

MAO ZEDONG AND CHINA

IN THE **TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORLD**

A CONCISE HISTORY



REBECCA E. KARL

Mao Zedong and China IN THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORLD

Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society

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TO MY NEPHEW, CHRISTOPHER,
AND MY NIECES, TEPI, CHANNA, SOPHIA, AND NORA:
with love and in hope.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Say “Mao Zedong” in China or among China scholars anywhere and there is a ready-made argument. The disputes over Jung Chang’s and Jon Halliday’s recently published *Mao: The Unknown Story* provide just one example. According to many reviewers of that book, the story therein told is unknown because Chang and Halliday substantially fabricated or exaggerated it into existence. According to others, Chang and Halliday have finally exposed Mao in all his naked cruelty to a hitherto credulous world. Whichever side one takes—and there are more than these two alone—the polemic gets polarized, the rhetoric heated, and the arguments intolerant. In China, it is even worse. Attempts to reassess portions of the Mao period—particularly by taking the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) seriously—bring accusations of desires to bring Maoism back to life, of wishing to negate the post-Mao Dengist reforms and return the country to poverty and global irrelevance, and of being anti-Chinese.

As Mao Zedong and his legacy for China are fought over by scholars and laypeople alike, certain parts of Maoism are now detached from their revolutionary meaning and historical context and reborn as fundamentalist capitalist tenets. Business schools routinely teach about “guerilla marketing,” a strategy supposedly derived from Mao’s theorization of “protracted war.” Mao as kitsch and commodity floods the consumer market, available on eBay or at any roadside stand in Chinese tourist spots. As the scholar Michael Dutton wrote of this phenomenon in 1998, “Mao sells, but what he sells today is the very new idea of everything being for sale” (*Streetlife China*).

The current text joins the scholarly fray implicitly and becomes yet

another commodity on the market, yet it engages neither the academic nor the market realm explicitly. But, it engages both implicitly. In the case of the scholarly fray, what can be said of the current effort is that the book takes Mao Zedong and his era—in Chinese and in global terms—quite seriously. It takes socialism in China and the world as integral to the history of the twentieth century. It construes Mao and Maoism as central to the history of Chinese and global socialism, as well as central to the history of revolution and modernity in the last century. Even this mildest of approaches to the subject lands the text in fraught politics. Some would like to understand those politics in terms of *today's* uncompromising opposition between “freedom” and “tyranny.” In the absurd “good vs. evil” passing for political analysis in some quarters these days, taking Mao and socialism seriously puts one, by taint of conflated ideological association, on the side of “evil” and “tyranny.” This text, then, could be taken as an extended argument against such simplistic reductions.

As for the book as a commodity, the market will decide. I have written the text as accessibly as possible without sacrificing complexity. While Mao's life is the chronological frame of the narrative, twentieth-century Chinese and world history are what makes Mao possible. Discussing Mao without Chinese and world history is quite impossible, just as discussing modern Chinese history without Mao is also quite impossible. The book makes every effort to make Mao and China reflect on one another in complex ways.

This text attempts to reattach Mao to a historical moment of crisis demanding critique and action. It tries to understand how, out of the multiple catastrophes of the early twentieth century (Chinese and global), Mao dared to propose and activate a revolutionary project calling every convention into question so as to remake the world. Recalling Mao's challenge is to recall a time when many things seemed possible; it is to remember possibility against the pressure to concede to the world as it now appears. In this sense, I am less concerned in the text about whether Mao individually wrote or thought all the things attributed to him and more concerned with Mao as a figure in Chinese and global history: as a maker of revolution. This is not a biography but rather a history on the model of Georg Lukács's consideration of Lenin in the 1920s.

For many of the formulations and approaches in this book, I am grateful to two sets of intrepid and intelligent undergraduate students at New York University: those in my inaugural “Mao and the Chinese Revolution” class

of Fall 2005, assisted by the PhD student and tireless graduate labor organizer (GSOC), Maggie Clinton; and those of the Fall 2006 version of that course, ably assisted by the PhD students Feng Miao and He Xiang. In Fall 2005, in addition to learning about Mao, students were forced to confront politics in their everyday lives, as we faced the stand-off between the graduate student union and the NYU administration. It was a marvelous lesson in politics in action, although also a dispiriting lesson about strong-arm domination in reality.

The students in these two classes allowed me—with significant challenge—to introduce Mao and his revolutionary philosophy in terms a politically engaged, yet slightly confused, younger generation might understand. They allowed me to discuss Mao in ways relevant to today's world, without conflating today's problems with Mao's. Most important, they permitted me to engage them in a theoretical and historical sophistication sufficient to forestall simplistic reductions. Together, we strove to restore complexity and philosophy to historical inquiry and contemporary critique. The most industrious of these students—Eliot Ayer, Jessica Perlman, Margaret Hsu, Andrew Ongchin, Max Kubicki, Mark McConaghy, Sylwia Weiwora, Andrew Samuel, Riazul Islam, Kaitlin Collins, Megan Smith, and Destin Hodges, among others—learned to grapple with the philosophical problems of revolutionary thought and practice, while working through the politics and historical problems Mao faced as a committed Marxist revolutionary and a Chinese living in the twentieth-century world. They demonstrated great ability to resist the conflation of the past with the present, while also recognizing how the past can potentially exist in the present as a principle of historical transformation. In this, they proved both wise and adept. I am grateful to them for taking me seriously and allowing me to learn from their questions and confusions.

One motivation for writing this book was personal. It is dedicated to my nephew, Christopher, and my nieces, Tepi, Channa, Sophia, and Nora, who face so many challenges, in part as legacies of the historical moment discussed here. The world they and their generation will inherit is much poorer for what has been called the project of *disutopia*, which is “not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams.” (Žižek, *Repeating Lenin*, 9). This book introduces a historical moment, when fundamental global transformation could be thought. It is a moment I admire. Yet, I harbor no illusion that the specific projects toward which Mao Zedong worked are appropriate or even sufficient for

today or for his world. I am optimistic, though, something of his philosophy, passion, and historical method can be retrieved for a rethinking of our present.

I also want to thank others, without whom this would have been a less enjoyable project. Deborah Karl gave me good advice; after all these years, I should just learn to listen to her. I am grateful to my initial readers, on whom I relied to tell me what required elaboration and what was *just too much*. Joanne Filley read with humor and sympathy the early chapters. F. David Bell read the entire text with a critical and knowing eye toward my tendency to excess. My mother, Dolores Karl, removed many writing infelicities, while also reading carefully for coherence and accessibility. However much I've depended on them, everyone mentioned above and below is absolved of responsibility for what remains.

Several of my graduate students and colleagues assisted in crucial ways. He Xiang taught me what I know of Mao's poetic practice. Zhu Qian traveled with me to China in May 2007, recorded the interviews there, and transcribed them for me. Her good humor, intelligence, and enthusiasm for food made the trip a joy and a learning experience. I thank Harry and Kristin for their house and the isolation I needed to finish writing. And I am grateful to Maggie Clinton for finding books in China for me; sharing my monastic retreat; and enduring weird cats and bold mice as I worked through the final chapters.

I want to express gratitude to Professor Wang Hui at Tsinghua University for sharing his time and insight with me; to Sabu Kohso in New York for years of political camaraderie, and wonderful perspicacity on things near and far; and to Wu Hongsen, the best friend a person can have. I am deeply sorry that Mr. Wang Yuanhua, one of the most extraordinary people I have had the good fortune to know, died before this book could be published. While he would never have agreed with me on many things in it, we would have enjoyed a good-natured argument about them, followed by lunch and great conversation about a number of other things. His passing truly marks the passing of an era. I will miss him and his energy.

Finally, thanks to my editor, Reynolds Smith, who got this book peer-reviewed and into production quickly. To the readers, particularly Wang Ban, I am grateful for the suggestions and encouragement. And to those at Duke University Press involved in the production of the book, especially Mark Mastromarino, I am grateful for the hard work and creative energy invested.

I

China in the World in Mao's Youth

Mao Zedong was born on December 26, 1893, in China's south-central Hunan Province, in a small village called Shaoshan. Located in a fertile rice-growing valley at the foot of Mount Hengshan, the village is about eighty-one miles southwest from the provincial capital, Changsha. Although Mao's birthplace was a quiet rural backwater, the political and social situation in China at the beginning of the twentieth century was becoming increasingly fraught.

Free Trade, Opium, Tea, and Silver

At the time of Mao's birth, China was ruled by its last imperial dynasty, the Qing. The Manchus who founded the Qing had swept into China in the seventeenth century from their base in Manchuria to overrun the native Han-Chinese Ming Dynasty. Initially a robust dynasty, the Qing had entered a long decline by the early 1800s as the empire was repeatedly assaulted by aggressive foreign powers (led by the British) who were attempting to force China into free trade agreements the Qing resisted.

The assault on China's territorial integrity and political sovereignty began in the mid-nineteenth century with the infamous Opium Wars. These conflicts were fought between China and Britain, primarily. Trade between those two countries had thrived in the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, however, the British could find nothing that the Chinese wished to purchase from them in large enough quantities to offset the in-

creasing British demand for Chinese tea. With the South American wars of independence against Spain closing the silver mines and provoking a global silver crisis, the British were desperate to find an alternative mode of payment for their burgeoning tea-drinking habit. They hit upon opium. Highly addictive and easily grown by the British in their newly secured nearby Indian colonies, opium began to be imported to China by British merchants in great quantities as a substitute for silver. The Dao Guang Emperor attempted to enforce a ban on the opium trade as the drug devastation spread like wildfire through his empire. Queen Victoria, incensed at the trampling of British trade prerogatives, declared war against the Qing to enforce Britain's right to "free trade."

The Chinese were no match for the powerful British navy, which decimated their coastal forts. The Qing armies had never encountered the technology possessed by the British troops. They suffered one defeat after another. Finally, in 1842, the Chinese were forced to sign a humiliating settlement, known as the Treaty of Nanjing. The treaty was weighted entirely in favor of the British. One key concession was "extraterritoriality," which meant that British citizens on Chinese soil would be subjected to British, not Chinese, law. In addition, trade would no longer be restricted by Qing imperial custom. Five ports were opened for foreign trade—Canton, Shanghai, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Xiamen (Amoy)—while Hong Kong was ceded to the British as a foothold on the Chinese coast. In subsequent decades, with the strengthening of the British colonial grip in India and Southeast Asia, the volume of opium grown increased quickly and imports of opium more than doubled.

Most destructively, the Nanjing Treaty established the principle of "most favored nation." This clause provided that any commercial or other rights wrested from the Chinese by other countries would automatically be granted to Britain. Two years later, the Qing was forced at gunpoint to sign new treaties with France and the United States; these were followed by treaties with Prussia, Italy, Russia, and other European nations. This marks the beginning of what the Chinese later would call the "century of humiliation," a century Mao is credited with ending by the founding of a strong and sovereign China in 1949.

A Crumbling Society and Defeat by Japan

The fallout from the Opium Wars played a crucial part in the decline of the imperial grip on China, which for centuries had been administered

through a thinly spread network of well-educated bureaucrats. As the authority of the central government weakened, the sway of local power holders increased. A series of huge mid-century peasant rebellions—in part set off because of the Opium War disruptions—then forced the emperor to cede even more power to local officials, so that they could defeat the uprisings in their midst. The most famous of these uprisings—the Taipings—lasted for fourteen long years, before the Qing state could muster the force finally to suppress it.

Meanwhile, the spread of European and American commercial and religious settlements, initially restricted to the coastal areas, had reached, by Mao's childhood in the 1890s, the hinterlands of Hunan and beyond. The presence of foreigners, with their capitalist and Christian priorities, was insidiously destructive of the established order. Peasant handicraft production was squeezed; railroads were built where no transport systems had existed, thus rerouting familiar trade patterns; and missionary stations were set up with educational and hospital facilities that often created violent tension with local populations, whose suspicions about alien practices were often fueled by the contempt in which missionaries held local "heathen" society.

China's weakness attracted the predatory attention of the rising Japanese—a people who long had been regarded by the Chinese as the "dwarves of the East," or as pesky pirates operating lawlessly near China's coasts. China was completely demoralized when the Japanese convincingly defeated their forces in a dispute over the Korean monarchy. In the process, Japan destroyed the Qing government's new navy, which was supposed to be the strongest fleet in Asia and which had been built under the supervision of French and British naval assistants. The 1895 treaty—signed at Shimoneseiki—ended the short war. China was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan; to provide huge indemnity payments to Japan; and to grant Japan manufacturing rights in China's open ports.

After China's defeat at the hands of the Japanese, the Qing dynasty entered its final death throes. Failure to confront these previously weak neighbors made the educated and commercial classes of China seriously question the dynastic state's ability to safeguard China from outside assault. An attempt made in 1898 by educated elites to force the dynasty to reform its practices failed miserably. These two failures, combined with far-reaching social trouble brewing within China, led to a serious weakening of the state.

The special privileges enjoyed by colonial foreigners (British, French, Germans, Americans, and after 1895, Japanese) and native holders of local power soon provoked endemic rural violence, culminating in the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901. This uprising was initiated by members of a secret Chinese martial arts group known as the “Righteous Harmonious Fists” or, as many non-Chinese called them, the “Boxers.” Targeted initially at missionaries and their native converts, whose presence was deemed disruptive of local social order, the Boxer rebellion soon grew into an all-purpose anti-foreign and anti-Christian uprising. The rebels seized Beijing, executing scores of foreigners and thousands of Chinese Christian converts. The Qing joined the rebels, in a bid to regain some popular credibility. This triggered an invasion by a combined force of eight foreign nations, which in its turn massacred any Chinese suspected of sympathizing with the Boxers. The Qing court abandoned the capital, and Beijing became a bloodbath. In the ensuing punitive settlement forced upon the Qing by the allied powers (led by Britain, the United States, Prussia, and Japan), the dynasty staved off final demise, but only by effectively giving away the country to its foreign creditors.

Through the turbulent years at the beginning of the twentieth century, many rival contenders to state power emerged. Hunan Province, Mao’s home region, was a hotbed of all kinds of anti-dynastic activity. However, it took some time for Mao to become aware of what was happening around him.

Mao at home in Hunan

Mao’s parents had seven children (five sons and two daughters) but only three survived, all boys. Mao Zedong was the eldest; Zemin, the middle brother, and Zetan, the youngest, soon followed. All three brothers remained close through childhood. Growing up on his father’s farm, in a spacious courtyard house surrounded by hills, terraced paddy fields, and ponds, Mao enjoyed the extraordinary luxury of having his own bedroom, even after his brothers were born. He worked on his father’s farm from the age of six, and even when he began to attend the village school, and later a nearby higher primary school, he continued to work in the early mornings and evenings. His experience as a working peasant was limited to this childhood period, even though he later vividly recalled carrying buckets of manure from collection pits to the paddy fields for fertilizer.

Mao’s father, Mao Rensheng, was a relatively wealthy but poorly edu-

cated peasant. Mao remembered him as authoritarian and unpleasant, and unsympathetic to his son's desire for a good education. According to Edgar Snow, who based his biography of Mao on interviews with him in the late 1930s, Mao attributed his father's disposition to his stint in the Qing dynasty's army.¹ After leaving the army, he became highly preoccupied with accumulating wealth. Through dint of luck, labor, and parsimony, by 1893 he had become one of the richest of the 300 families of Mao's natal village, Shaoshan. He owned about 2.5 acres of land—later acquiring another acre or so—which produced around 133 pounds of rice, of which about two-thirds was consumed by the family, leaving one-third as surplus for the market. With two hired laborers to assist on the farm, Mao's father soon began a grain transport and selling business, and set himself up as a middleman for urban markets. The middleman merchant was a feature of the rural areas, and would later be defined by the Marxist Mao as “parasitic,” and thus a target for revolutionary overthrow.

In contrast to his near-contempt for his father, Mao loved and revered his mother, née Wen Qimei. A hardworking woman who died young (at the age of fifty-three), she was reputedly selfless in her sacrifice for her sons and family. Born just beyond the mountains from Shaoshan, she and her husband actually spoke different dialects of Chinese; nevertheless, family discussions, in which she participated fully, were reputedly always vigorous and spirited. Mao's emotionally charged funeral oration for her, delivered on October 8, 1919, highlighted his mother's steadfastness, her adherence to the traditional virtues, her cleanliness and sense of order, her charity, and most important, her hatred for injustice of any sort. Indeed, Mao credited his mother for being adept at analysis, a skill that she used in supporting his side in his stormy relationship with his father.² A devout Buddhist, his mother clearly imparted to Mao a distinctive ethical stance. This was not a reverence for religion, which Mao eventually labeled as “superstition” and pledged to stamp out; rather, it was a desire to correct the problems of his world through action. His mother's love and affection were a touchstone for Mao throughout his life.

Mao's early education at the local school was presided over by an old-style scholar, whose interest in world and dynastic affairs was apparently minimal and whose mode of teaching relied on the age-old method of rote memorization of the Confucian classics. In an oft-told story, Mao narrates that after a particularly harsh lesson, he ran away from school and home. His worried family found him only after he had wandered alone without

food for three days. Upon his return home, Mao claims, his father's disposition towards him moderated, at least temporarily, as did the teacher's. According to Mao, in a clearly apocryphal attachment of significance to a childhood prank, this episode indelibly taught him the value and utility of rebellion.³

As the eldest son and only literate one in the family, Mao was soon put to work at bookkeeping for his father's business, a task that required writing ability as well as facility with an abacus. By this point, the business included not only farming activities and grain transport, but also the mortgages that Mao's father had bought on other people's land, part of the usurious rural credit and petty landlord system that Mao later learned to despise. It is during this period the disciplinarian side of his father flourished, and confrontations over Mao's continued education became endemic. Mao recalls that for these several years he was often beaten as well as deprived of meat and eggs in his diet. In subsequent years—after learning the Marxist analytical method—Mao often referred to his father as “the Ruling Power” that he, his mother, and assorted laborers always tried to overthrow in an ever-shifting dialectic of family relations.

Meanwhile, at school, Mao had become acquainted with the Confucian texts, which he found dry and boring. He nevertheless learned to cite them from memory, sometimes hurling Confucian sayings at his father during their arguments. He soon became attracted to the old novels of China, including the popular stories of rebellion, knights-errant, mythology, and romance. His lifelong love of books, and in particular of classical tales and legends, clearly stemmed from his voracious reading as a youngster. In his subsequent theoretical, philosophical, and historical writings, Mao never ceased to illustrate his political and social lessons with the folksy and earthy color derived from these popular yarns.

It was only after leaving the stifling atmosphere of the traditional-style school that Mao seems to have discovered the roiling debates over dynastic and republican politics then animating the urban scene all over China. He began reading political articles published in journals smuggled in from the coast. These primarily featured members of a reformist monarchical faction, led by Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, and a revolutionary republican faction, led by Sun Yatsen, all of whom were exiles in Japan. In addition to these factions based abroad, there were various conservative defenders of the dynasty, as well as local activists, who advocated regional autonomy in China, with calls for Hunanese independence leading the way. Mao

subsequently commented that he found all these issues very exciting—except for the dynastic defense—but that he couldn't tell any of them apart at the time.

Right before the fall of the Qing dynasty in late 1911, the social and political situations became even more chaotic. Famines were endemic, in part stemming from poor weather but also in part because merchants like Mao's father shipped rice from rural areas into the cities for enormous profit. Peasants rebelled in frustration and were ruthlessly suppressed by local forces of order. These local rebellions, in Mao's later recounting, were of great significance to the development of his political consciousness: he particularly remembered having to pass the severed heads of executed rebels stuck on top of stakes in public places that served as a warning to would-be troublemakers. And yet, he was not a wholehearted sympathizer of the peasants: while he condemned people like his father for their rapaciousness, he did not support violent seizures of other people's property.

Mao leaves home

In 1909, at the age of sixteen, Mao convinced his father to pay for him to go to the district city of Xiangtan, a busy trading center on the Xiang River around twenty-five miles away from Shaoshan. There he enrolled in a new-style school, whose curriculum was not defined by the Confucian classics, but rather included natural sciences and what was called at the time "Western learning." One of the teachers had even studied in Japan and had completely different ideas about learning from those of the old-style Confucianists. In this context Mao was more systematically introduced to the anti-dynastic thought of the time. He was also exposed to a worldly milieu, in which China was conceived as part of the larger global historical moment, which included the contemporary situations of Japan and Russia after Japan's surprise victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5; the colonizations of neighboring countries such as Vietnam (French), Korea (Japanese), Burma (British), and the Philippines (American); as well as knowledge of the American and French Revolutions. He also encountered the biographies of past European and American political and intellectual leaders, such as Napoleon, Catherine the Great, Peter the Great, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Lincoln, even as he continued to be fascinated by the rebels and heroes of Chinese history.

On the eve of the establishment of the Republic in 1912, nothing in Mao's thought or action indicated the revolutionary he was to become. His

politics—vague, at best—were mostly informed by his personal opposition to his father rather than by any intellectual analysis of China’s ills. By the same token, his readings in classics had not attracted him to the ideal of a Confucian gentleman as a personal or social role model. And, while his interest in the anti-dynastic and anti-Confucian debates of the time, as well as his spotty introduction to Western thought, had given him an inchoate sense of socio-political excitement, none of this had developed into any sort of firm ideology. In this sense, contrary to what some interpreters have claimed, Mao’s early views did not indicate the political theorist that he was later to become.

In other ways, Mao changed little. His personal habits were ingrained early and never faded, no matter how high and mighty he later became. He was contemptuous of flush toilets and toothbrushes (washing his mouth with tea leaves), and he habitually burped and broke wind loudly. He always wore shabby, patched clothes, with complete disregard for outward appearance. Mao held on to his rural habits throughout his life, often regarding his more cosmopolitan and “modern” associates with suspicion and disdain. Some time after he left the close provincial community of his childhood, he came to articulate his rural personal habits as an expression of political purity.

The 1911 Revolution and Aftermath

Just a few months before the October revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty, Mao moved from Xiangtan to Hunan's provincial capital, Changsha. He was one of the first in his school to support the revolution by cutting the long tail of hair—the queue—that all boys and men wore. For 260 years, this had been an enforced sartorial symbol of fealty to the Manchu Qing; removing it was subject to the death penalty. When the 1911 (“xinhai”) revolution broke out, Mao joined the local revolutionary army and served as a soldier in Hunan, although he saw no action. With the first salary of his life, he paid others to haul water for him (probably because he had endured enough hauling of buckets on his father's farm), bought food, and used the remaining money to purchase a variety of journals and newspapers. Through this new practice of daily newspaper reading, Mao avidly followed the fortunes of the revolutionary armies around the country. He later claimed that it was also at this time that he first encountered the concept of “socialism,” although if so, it did not leave any immediate impression.

A few months of soldiering was plenty at this point for Mao. Believing the revolution to have been successfully completed after the emperor's abdication in February 1912 and the ascension to power of General Yuan Shikai, Mao went back to school to broaden his education. It took him several tries to find an appropriate venue. A short stint at a vocational school for soap making