which Mao believed could accumulate capital quickly; but all but the most labour-intensive projects need simple machine tools, which in turn needed steel, and so the Leap ended up putting an even greater emphasis on steel-making than the Plan had done. This was not in itself irrational. There were widespread sources of metal ores but not of coal, so the transport system became jammed with coal so that it became difficult to move grain, and this contributed to the famine. The record harvest of 1958 was so great that much of the grain could not be stored; much had to be exported; hence stocks were not high enough when the next year saw bad weather and a very bad harvest. Euphoria led to a huge increase in consumption and this disposed of much of the record harvest; a Russian expert in China told me that he was appalled by this and feared that the procurement system would break down, which it did. Meanwhile, so much labour had been diverted to industry, especially to steel-making, that when the bad weather arrived the extra labour necessary to meet the natural disasters was not quickly available. Above all the basic idea was to start from nil-gestation investment which would pay off by the next harvest, but in the euphoria of the time this principle disappeared.

More fundamental, however, was that the hierarchical, authoritarian party system was totally inappropriate for the leadership of a campaign which could only flourish on popular support. Chinese local cadres, under pressure from above, resorted to compulsion. The

tragic irony of this was that they simply thrust Stalinism down into the grassroots and the very plots of the cottages, to create half a million miniature Stalinist economies. Before the Leap, all China's institutions had put on public record a resolve to lead the movement democratically, but the whole nature of the political system left China's cadres unaccountable to the people and forced them to obey their superiors. The movement was meant to empower the people, but more often simply empowered the county cadres.

When grain became scarce, China's more prosperous peasants were made the scapegoats and accused of having caused the dearth by hoarding grain; so in a final irony Mao's anti-Stalinist movement led to persecution of China's kulaks.

Mao saw most of this and was quick to protest, but the whole movement had got out of hand. He justified and supported the peasants' resistance, but could not prevent the compulsion this resistance opposed. He has generally been regarded as ideologically fixated in his refusal to end the Leap; but as we have seen, ideology had little to do with it. Convinced that his strategy was economically correct, which in principle it was, he hoped to correct the faults and keep the movement going.

Of course our perspective on the Leap should have changed when Mao's second attempt to apply his strategy from 1970 onwards proved dramatically successful, but few people saw this, and Deng Xiaoping's party line concealed it. The line was that the Gang of Four had actually destroyed commune and brigade enterprise, and Deng Xiaoping had started it afresh after 1979. However, my fieldwork in 1982 proved that this was wrong; most of the factories I visited had been started or re-started in 1970 or 1971; some had even begun in 1958 and survived Liu Shaoqi's (刘少奇) attack on them.

The text of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was given in a speech Mao made in 1966 in Shanxi: "The officials of China are a class, and one whose interests are antagonistic to those of the workers and peasants." Mao predicted that if the privileges and abuse of power of this new Red bourgeoisie were not reined in, China might become fascist.

What the Cultural Revolution was meant to be was well indicated in two statements. The first is Zhang Chunqiao's (张春桥) description of the central figure in a new revolutionary play then being written: "There is not a landlord or a bourgeois in his ancestry. He fought with us in the Long March and in the War of Liberation. He is a man of infinite conscientiousness and absolute integrity." Why then is he a tyrant? Because the system gives him no choice. In sincerely pursuing his duties day by day he is helping to create something that he would hate if he recognized its true characteristics. He must be made aware of this.

The second statement I have in mind was given by Zhou Enlai to the staff of a science institute which had got rid of its leaders: "We

could have done all this by administrative means, but from that you would have learned nothing.”

The Cultural Revolution was not meant to be a widespread purge. Zhou Enlai, with Mao's agreement, stated that not more than 5 per cent of the cadre force were likely to deserve dismissal. It is of course obvious that Mao no longer thought Liu Shaoqi an appropriate successor, because he could not apparently distinguish between problems which could be handled by legal or administrative means and problems which required a patient political solution. This is the mistake Mao believed that Liu Shaoqi had made in the Socialist Education Movement. Yet Mao continued to insist that while Liu Shaoqi's ideas should be attacked, the man should not.

Why then did the Cultural Revolution escalate into near civil war? We still do not have a comprehensive study, although we have several good regional studies. These suggest: first, that the grievances of the young and of the casual workers were far more strongly felt than even Mao had suspected; secondly, that the PLA's attitude was ambivalent; thirdly, that the children of threatened senior Party leaders formed sham Red Guard groups which obtained arms and fought their rivals; fourthly, that the Cultural Revolution gave widespread opportunities for the settling of old scores, and for the activities of patron-client networks which in China always provide a hidden agenda; and finally, that Mao himself backed off when the existence of the Party itself was threatened by the creation of “Paris commune” governments in some of China's cities.

Yet the Cultural Revolution, like the Great Leap Forward, had some positive consequences in the long run. Mao's assertion that “to rebel is justified” came to be combined with experience in the Cultural Revolution which made it obvious that to secure the accountability of the Party bureaucracy would require democratic institutions.

Mao's Consistency and Elaboration of a New Strategy

Let us now look more closely at Mao's strategy, his “alternative socialism.” When in the early 1920s the Soviet Union considered the problem of “primitive accumulation,” Preobrazhensky pointed out that according to Marx most of the capital for Britain's original industrialization had come from the expropriation of the British peasants in the enclosure movement. The Soviet Union, he argued, had no resource but to find the capital for industrialization by exploiting the peasants in an analogous way. He called this “objective feudalism.”

In fact modern research has shown that there was no expropriation of the English peasants in the enclosure movement. Suffice it here to point out that the English land-tax records show more small owner operators in England after the enclosure movement than there had been before. The integration of arable and pasture resulting from enclosure permitted four-course rotation which made more small

farms viable. Stalin's screw-the-peasants strategy was thus based on a historical myth.

On the other side in the Soviet Union in the 1920s were two pioneer socialist planners, Shanin and Bazarov. Shanin argued that small amounts of capital invested in agriculture could have an immense effect on agricultural production and on peasant incomes. Increased peasant demand would then stimulate industrialization. Bazarov argued that most economic development is, by nature, local; that electricity had removed the need for the expensive urbanization of industry; that what Russia's peasants most needed to raise them above subsistence level was "dirt roads and spur lines"; and that the most economic form of development was that in which "the labourers are also the beneficiaries." Shanin and Bazarov in the end convinced even Preobrazhensky to change his mind. Bukharin supported them. But Stalin still chose "objective feudalism."

In the early 1950s when the undeveloped countries began their efforts at planned development, the Stalin paradigm was widely accepted (though applied less ruthlessly) in the sense that agriculture was made to provide the capital for industrialization by high taxes on land and low farm-gate prices fixed by the state. Then Nurkse created a new development paradigm. He argued that the surplus of rural labour typical of many poor peasant countries could be turned from a burden into a resource, used to increase production, diversify crops, improve agricultural infrastructure, and create labour-intensive, low-tech village industries. He examined the possibilities and problems in detail. Vastly increased peasant purchasing power would then create the demand that would drive forward industrialization.

This was also the basis of Mao's Great Leap strategy. The parallel between Nurkse and Mao in this respect is so close, even in detail, that one must wonder if Mao or someone close to him knew Nurkse's work.

At the same time, Mao insisted that it was not balance but imbalance which drives economies forward. Roderick MacFarquhar has scorned this idea, but it is economic common sense, and Hirschman, at much the same time as Mao, was saying the same thing. Mao's point was that bureaucrats planning at their desks and allocating materials on the basis of a static balance miss out on the possibility of human initiatives which can freely respond to changes in demand and supply. What Mao is asking for here is a market dimension.

Mao's ideas also chimed in with those of Myrdal, who argued that peasant consciousness would have to be changed if the world's peasants were to fight their way out of poverty. In fact there is nothing idiosyncratic about Mao's strategy. It did not "spring full-armed from the brow of Jove." It was in tune with modern thinking. It was Mao's opponents who were still stuck in the Stalinist past. In pursuing these ideas Mao showed considerable consistency. He did not in 1958 have some sort of brain storm changing him from a man hitherto considered to be very pragmatic as Communists go, to the most ideological of them all. Mao's real inconsistency was his acceptance of

Stalinism in 1953 to counter American hostility. And this inconsistency did not last long. The 1953 First Five-Year Plan was not fully implemented until 1955, and by the end of that year Mao's revolt against Stalinism had begun.

Mao's Heritage to China

Let us briefly review Mao's whole career, starting with his education, which is too often undervalued and which produced ideas which remained vital in his interpretation of Marxism. Mao came to Marxism as Marx had come to it – from a passion for individual self-fulfilment to the belief that class structures are the main source of inhibition of such self-fulfilment. The May Fourth movement was based on the authors of the European Enlightenment, and Marx was one of them. His contribution gave to democratic thought the assertion that uncontrolled capitalism can be as big a threat to democracy as uncontrolled government. For the rest, I do not much value Marx. His history was poor, his economics contradictory (how can capitalism grow while it is reducing the vast majority of its customers to subsistence level?) and his philosophy is a third-hand version of the mysticism of Meister Eckhardt and Jacob Boehme (when I read my first words of Hegel, it was Boehme who immediately sprang to my mind).

We have seen that, philosophically, Mao settled for Green's concept of consciousness. Mao's mass line is a means of creating new consciousness in both leaders and led, in a process which elsewhere has come to be called "participatory research." His theory of knowledge explicitly identifies the mass line with Marx's theory of knowledge. But he does this in a way which is as much Dewey as Marx, with its emphasis on a continuing process of trial and error. We know that Mao greeted Dewey's pragmatic philosophy with great enthusiasm:

In the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study, turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them, and translate them into action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge.

The close relation in Mao's mind between mass-line politics and his theory of knowledge is shown not only by the specific reference to the Marxist theory of knowledge in this passage on the mass line, but by the occurrence of an exactly parallel passage that ends his philosophical essay "On practice":

Discover the truth through practice, and again through practice verify the truth. Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectical-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and doing.

The May Fourth movement mediated the acceptance of Enlightenment thought through Chinese thought. The elements of this mediation were mainly the writings of Wang Yangming (王陽明) with his theory that “principles” came from individual experience put to the test of individual conscience; Wang Fuzhi (王夫之) with his condemnation of the reification of ancient or current institutions, which become obstacles to progress; Gu Yanwu’s (顧炎武) insistence that China has always been strongest when her local communities were strong, and weakest when her central government was strongest; Huang Zongxi’s (黃宗羲) reminder that it is not the emperor but the people, represented by the Confucian scholars, who are the true custodians of Confucian values; and the Modern Text School of Kang Youwei (康有為), who argued that Confucian aspiration could be fulfilled by doing, pragmatically, what could be done towards that fulfilment in the conditions of one’s own lifetime (politics in fact as the art of the possible). Of all of this young Mao, as an enthusiastic student of May Fourth thought, was certainly aware.

Although for obvious political reasons he almost never refers in later life to the “idealist” writers of the West or to Confucian philosophy, their influence on his interpretation of Marxism is obvious. Apart from Green on consciousness, the most obvious influence is John Dewey. The contrast often made between Dewey’s pragmatism and Marxist holism goes too far. Dewey believed that the only truth we can know is derived from observation of predictable change; we learn by changing things. Marx insisted that knowledge came from action in the course of revolutionary change. Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) put the two together; in a sense it was Dewey who led Chen to Marxism. Perhaps it was the same for Mao. In any case, the idea of pragmatic action without an aim is a sort of oxymoron. And the action can be based on values, without this precluding pragmatic action. This influenced Mao’s theory of knowledge.

The third Western influence (after Green and Dewey) was Thomas Kirkup, whose *History of Socialism* was the first thing Mao read on socialism. He told Edgar Snow that he read it “with wild enthusiasm.” From Kirkup Mao learned of the contradiction within the socialist vision between Saint-Simon’s etatist view and the communalist views of Owen and Fourier, and presumably read the quotation from Marx in which Kirkup shows that Marx in the end settled for the communalist alternative. In Kirkup Mao would also have read of Owen’s conviction that human nature can be perfected through social

change, as Owen's New Lanark Mill had changed its largely degraded pauper work force. He must also have read Kirkup's arguments that the forms of socialism may be determined by the route by which they are reached, and that socialism will vary according to national characteristics – two views which Mao's later reading of Kautsky may have confirmed.

One must of course bear in mind that when Mao read Kirkup, Stalinism lay in the future. Socialism was still open-ended. Kirkup's work had great influence in China; indeed in Sichuan in 1982 I was told that it was about to be republished.

Of course any account of the influence of Mao's education on his later thought is bound to be to some extent speculative. However, we know something of his own self-education in Changsha library. We know something of what Yang Changji (杨昌济) taught him. We know his response to Kirkup, a copy of Jiang Kanghu's (江亢虎) translation of which Yang Changji had given him. We know what he would have met in the literature of May Fourth which he read with care. His enthusiastic response to Dewey he gave in a published article.

We can also see that Mao shared many of the ideas with which he is thus bound to have become familiar: that consciousness motivates; that truth consists of the knowledge of predictable change through trial and error; that socialism offers a communalist alternative to centralized state control and comprehensive material allocation; that the state of China's local communities is fundamental to her strength; that the individual can only be fulfilled through opportunities for interdependent action; that the reification of institutions can inhibit progress; that socialism will be shaped by the means used to create it; that wisdom in the last analysis lies with the people not the government, and that government depends on consent; that will power is a function of self-esteem; and that socialism will vary with national circumstances and national traditions. On most of these points, one could quote Mao. On the rest, his actions speak for their influence on him.

His earliest political activities in Changsha could not but confirm to Mao that only force could solve China's problems. It was a conclusion with which few people in China would then have argued. And perhaps the hollowness of Hunan's pseudo-democratic institutions confirmed what he had seen as the hollowness of China's earlier national parliaments. He had no reason to resist the idea that so-called democratic institutions can sometimes positively smother attempts at social change, as we have seen in certain countries since 1945. His preference was for the creation of as wide a consensus for change as possible, with those prepared to oppose it repressed. Such situations are not uncommon in history. The only question we can reasonably ask is whether or not he sustained the consensus or betrayed it (a big question!).

Within six years of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao became identified with China's peasants. He became the leader of China's Peasant Movement Institute. He published his *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan* in 1927. In the same year Chiang Kai-shek's coup forced him into rural Jiangxi. In 1934, driven out of Jiangxi, the Long March took him to Shaanxi. From then until 1949 he ruled a peasant state within the state. In Taiwan they made a distinction between two Chinese Communist parties, the Shaanxi party and the Shanghai party, and "se non e vero e ben trovato." I have always felt that when Liu Shaoqi thought of China he thought first of the developed coast, but when Mao thought of China he thought first of the undeveloped hinterland.

It was in the border regions that Mao first had to deal with economic issues. The border region had to strengthen its economy in order to resist the Japanese and siege by the Kuomintang. Some Communists wanted to develop nationalized industries and fully collective agriculture. This unrealistic notion Mao totally rejected. He settled for an economy of mutual aid teams and commercial and industrial co-operatives.

Stuart Schram does not believe that the economy of the border regions was related to Mao's Great Leap Forward strategy, especially because having no state sector they cannot be seen as a precedent. I hate to disagree with Stuart, to whom the study of Mao owes so much, but disagree I must. When Mao wrote his *Economic and Financial Problems of the Border Regions* he praised the non-communist Indusco co-operatives and thanked them for their help in setting up his own model, the South Yan'an co-operative. (This acknowledgement was cut out of later editions.) And it has always seemed to me that Indusco was Mao's inspiration. Its co-operatives were village-based. They used labour-intensive low-tech methods. They turned over their capital rapidly and ploughed it back into technological advance. Their members were peasants, but often led by technicians from the cities, mostly young. The organization of Indusco was based on "local management, central supervision." Their management was democratic, sometimes ultra-democratic. In the frequent absence of complementary firms, they had to practise integrated development. In the conditions of the border regions they provided medical and educational services and extended them to the whole village. Sometimes, as Edgar Snow reported, they came to organize the economic life of a whole village or of several villages. The analogies between Indusco as Mao's model and the communes of 20 years later are too significant and too comprehensive to be dismissed.

As for the existence of a state sector, some of the Yan'an co-operatives, usually those organized directly by administrative or military personnel, played the role that the state sector was to play (rather badly) in the Great Leap, that of providing the co-operative sector with advice, technology and credit. Thus they too formed a precedent for the commune system.

There is in fact a continuous thread from Rewi Alley's apprenticeship schemes and the self-help co-operatives created in the Shanghai suburbs by missionaries, through Indusco, through the border region co-operatives built on specific plans to diversify production as described in *The High Tide of Socialism in the Chinese Countryside*, to the communes of 1958. Why repudiate all this evidence of continuity?

Not much more than half way through the First Five-Year Plan, Mao published in *The High Tide of Socialism in the Chinese Countryside* a three-volume collection describing the process of the foundation of individual Agricultural Producers' Co-operatives. Throughout, the stress was on presenting co-operativization not through abstract arguments but by creating in each village a plan for increasing the income of co-operative members by economic innovation based on village resources and village proposals. The *High Tide* idea that nil-gestation investment, mainly of labour, paying off by the next harvest, could be the beginning of a spiral of growth, diversification and technological advance in collective hands was a further step towards the commune system. And the figures (which seem credible) showed that at existing levels of income quite modest increases in productivity could ensure that all the peasants, or in some cases all but a small handful of especially prosperous proprietors, could find their incomes increased. Generally, after land reform, the richest peasants had up to twice as much land as the poorest, but of their incomes perhaps 70–75 per cent was still subsistence, and because the more prosperous peasants tended to have significantly larger families, their net incomes over subsistence were almost never double those of the poorer. Given that existing cultivation covered subsistence needs, relatively small increases in production could bring large increases in disposable incomes, and reconcile almost all the farmers to participation in a collective attempt to increase and diversify production. This, at any rate, was the argument.

The first example in the book represented an *a fortiori* argument. The Party secretary of the proposed Agricultural Producers' Co-operative, Wang Guofan, was faced with the fact that the more prosperous families in the village would have nothing to do with the co-operative. So he organized the poor peasants to collect firewood in forests some distance from the village and sell it. This was done in the off-season, so that the labour used had little or no opportunity cost. Enough was raised to make a start on investment, and from this progress began. Within two years the middle peasants were impressed enough to join the co-operative. This example may have been largely mythical, but it constituted the motivating idea.

However, Mao, having demonstrated his careful, gradualist tactics for collectivizing agriculture in a convincing way, then chose to rush his fences and the process of collectivization encountered resistance among richer peasants. By Mao's own admission, 80,000 people were killed in the process. That is an average of eight deaths in every 50

villages. Who died and why? We will probably never know. However, it must be remembered that as late as the mid-1950s former Kuomintang supporters were still carrying on covert resistance in many parts of China, and this may account for at least part of the loss of life.

Non-agricultural employment in the village continued to rise, but perhaps mainly in private hands. There is no evidence that it was provided by the agricultural collectives (though no evidence that it was not), nor any sign throughout the rest of the First Five-Year Plan that the collectives took such initiatives. Whatever Mao had hoped and expected, it does not seem to have happened much. All the more reason then that Mao should try again, and the Great Leap was the second effort, this time with the theory adumbrated in *The Ten Great Relationships*, the original speech on which was given three months after the publication of *The High Tide*, which advocated decentralization, the encouragement of local initiatives and a dynamic relationship between economic sectors, that is, in effect a sort of market system to the extent that it would make central material allocation less comprehensive and leave much of subsequent growth to mutually profitable quasi-market relations among sectors. This is certainly what *The Ten Great Relationships* implied, and it represented a long further step in the elaboration of the strategy, although a logical step.

The next step was the Hundred Flowers and the Rectification Campaign which followed it, which for the first time invited the public to criticize the Party. Criticism was an essential part of the mass line as Mao had described it, but public criticism on a national scale was new. The Rectification is often assumed to have been intended as a trap for dissidents, but Mao's epigrams about tempting enemies to reveal themselves need not be taken as more than rationalization after the event. The argument that it was so depends on the assumption that Mao was in agreement with the subsequent punitive Anti-Rightist campaign. However, there is ample evidence that he was not. For example, if he favoured the campaign, why create a photo-opportunity of himself dining with a group of prominent rightists? Mao's proposed method of dealing moderately with most of those who did not accept the revolutionary consensus is well documented.

He went on to justify the Rectification in *How to Handle Contradictions Among the People*. This was an elaboration of his criticism (later made explicit) of Stalin's denial that conflicts can arise in socialist societies. It distinguished between conflicts within the revolutionary consensus and conflicts with those who opposed the consensus; but it has little to say about those beyond the pale. There is nothing to suggest that Mao had changed his view that the best way to deal with them was to leave them alone to die off, no doubt still unrepentant, in the fullness of time. As for those within the consensus, Mao argued that they were bound to develop differences of both interests and opinions which could then be reconciled by democratic methods.

The public criticisms which emerged from the Rectification, however, suggested that the revolutionary consensus was in trouble. This was not entirely unexpected. There had been end-to-end campaigns, launched by Mao, against “bureaucratism and commandism” since the early 1950s. Mao was no lover of jacks-in-office. Red Guard documents later represented the Great Leap and the communes as Mao’s answer to bureaucratism, and I have no doubt that this was one dimension of Mao’s thinking on the subject.

Thus the Great Leap was supposed to use the mass line not just as a matter of political style but as the most effective and the most “democratic” means to carry through great social changes. All would participate, critically, in designing and implementing those changes. The people would provide the raw material of policy and the Party would process it. The economic strategy involved, by putting power in the hands of the local communities, would short-circuit the bureaucracy. Central planners would no longer lay down the law, but respond to the effects of local initiatives.

The Cultural Revolution grew out of the Great Leap, as Roderick MacFarquhar indicates in the title of his substantial and valuable work, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*. The mistake he makes, however, is a mistake of periodization. To start in the middle of the Leap and end at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution leaves out, on the one hand, the origins of the Leap and, on the other, the consequences of the Cultural Revolution. This impairs judgement of both. On the one hand, the success of the Leap in its first year is not included, and it was this success which created the euphoria which made possible the ruinous distortions which then occurred. On the other hand, the book never reaches the revival of the Leap strategy in a more controlled form after the Cultural Revolution, when it proved successful. The result is that the fundamental economic strategy at issue throughout is never seriously treated. Without the strategy made clear, one is left with the conclusion that the whole movement of events from 1958 to 1976 was an ideological struggle. Roderick, in giving the discussions taking place at the top, discussions which were certainly expressed in the discourse of Marxism, at one point quotes Mao intervening to say, “the communes must maximize their commodity trade in order to maximize their profits.” On this, however, Roderick makes no comment, although the sudden intrusion of this emphatically non-ideological statement reveals that, however esoteric the language of the debate, the issues were at bottom practical economic ones.

In the same way, the Cultural Revolution is always treated as having been touched off by literary issues. However, it was just as much touched off by the clash between Mao’s ideas for the mechanization of agriculture and those of Peng Zhen and Liu Shaoqi. Mao wanted the villages to buy and own the tractors. He had proposed this in 1958. Lin Biao now revived Mao’s proposals. They were sent to Peng Zhen for comment. Peng condemned them by

cutting out Mao's criticism of Soviet policy on this issue. According to Red Guard sources, Liu Shaoqi wanted Machine Tractor Stations, which were anathema to Mao. Peng supported Liu and was immediately removed from office. Peng was also, of course, the patron of the satirists who had attacked the Great Leap.

The authors who were attacked at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution had all condemned the Great Leap. These authors were patronized by the leaders who were disillusioned by its failure. All authors in China served patrons. The idea that the people under attack were honest impartial independent writers is nonsense. And at that stage no patrons or writers could publish the case for Mao's strategy.

The struggle for the succession to Mao had begun. This dominated what was published. The "thaw" of the time was a thaw on the right with a freeze on the left. However, as far as many Western commentators were concerned, the situation in China now consisted of the ideologist Mao on one side and the sensible, pragmatic, liberal-minded men whom Mao was attacking on the other. Not long before, however, the same men had been regarded as communist tyrants, apparatchiks, no different from Mao himself. Where was Deng Xiaoping during the Anti-Rightists campaign? He was leading it, while Mao was deploring it. Where was he during the Great Leap? Touring the country, accepting every extravagance presented to him. Where was Liu Shaoqi when Mao invited the young people of China to criticize their superiors? Preparing to keep control over the students by imposing Party work-teams on them. What did Libermanist reforms advocated by Mao's opponents achieve when they were attempted? Little or nothing. What did Mao's commune and brigade enterprises achieve after their renewal in 1970 and Deng's acceptance of them in 1979? They were producing 50 per cent of China's vastly increased industrial output value, raising the average income of the Chinese peasants to the average of economically middle-ranking countries, and filling China's banks with peasant savings to finance Deng's economic reforms.

Integrated village development on the basis of the employment of surplus rural labour is probably the best way forward for most poor countries and the best way to exploit globalization. This is more and more being recognized. It does not even need communism to do it; but it was Mao who first demonstrated the possibilities – not a bad epitaph.

As concrete evidence for the potentialities of Mao's strategy, let me give two examples. I do not put them forward as examples of average achievement, but at the same time neither of them was a special show place. They credibly indicate the possibilities of the system. The first was a labour-intensive water conservancy scheme about 100 miles west of Beijing. The village was in a valley surrounded by slopes liable to erosion, which caused regular flooding. The main crop was rice; this was about as far north as rice is ever grown. Half a million trees

were planted on the slopes. They were fodder trees, which supported a large herd of cattle. Each tree was planted in a hollow which checked the run-off of water. These hollows were joined by small ditches which fed a number of very small reservoirs – small enough for men to dig out the silt by hand. In this ingenious way they solved their water conservancy problems and substantially increased production. Out of this increase, they were about to buy their first tractor.

The second example is a commune-owned factory in Qixia xian (棲霞县), Shandong. It had originated as a group of housewives sewing up gloves. In the Great Leap they had begun to manufacture gloves completely and to take on other sorts of textile work. The enterprise survived Liu Shaoqi's destruction of commune and brigade enterprises because it was too small to count, but it continued to expand its operations. From 1970 it was able to work openly and to expand. When nylon became available it specialized in nylon. Then it specialized in crimped nylon. When I was there in 1982 it had gone over to producing nylon-crimping machinery for sale throughout China.

At that time I lived for three months in Chinese villages in Shandong, Jiangsu and Sichuan. I had requested the opportunity to stay in three villages: one representing good average industrial performance, one exceptionally successful, and one with poor resources. Beijing agreed. The average performer was the village in Qixia xian, Shandong; the high flyer was (as one might expect) in Wuxi (无锡), Jiangsu; the poorly endowed village was Hong Ya (洪雅) in western Sichuan. Living and eating with the peasants of these villages I learned far more than I could ever have learned in Beijing. When the Shandong beer flowed, the Party line got lost! This experience gave me the opportunity not only to see the economic possibilities and problems of village enterprise, but its psychological consequences. What were the effects on peasant consciousness of participation in these new ventures? The most obvious thing was their consciousness of new possibilities. The second thing was their confidence which seemed to me a good indication of a high level of self-esteem.

I was convinced from their self-assurance that village development in this form was creating the beginnings of a new civil society. There were by then perhaps two million commune and brigade enterprises operating in the market. The greater the number of small firms and the more complex the market, the smaller became the possibility of governing the system by command and the greater the need to negotiate. Relations with customers were replacing relations with the Party hierarchy. Grassroots cadres began to identify with their firms. It was a process with some analogy to that long before described by Adam Ferguson, the undermining of feudal hierarchy by the markets; a new civil society in the making – and bitterly resented for that reason by the die-hard Stalinists. And there can be no doubt that Mao Zedong, in advocating dynamic relationships between the sectors and decentralizing economic decision-making to small firms operating on the market, was aware of the political implications. He wanted the

localities to have room for initiative. He had already asserted the paradox that successful centralization was possible only if adequate room was left for local initiative – no doubt reflecting his observation that extreme centralization in the Soviet Union simply produced counter-productive defensive measures by those at the receiving end of central commands. He saw in the exercise of this initiative “our great and glorious hope for the future.” I could not but feel, as I went round the factories and the fields in these villages, engaged in animated and practical discussion of successes and hopes, that China’s rural people were well on the way to becoming active citizens.

I do not want to idealise commune and brigade enterprise. Many enterprises failed. Many were too dependent on subsidies out of village funds. There was much wasteful duplication. Many of these crude little factories were poisonous to the environment. There was much corruption. There came to be much debt. However, here is a point at which one must remember not to compare our own ideal with their reality. Some of these accusations could be equally directed to small new businesses in the West, where indeed the failure rate is substantially higher than it was in China.

China’s democratic movement was begun by Mao, although perhaps he would have resisted it had he lived; but he built better than he knew. In the Cultural Revolution he asserted that “to rebel is justified.” However, as the Cultural Revolution came to be overwhelmed by chaos, some Red Guards learned a second lesson: that democracy was viable only if protected by democratic institutions and procedures. Hence the LiYiZhi poster which assumed that Mao had sought and had achieved a significant degree of democracy, but which insisted on the need for democratic institutionalization. Then in 1976 Chen Erchun built this idea into a new version of Marxism which he took for granted was a Maoist version. He argued that because violence was needed to overthrow the old exploiting classes, the revolution was bound to create authoritarian government. This authoritarian power was in turn bound to create a new, post-revolutionary ruling class. There always then had to be a second revolution to arrive at democratic socialism. The Marxist course of history was thus from feudalism to capitalism to the Red bourgeoisie to democratic socialism. Chen sent a copy of this manuscript to Mao, but Mao was already dying. However, his book inspired the Democracy Wall movement of 1979. Thereafter, Red Guards like Chen led the most vital part of China’s democracy movement, the part which (unlike Beijing’s democratic intellectuals) sought to create a mass democratic movement. This was obvious at Tiananmen, and indeed their efforts provided the main reason why the massacre occurred. The Red Guard democrats fought on thereafter, but were successfully suppressed when Jiang Zemin, having seemed to offer a degree of pluralism in politics, changed his mind and imprisoned Wang Youcai (王有才), Xu Wenli (徐文立) and Qin Yongmin (秦永敏).

To find positive elements in Mao Zedong's thought and action is not to deny that he was a dictator. Although he constantly warned against indiscriminate resort to imprisonment and execution, he was ruthless when he believed he had to be; the revolutionary consensus was to be protected at all costs from its enemies. Yet to assume because most dictators are paranoics or kleptocrats or closet fascists does not mean that all are. I do not see Mao as another Stalin or another Hitler. I see him more as I see Oliver Cromwell – a man of profoundly democratic instincts forced by circumstances to play the tyrant in defence of his democratic values and ill-served by his major generals.