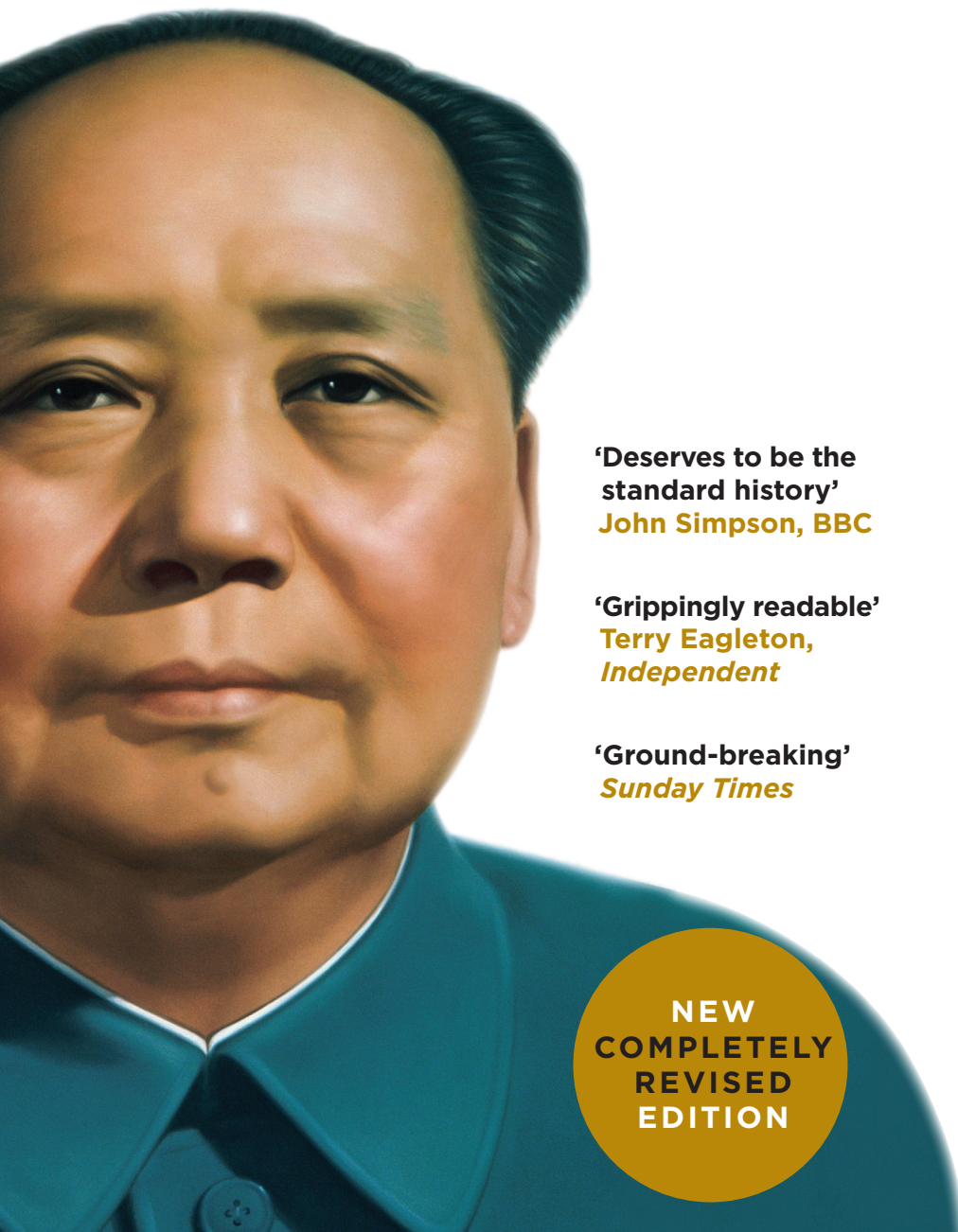


MAO

PHILIP SHORT

THE MAN
WHO MADE
CHINA



**'Deserves to be the
standard history'**
John Simpson, *BBC*

'Grippingly readable'
Terry Eagleton,
Independent

'Ground-breaking'
Sunday Times

**NEW
COMPLETELY
REVISED
EDITION**

PHILIP SHORT was for thirty years a foreign correspondent for the BBC, based in Washington, Moscow, Paris, Tokyo and Beijing. He lived and worked in China in the 1970s and 1980s, and has returned regularly to the country ever since. He is the author of acclaimed biographies of François Mitterrand (*A Study in Ambiguity*, 2013) and Pol Pot (*History of a Nightmare*, 2004).

'Beautifully written, grippingly readable... A formidable piece of research'
TERRY EAGLETON, *INDEPENDENT*

'Nowhere has the story of the late Chinese leader been told with greater authority'
ANNE THURSTON, *WASHINGTON POST*

'Short has a large canvas and he uses it brilliantly'
NEW YORK TIMES

'He tells the story superbly... An excellent account'
GUARDIAN

'Deserves to be the standard history. It is everything one could hope for: magisterial... and rich in material'
JOHN SIMPSON, BBC

'A fascinating account'
IAN BURUMA, *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*

'A ground-breaking biography'
SUNDAY TIMES

'Complete and unflinching'
ECONOMIST

NEW COMPLETELY REVISED EDITION

MAO THE MAN
WHO MADE
CHINA

PHILIP SHORT

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON - NEW YORK

Revised edition published in 2017 by
I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd
London • New York
www.ibtauris.com

First published in Great Britain in 1999
by Hodder and Stoughton
a division of Hodder Headline

Copyright © 1999, 2017 Philip Short

The right of Philip Short to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by the author in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book,
or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced
into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Every attempt has been made to gain permission for the use of the images
in this book. Any omissions will be rectified in future editions.

References to websites were correct at the time of writing.

ISBN: 978 1 78453 463 9

eISBN: 978 1 78672 015 3

ePDF: 978 1 78673 015 2

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset in StoneSerif by OKS Prepress Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For Christine

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Maps</i>	xi
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xii
<i>Note on Spelling and Pronunciation</i>	xvi
<i>Chinese Views of Mao: Preface to the New Revised Edition</i>	xix
Prologue	1
1. A Confucian Childhood	17
2. Revolution	35
3. Lords of Misrule	47
4. A Ferment of 'Isms'	74
5. The Comintern Takes Charge	107
6. Events Leading to the Horse Day Incident and its Bloody Aftermath	174
7. Out of the Barrel of a Gun	190
8. Futian: Loss of Innocence	255
9. Chairman of the Republic	274
10. In Search of the Grey Dragon: The Long March North	304
11. Yan'an Interlude: The Philosopher is King	338
12. Paper Tigers	402

MAO

13. The Sorcerer's Apprentice	433
14. Musings on Immortality	502
15. Cataclysm	523
16. Things Fall Apart	583
Epilogue	636
Afterword	643
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	675
<i>Notes</i>	684
<i>Index</i>	801

Acknowledgements

A book of this kind is the cumulation of many people's goodwill. Some I am able to thank publicly here, including Zhang Yufeng, the companion of Mao's last years; Li Rui, Mao's one-time secretary and later a forceful advocate of social democracy for China, who, as these lines are written, is still fighting the good fight in his 100th year; the late Wang Ruoshui, courageous former deputy editor of the *People's Daily*; Pang Xianzhi, once Mao's librarian and today one of China's best-informed official historians; Zhou Enlai's niece, Zhou Bingde; Deng Xiaoping's son, Deng Pufang; and Liu Shaoqi's daughter, Liu Tingting.

Many others contributed anonymously. When the first edition of this book was published in 1999, China was already a far more tolerant and liberal country than when I had made my home there, twenty years earlier, and its people took for granted freedoms which would have been unthinkable when Mao was alive. But it had yet to reach the stage where its citizens could be quoted on-the-record on sensitive political topics without fearing the wrath of their superiors or inquiries from the police. Today, another twenty years on, there is more latitude. Despite a systematic clampdown on anything which might be construed as threatening Party rule, most educated Chinese, especially the younger generation, feel able to voice their opinions on almost any subject. For the published word, however, red lines still exist which it is better not to cross.

No one has a monopoly of wisdom about Mao. CCP officials, Party historians, Chinese academics and former members of the Chairman's household who shared with me their private insights disagreed on many key points. Sometimes I found all their views unpersuasive (as they did mine). But, together, they helped to illuminate areas of Mao's life that,

MAO

until now, have remained artfully obscured, in the process demolishing much conventional mythology. To all of them I express my gratitude.

In writing the first edition of this book, I was greatly aided by Judy Polumbaum and Karen Chappell at the University of Iowa, through whose good offices I was able to spend a year in scholarly retreat in the Midwest; by my editors, Roland Philipps in London and Jack Macrae in New York; and by my agent, Jacqueline Korn, who kept the faith when others began to doubt whether it would ever be finished. Since then, a huge amount of new research has been undertaken by both Chinese and Western historians, and episodes which were still opaque when this book was originally written are now much better understood. That has provided the rationale for this new, expanded and revised second edition, which owes its existence to Tomasz Hoskins, my editor at I.B.Tauris. To him and to Sara Magness, who oversaw its production, my thanks and appreciation.

List of Maps

China	xxxvi–xxxvii
The Long March, 1934–1935	4–5
The Autumn Harvest Uprising in Hunan, 1927	200
The Central Soviet Base Area in Southern Jiangxi, 1931–1934	210

List of Illustrations

Photographs courtesy of Xinhua (New China News Agency) unless stated otherwise.

SECTION 1

166–73

1. The earliest known portrait of Mao, as a teenager around the time of the 1911 revolution.
2. A soldier preparing to shear off a peasant's queue after the overthrow of the Manchus. *Harlingue-Viollet*, Paris.
3. One of the many forms of death by slow execution common in Mao's youth. These prisoners are being slowly asphyxiated as the weight of their bodies stretches their necks. Joshua B. Powers Collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
4. The Mao family home at Shaoshan. Marc Riboud, *Magnum Photo Agency*.
5. Mao at the age of 25, with his mother, Wen Qimei, and his brothers, Zemin, 22, and Zetan, 15, in Changsha in 1919.
6. Mao's father, Shunsheng, 1919.
7. Mao's close friend, Cai Hesen, who converted him to Marxism.
8. Mao and other members of the Hunanese delegation in Beijing, petitioning for the removal of Governor Zhang Jingyao in January 1920.
9. China's first president, Sun Yat-sen.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

10 & 11. The spiritual fathers of the Chinese Communist Party. *Left*: Li Dazhao, of Beijing University, whose writings popularised Bolshevism in China. *Right*: Chen Duxiu, editor of *New Youth* and the CCP's first General Secretary.

12. Mao's second wife, Yang Kaihui, with their sons, Anying, 3, and Anqing, 2, in 1925.

13. Mao's third wife, He Zizhen. Courtesy of Maoping Revolutionary Museum, Jiangxi.

14. *From left*: Ren Bishi; Red Army Commander-in-Chief, Zhu De; Political Security director, Deng Fa; Xiang Ying; Mao; and Wang Jiaxiang, on the eve of the proclamation of the Chinese Soviet Republic at Ruijin in November 1931.

15. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. *Syigma*, Paris.

16. Zhou Enlai with Mao in north Shensi in 1937. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (Owen Lattimore Foundation).

SECTION 2

394–401

17. Yan'an in the late 1930s, with its distinctive Song dynasty pagoda. Edgar Snow's *China*, by Lois Wheeler Snow, reprinted by permission of Random House.

18. Zhang Guotao, whose challenge to Mao collapsed after the destruction of the Fourth Army in Gansu in 1937.

19. Wang Shiwei, the gifted young writer whose persecution in the Yan'an Rectification Campaign set the pattern for all Mao's subsequent efforts to crush intellectual dissent. Courtesy of China Youth Press.

20. Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, as an actress in Shanghai.

21. *From left*: Zhou Enlai, Mao and Zhu De, in Yan'an in 1946.

22. Mao reviewing Lin Biao's victorious army after the surrender of Beijing in March 1949.

23. A landlord in North China, on trial before fellow villagers during the land reform after the communist takeover.

MAO

24. Mao proclaiming the People's Republic from Tiananmen on October 1, 1949.
25. Gao Gang, Party boss of Manchuria, purged in 1954.
26. *From left:* Mao, Bulganin, Stalin and the East German Party chief, Walter Ulbricht, celebrating the Soviet leader's 70th birthday at the Kremlin in December 1949.
27. Mao relaxing with his nephew, Yuanxin, and his daughters Li Min and Li Na at Lushan in 1951.
28. *From left:* Jiang Qing; Li Na; Mao; his oldest son, Anying, soon to die in Korea; and Anying's wife, Liu Songlin.
29. Mao with the Dalai Lama (*right*) and the Panchen Lama in Beijing in 1954.
30. A struggle meeting to criticise bourgeois intellectuals at the start of the anti-Rightist campaign in July 1957.
31. The parting of the ways: Mao and Khrushchev meet for the last time in Beijing in October 1959. Courtesy of Du Xiuxian, Beijing.
32. Peng Dehuai (*second from left*) talking to peasants in Hunan during the Great Leap Forward in 1959.

SECTION 3

587–94

33. Members of the Politburo Standing Committee in a rare, unposed shot at the '7,000-cadre big conference' in January 1962. *From left:* Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi, Mao and Deng Xiaoping.
34. Swimming in the Yangtse.
35. Jiang Qing (*centre*), appearing with Mao in public for the first time in September 1962 to greet the wife of Indonesia's President Sukarno.
36. Mao's propagandist, Yao Wenyuan.
37. *From left:* Mao, with Lin Biao, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De and Dong Biwu during the 1966 National Day celebrations.
38. In Tiananmen Square, reviewing Red Guards at one of the ten gigantic rallies held at the outset of the Cultural Revolution to encourage China's youth to rebel.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

39. Magic talisman: the 'Little Red Book'. Paolo Koch, *Rapho Agency*.
40. Red Guards giving the *yin-yang* haircut to the Governor of Heilongjiang at a struggle meeting in September 1966. The placard around his neck labels him 'a member of the reactionary gang'.
41. Smashing ancient stone carvings at the Confucian Temple in Qufu, during the campaign against the 'Four Olds'.
- 42 & 43. *Top, from left*: Lin Biao with Edgar Snow and Mao on Tiananmen during the 1970 National Day celebrations. Eighteen months later, US–China relations had progressed to a point where (*below, from right*) Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon would meet Mao, with interpreter Nancy Tang and Zhou Enlai, at the Chairman's residence in Zhongnanhai.
44. The Chairman's inner sanctum, dominated by his vast bed, in the Study of Chrysanthemum Fragrance.
45. Mao with his last companion, Zhang Yufeng, nine months before his death, in December 1975.
- 46 & 47. The memorial meeting for Mao in Tiananmen Square on September 18, 1976. *Above, from left*: Marshal Ye Jianying; Hua Guofeng (reading the eulogy); Wang Hongwen; Zhang Chunqiao and Jiang Qing.

Note on Spelling and Pronunciation

Chinese names drive all who are unfamiliar with them to despair. Yet it is impossible to write about China and its leaders without identifying the protagonists. This book employs the *pinyin* transcription, which was officially adopted by Beijing in 1979 and has the merit of being simpler and more accessible than the older Wade-Giles romanisation. Nevertheless, a few basic rules need to be observed.

The consonants *C*, *Q* and *X* are used to represent Chinese sounds which have no precise English equivalent. *C* is pronounced similarly to *Ts* [in *Tsar*]; *Q* like *Ch*; *X* like *Sh* [*Hs* in the Wade-Giles system]

Vowels are trickier. Terminal *-a* rhymes with car; *-ai* with buy. *-an* [as in *tan*, *fan*, etc.] rhymes with man, except after *-i* and *y* [*lian*, *xian*, *yan*, etc.], when it rhymes with men; and after *w* [*wan*], when it is sounded as in 'want'. *-ang* rhymes with sang, except after *-u* and *w* [*huang*, *wang*, etc.], when it rhymes with song. *-ao* rhymes with cow.

Terminal *-e* [as in *He Zizhen*, *Li De*, *Li Xuefeng*, etc.] rhymes with her, except after *-i* and *y* [as in *Ran Tie*, *Ye Jianying*], when it rhymes with the American yeah. *-ei* rhymes with say. *-en* [as in *Li Wenlin*, *Tianan men*] rhymes with sun, except after *ch* and *y* [*Chen*, *Yen*] when it rhymes with men. *-eng* [as in *Deng*, *Meng*, etc.] rhymes with bung.

Terminal *-i* [as in *li*, *qi*, *di*, etc.] rhymes with see, except after *c-*, *ch-*, *r-*, *s-*, *z-* and *zh-* [*ci*, *chi*, *ri*, *si*, *zi*, *zhi*] when it rhymes with sir; *-iu* rhymes with stew.

Terminal *-o* [as in *wo*] and *-uo* [as in *Luo*] rhymes with war. *-ong* [*dong*, *long*] is similar to the *-u* in 'full'. *-ou* rhymes with toe.

Terminal *-u* rhymes with moo; *-ui* with sway; *-un* [*dun*, *lun*] with soon.

NOTE ON SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

In a very few cases, where the *pinyin* transliteration is so unfamiliar as to be unrecognisable for many readers, traditional forms have been retained. These are (with *pinyin* in parenthesis): Amoy [Xiamen]; Canton [Guangzhou]; Chiang Kai-shek [Jiang Jieshi]; Hong Kong [Xianggang]; Sun Yat-sen [Sun Zhongshan]; Soong Ching-ling [Song Qingling], her sister May-ling [Meiling] and brother, T. V. Soong [Song Ziwen]; Tibet [Xizang]; Whampoa [Huangpu]; Yangtse [Yangzi].

Chinese Views of Mao: Preface to the New Revised Edition

When China's President Xi Jinping and his Taiwanese counterpart, Ma Ying-jeou, met in Singapore in November 2015 at the Shangri-la Hotel – aptly named for such an encounter – it was more than just the first meeting at that level since 1949.

Ninety years earlier, Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek had met in Canton, shortly after the death of China's first President, Sun Yat-sen. The future Communist Party Chairman was then acting head of the Guomindang's Propaganda Department and an alternate member of its Central Executive Committee. Chiang, the nationalist army commander, was eyeing Sun's succession. Little is known for certain about their relationship at that time except that they were on the same side: the communists and the nationalists were allies against the northern warlords and Mao's relations with his own party, as often happened in the early part of his career, were at rock bottom. When the two next met, twenty years and a bloody civil war later, Mao was still the junior partner: contemporary photographs show him looking rather tense beside the urbane Generalissimo, as though painfully aware that he was in the lion's den. In 2015, the shoe was on the other foot. Xi was welcoming and expansive, with a grin like the Cheshire cat, while Ma, a slighter figure, locked into an interminable handshake for the benefit of the photographers, appeared torn between elation at the significance of the occasion and apprehension that he might be about to be eaten.

Amid the parallels, there was an essential difference. In 1925 and again in 1945, Mao and Chiang were reluctant partners, working together while

contending for the right to rule China. The fact that they could be partners at all showed that accommodation was possible – a hopeful precedent for Xi’s encounter with Ma. But on both occasions they met as Party officials. Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou – despite efforts to blur the issue by referring to each other as ‘Mr’, rather than by their titles – met as Heads of State (albeit states which refuse to recognise each other). In this sense the meeting in Singapore was not merely a replay of previous contacts. It broke entirely new ground.

For all Xi’s boldness, however, he was following an agenda which Mao himself had set. At a meeting with Richard Nixon in 1972, the Chairman had said that Taiwan’s fate was not a pressing matter: China was prepared to wait. Sooner or later reunification would occur. Unlike Chiang Kai-shek, who had been forced to recognise the independence of Mongolia under pressure from Stalin during the Pacific War, Mao ordained that Taiwanese independence was a red line that could not be crossed. Despite the talks in Singapore, that remains the case today.

The underlying policy choices which Mao laid down continue to guide China, forty years after his death, in unsuspected ways. The famous ‘nine-dash line’, for instance, whereby Beijing claims sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, is not a recent invention: it was delimited by Zhou Enlai and approved by Mao in 1953 after the Korean War.¹ The first steps towards making it a reality were taken under Mao’s leadership, in January 1974, when Chinese forces occupied the Paracel Islands, 180 miles south of Hainan, after a naval battle against the Vietnamese. The Chairman might insist all he wished that China had no pretensions to superpower status, but that did not stop him affirming the country’s suzerain rights as the region’s leading power. Mao proceeded cautiously: the ‘nine-dash line’ was made public only after Stalin’s death, and the conquest of the Paracels was delayed until the Kissinger–Le Duan peace agreement signalled US disengagement from Vietnam. In part this was because, in Mao’s day, China lacked the power to do more. But even now, when the country is infinitely stronger, building artificial islands on reefs many hundreds of miles from its shores to try to turn the surrounding seas into a Chinese domain, Xi Jinping is also moving prudently. Like Mao, Xi and his colleagues take an exceptionally long-term view, which makes it hard for other countries with short political cycles, whether the United States or South East Asian nations like the Philippines, to respond effectively. Xi’s calculation – analogous to Mao’s over Taiwan – is that, whatever grousing Chinese

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

expansion may provoke in the short term, eventually China's dominance of the region will lead to a *pax Sinensis* to replace the *pax Americana*, and in time the country's neighbours and rivals will have no choice but to get used to it. Given the mushy US response to Xi's probing, who is to say that he is wrong? The changing balance of economic power makes this a battle which the US and its Asian protégés cannot win – and deep down America knows it.

That, of course, is not how Mao imagined his country's future. He saw China exercising its leading role in the region, and ultimately beyond, by the force of ideological example. His successors, as he had feared, embraced capitalism instead. But although the form changed, the goal remained the same. China's destiny, for Xi as for Mao, is to lead Asia and help shape the world's future. Whether it does so as an ideological flagship or an economic juggernaut is beside the point.

In the months immediately following Mao's death in 1976, no one could have imagined in their wildest dreams the extraordinary renaissance – unequalled in rapidity and extent at any time in human history – which China would undergo in the next four decades.²

If today it has become the world's factory and its second-largest economy, with commensurate political ambitions, it is because Mao's successors gambled that the freeing of market forces, the subsequent growth of private industry and commerce, and integration into the world economy, all under the political management of a Communist Party determined to conserve its monopoly of power, would transform the lives of its people. Rulers and ruled have been linked ever since by an unspoken social contract: so long as China's people refrain from challenging the Party's hold on power, they are largely free to live as they wish. Chinese families in the country's main cities today, so long as they have the money, can own their own homes, travel abroad, send their children to foreign universities, buy whatever consumer goods they like, choose where they want to work and to live, read foreign books and watch foreign films (often on sale in pirated copies before they even reach the screen in the West) – in other words, in ways that would have been inconceivable a generation before, their lives are not so different from those of people in the rest of the developed world.

Lest that picture appear too glowing, there is of course a downside. Freedom of public expression is severely curtailed. There is no rule of law.

Corruption is rampant. In many rural areas, local officials ride roughshod over the peasants whom they exploit as shamelessly as the cadres of Mao's day or their long-ago imperial predecessors. Those who wish to change the system, whether intellectuals in the cities or peasant activists in the hinterlands, risk imprisonment or worse. In Tibet and Xinjiang, the slightest sign of separatism is ruthlessly repressed.

Yet overall the balance is positive. For the first time in well over a century, a fifth of the world's population is at peace, in a stable environment, where life today is usually better than yesterday and it is possible to plan for the morrow without having to fear another war or political convulsion in which everything might yet again be lost. These are things which in the West are taken for granted. In China they are new.

Where does that leave Mao – the founder of the regime?

His picture still gazes down from Tiananmen across the vast empty square laid out before the Forbidden City, at whose southern end, each morning, Chinese from the provinces queue to pay their respects to his embalmed remains in the present-day equivalent of an imperial mausoleum.

His portrait adorns the banknotes which are the lifeblood of the capitalist economy that he fought all his life to prevent, now serving as an international reserve currency, on a par with the dollar, the euro, the pound sterling and the yen. His birthplace in the village of Shaoshan, amid the ricefields of central Hunan, almost a thousand miles south of Beijing, has become a place of pilgrimage, or 'red tourism' as the government prefers to call it, where Chinese visitors light incense before Mao's parents' grave, bow before his statue and buy the same kinds of kitschy souvenirs – plastic water-bottles and gilded plaster busts – that provide the shopkeepers of Lourdes with an income from devout Roman Catholics. Other sites have been developed to the same purpose: the mountain fastness of Jinggangshan, further south, where Mao's career as a guerrilla leader began; Zunyi, in the south-west, where, after numerous false starts, his political career began to take off; Yan'an, in the north-west, where the communists made their headquarters during the Pacific War; and Xibaipo, south of Beijing, where Mao masterminded, usually though not always correctly, the final battles with the nationalist armies which brought the communists to power.

His image in China today – at least as framed by the Party, which expects everyone else to follow – is as mummified as the corpse lying in his mausoleum. In death he is a 'national treasure', as the Japanese would put it, which the Chinese people may contemplate but not touch.

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

The prevailing orthodoxy on the Maoist period, to which, in theory, all Chinese writers must conform, was set out in the 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic', approved by the 6th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in June 1981. It runs to more than fifty pages, of which nearly three quarters are devoted to a glowing account of the Party's 'brilliant successes ... achievements [and] correct line' and of Mao's leading role in them. The remainder addresses his errors, but in such a way as to minimise their import. The anti-Rightist struggle of 1957, while 'entirely correct and necessary', was made 'far too broad ... with unfortunate consequences'. The Great Leap Forward, which began a year later, was due to 'lack of experience ... and inadequate understanding of the laws of economic development' and 'arbitrary directions, boastfulness and ... the fact that Comrade Mao Zedong and many leading comrades ... had become smug about their successes [and] were impatient for quick results'. The outcome, it acknowledged, was 'economic difficulties [and] serious losses to our country and people' – a considerable euphemism for the worst famine in recorded history in which, between 1958 and 1962, several tens of millions of Chinese died. Even then, the resolution maintained, throughout this period the Party's successes were 'dominant', its errors secondary:

It is impermissible to overlook or whitewash mistakes, which in itself would be a mistake and would give rise to more and worse mistakes. But after all, our achievements ... are the main thing. It would be a no less serious error to overlook or deny [these] achievements.

The resolution's harshest condemnation was reserved for the Cultural Revolution – a 'comprehensive, long drawn-out and grave blunder' – which lasted from 1966 to 1969 but in Chinese historiography is held to have continued until 1976 in order that the whole of the last ten years of Mao's life may be written off as a regrettable but temporary aberration. 'Launched and initiated' by Mao on the basis of 'erroneous theses', it declared, the Cultural Revolution caused 'the most severe setback and the heaviest losses since the founding of the People's Republic' – an extraordinary statement in view of the death toll in the Great Leap, reflecting the fact that the men who drafted the resolution suffered grievously from the one while surviving unscathed the other, which, moreover, they themselves had led.

Much space is then devoted to showing that Mao's leftist ideas during the last years of his life had no connection whatever with Mao

Zedong Thought, with which they were 'obviously inconsistent' and which remained the Party's 'valuable spiritual asset [and] guiding ideology'. The Chairman, the resolution said, had been 'labouring under a misapprehension' which had been exploited by the 'counter-revolutionary cliques' headed by his wife Jiang Qing and his anointed successor, Lin Biao. 'Chief responsibility' for the great upheaval, it concluded, 'does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong. But it was, after all, the error of a great proletarian revolutionary ... The Chinese people have always regarded Comrade Mao Zedong as their beloved great leader and teacher.'

Thirty-five years later, that remains China's official stance.

Today the convoluted arguments and double-think appear even more blatant than at the time. But in 1981, they represented a delicate balancing act. Communists are orderly people: they like to put history in boxes (a habit unfortunately shared by some academics). For the country's new paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, it was essential to achieve 'a unified view' of the Maoist past in order to turn the page and look towards the future, just as it had been essential for Mao in 1945, after his consecration as Chairman of the Central Committee, to ensure the passage of a similar 'Resolution on Party History', summing up the struggles which had won him supreme leadership. Between them, the two resolutions book-end the entire period that Mao was in power. Each was intended to reconcile opposing factions: in 1945, the winners and losers in the protracted intra-Party conflict from which Mao emerged triumphant; and in 1981, those who had been close to Mao and wished to spare his memory (Deng himself among them) and those who sought a more sweeping repudiation of his errors.

In the latter case, moreover, another, much more frightening consideration had weighed on the debate: the risk that the pendulum would swing too far, and that instead of rejecting Mao's errors, the country would rise up against the system he had created and overthrow the Party's rule.

Two years earlier, during the so-called Beijing Spring of 1979, a former Red Guard named Wei Jingsheng, the son of a middle-ranking official in the State Capital Construction Bureau, had put up a wall-poster called 'Democracy, the Fifth Modernisation'. Wei did not pull his punches. He denounced Mao as a 'bragging despot' and Deng as a 'political swindler', while the Chinese people were 'old yellow oxen', who, rather than being the masters of the country, as the Party's propaganda maintained, were in fact no more than slaves:

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

There are two old Chinese sayings, 'To draw a cake to satisfy one's hunger' and 'To look at plums to quench one's thirst'. Even in ancient times, people could satirise these fallacies . . . Yet for several decades the Chinese people, following their Great Helmsman, took the ideals of communism as 'the drawing of a cake' and the [Party line] as 'the sight of plums', always tightening their belts and going forward. Thirty years passed like a day and left us this lesson: the people have been like the monkey, fishing for the moon in a pond and not realizing there is nothing there . . . The Marxist socialist experiment of using dictatorship to achieve the equal rights of man has been going on for decades. The facts have shown time and again that it simply won't work. A 'dictatorship of the majority' is simply a utopian dream. A dictatorship is a dictatorship. A concentration of powers is bound to fall into the hands of the few.

How many of Wei's generation of disillusioned former Red Guards and the sons and daughters of Mao's victims shared such views, there is no way of telling. Certainly they were a very small minority. But the Party leaders had grown up with the idea that, as Mao once put it, 'a single spark can start a prairie fire', and many of them had seen that happen in the May Fourth movement in 1919, which had challenged the then ruling orthodoxy, Confucianism. Half a century later, another youth movement, manipulated this time from on high, had plunged China into chaos in the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, the chances of a repetition were infinitesimal. The Chinese people had had enough turmoil to last them a lifetime. But the leaders' fears were not entirely misplaced, as was shown when some of Wei's arguments resurfaced in the movement which met its end in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. In any case, none of them was prepared to take that risk. While Wei and other dissidents were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms, the 1981 resolution batted down the ideological hatches. From then on no one would have an excuse for not knowing the permissible limits of criticism.

In China, however, nothing remains set in concrete for very long.

The resolution, while continuing to represent the Party's immutable truth about the recent past, was quietly re-interpreted. Instead of being '70 per cent correct and 30 per cent mistaken', as Deng Xiaoping had proposed in a secret speech to the Central Committee's Third Plenum in December 1978, Mao was increasingly portrayed on Chinese television and in the cinema as 99 per cent correct and, at most, one per cent mistaken. Hagiographic series were broadcast about his youth, the Long March and the War of Liberation, in which Mao and his companions were

depicted as a Chinese brotherhood of Knights of the Round Table whose chivalry exceeded the Arthurian legend. The 'twists and turns' after 1949 were ignored or, better, written out of the script altogether. In this mass-media version of Chinese history, the anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution never happened: they have disappeared down a memory hole. Today they are not taught in university history courses, let alone at high school, nor are they often discussed at home, even in families which suffered in those movements. Deng Xiaoping argued that priority should be given to building a prosperous future rather than delving into the horrors of the past. Most Chinese – certainly most older Chinese – agree: what happened, happened; nothing can be done to change it, so why look back when the present already offers a vastly better life?

However, no system of control is foolproof, least of all in a country as large and as rebellious as China, where a tradition of independent thought and of upright scholars memorialising the throne undeterred by the risk to their lives stretches back thousands of years. Alongside the memory hole are discreet wormholes through which forbidden knowledge seeps out.

These can take various forms. Amid China's shifting political winds, there are brief moments of greater openness. During one such window of opportunity, in 2004, the Contemporary China Institute, headed by Zhu Jiamu, formerly the secretary of Chen Yun, a veteran Party leader second only to Deng in the post-Mao hierarchy, agreed that I might interview the surviving members of Mao's inner circle for a documentary series for the Franco-German television channel Arte. They included Liu Songlin, the widow of Mao's son, Anying; his grandchildren, Kong Dongmei and Mao Xinyu; members of the families of Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi; and many of Mao's personal staff, including his bodyguards, valet, nurse and doctor. Among the archive materials we used was unique footage from the Cultural Revolution, showing, among other things, Mao's erstwhile Politburo colleagues being humiliated and beaten by Red Guards at public 'struggle meetings'. On the basis of the 1981 resolution, such images should have been acceptable. Two decades later, that was no longer the case. Senior Chinese cultural officials expressed shock and dismay. The head of the Chinese television group which had collaborated with Arte retired to hospital on sick leave for six weeks in the hope that that would protect him from the inevitable fallout when the programmes were aired.

What happened next was revealing. There was *no* fallout.

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

Instead, one of the most senior of the men who had been called in to view the offending programmes, whom I encountered at a seminar a few months later, took me aside to say that he and his colleagues understood perfectly well why I had told the story as I had and that they had no problem with the historical interpretation; unfortunately, as I would surely understand, they were not in a position to say so. Shortly afterwards a pirated DVD of the programmes, with Chinese narration, appeared in the shops in Beijing. It evidently did well, because, ten years later, it is still selling. Neither the Propaganda Department nor the police have raised an eyebrow.

Outside China the reaction was instructive, too. In an internet forum after the final programme was shown, hundreds of young Chinese, studying at universities in France and Germany, went online to discuss a past which most of them did not know existed. One young woman wrote:

As a Chinese, born after Mao's death, there are so many things we don't talk about and the result is we don't know our own history. What our parents had to live through they don't speak about. It's a past which is deliberately forgotten. I am totally shattered by these films because it's the first time that I have seen face to face all these personalities who are my grandparents' age, or just a bit older, and some of them are still alive. For me it's incredible. I hope that one day our Chinese people can see it just as I have today.

If I have recounted this episode at some length, it is because it encapsulates the Chinese authorities' dilemma over how Mao's legacy should be treated. The 1981 resolution turned out to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the mass media were required to eulogise the Chairman, with the result that, for most Chinese born after the mid-1970s, the Maoist turmoil of their parents' generation is a closed book, just as today's twenty-somethings know next to nothing about the shooting of student protesters around Tiananmen in 1989. They have become non-issues and the Chinese government wants to keep them that way. On the other, the resolution legitimised historical research on the period – which in Mao's lifetime had been effectively forbidden – and as a result whatever could fly under the radar, whether pirated DVDs of foreign documentaries, research works by Chinese scholars or Cultural Revolution relics sold in flea markets, was usually permitted.

The twenty years following Mao's death saw a flood of memoirs, of collections of his speeches and Central Committee documents, and of research by Chinese historians on the major episodes of the Chinese

revolution, the most sensitive reserved for internal distribution within the Party elite, but much of the rest for public circulation. That newly available material formed the basis for this book when it was first published in 1999. Since then the flood has continued. The Central Archives remain closed to all except a select few among the Party's own researchers – and significant parts even to them – but provincial, municipal and local archives have begun opening their doors, albeit cautiously, to both Chinese and foreign historians.

The contrast between the simplistic image of the past purveyed by the Chinese mass media, under strict Party control, and the meticulous accounts to be found in Chinese books and scholarly journals, is flagrant.

It is true that the latter are largely confined to publications with limited print runs, which are not stocked in high-street stores but have to be sought out in specialist book shops. It is true, too, that they often confine themselves to a factual recital, leaving it to the reader to tease out the interpretation concealed between the lines. None the less, the wealth of information now available, which not long ago would have been considered top secret and whose disclosure would have landed an author in jail, is truly remarkable. Part of the reason is the passage of time: historical details which, thirty or forty years ago, might have been used as weapons in intra-Party intrigue, become much less sensitive when most of the potential rivals are dead. Now it is a question of preserving, or rehabilitating, the reputations of the protagonists and their followers. Regional political figures demand that local heroes get their fair share of credit for revolutionary successes, rather than the whole story being centred on Mao; local historians, working from local archives, write regional histories – both to please their patrons and to advance their own standing in Party history circles – and provincial presses publish their work without, in most cases, needing to refer upward to Beijing.

In one sense, this is simply a reflection of the changed nature of the regime. Deng Xiaoping's rallying cry, which he used to repudiate the ideological excesses of Mao's closest followers, was: 'Seek truth from facts!' Even in the world of Party double-speak, it would have been hard to promote that slogan and at the same time prevent Chinese historians from trying to carry it out. But there was another, deeper reason. For more than 2,000 years, ever since the great Han dynasty scholar Sima Qian wrote the first comprehensive Chinese history in the second

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

century BC – suffering imprisonment and castration for his pains – Chinese historians have viewed the past as a mirror to throw light on the present and provide guidance for the future. The 1981 resolution itself reaffirmed that principle. Small wonder, then, that the moment the powers-that-be acknowledged the legitimacy of research into the period of Mao's rule, historians both within the Party and outside it swarmed through the breach. Ever since, Chinese scholars have been steadily pushing the boundaries, and although there remain some 'no-go areas', such as the role of Premier Zhou Enlai as the Chairman's echo-chamber and enforcer; Deng's excesses in the political campaigns of the 1950s; and the complicity between Mao and his cantankerous wife, Jiang Qing, they are becoming the exceptions to the rule.

But why, in that case, is this openness confined to the elite? Why does the Chinese State continue to insist that Mao's image, for the great mass of the Chinese people, remain sacred and untouchable?

The answer is to be found in the nature of the Chinese polity since Mao's death. Since the 1990s, if not earlier, the Chinese Communist Party has been communist in name only. On what, then, does it base its claim to a monopoly of power? After all, absent the Marxist-Leninist assertion that 'socialism [for which read, communism] and socialism alone can save China', as the 1981 resolution phrased it, what possible justification can there be for maintaining a one-party system?

To the extent that the Party responds to such heretical ideas, it justifies its hold on power firstly by its ability to deliver rising living standards, not only along the developed seaboard but also in the interior; and secondly by its history. The communists, under Mao's leadership, it argues, gained the right to rule China in 1949 by bringing to an end more than a century of turmoil and humiliation and restoring to the Chinese people their national pride – a discreet allusion to the nationalism which, since Mao's death, has provided the glue to hold the country together in an era when ideology has lost its appeal. These three pillars – prosperity, nationalism and the legend of Mao's revolution – are the foundations on which Chinese political power is based. Thus far, the government's record in resisting economic shocks – in other words, preserving prosperity – has been remarkably good: China took in its stride both the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 'Great Recession' a decade later. The transition from export-led growth to consumption may prove trickier to manage, but there is no reason to think that the Chinese will be less successful than other nations before them. Nationalism always carries a risk that it will spin out of control, as China's rhetoric against Japan has shown, but thus

MAO

far it has been kept within bounds. The founding legend, however, is a very different matter. Tampering with that could open a Pandora's box with unforeseeable consequences which would bring no possible benefit to those who now hold power.

The Chinese leaders are all the more alive to this danger – perhaps, indeed, excessively so – because both Mao, at Yan'an in 1945, and Deng, in 1981, began by repudiating those of their predecessors' policies which contradicted their own vision of the future. In China, the past is bound up so intimately with the present that it serves not only as a mirror but as a political weapon. Moreover this cuts both ways. Xiao Yanzhong,³ Professor of Political Science at East China Normal University in Shanghai, has described Mao studies in China as 'a bellwether that can indicate changes in China's politics, economy, and society, as well as the states of mind of the Chinese people.' More or less openness about the past goes in tandem with the leadership's willingness, or refusal, to contemplate economic and political reform in the present.

The regime's nervousness about such matters is striking. For more than ten years, attempts have been underway to persuade the Chinese authorities to permit the making of a Western-financed big-screen movie about Mao along the lines of Richard Attenborough's classic, *Gandhi*. It would focus on Mao's rise to power and the epic struggle against Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists, and end with the communist victory in 1949. The 'Big Events Group' of the China Film Co-production Corporation was enthusiastic. But when it came to approving the project, there was silence. No one was willing to take responsibility. When the question was referred upward, the response was the same. Even at the highest levels – and even though the script avoided the contentious episodes of Mao's later years – no one saw any interest in risking the kind of controversy that such a project was bound to generate.

Hence the curious compromise that governs the study of Mao in China today: scholars are given – within limits – generous latitude to pursue their researches; but for the general public, the 'masses', as they were called in Mao's day, the lid is clamped hermetically shut.

Not touching Mao's image is one thing, however; not using it is another.

In 1979, after the wall-poster attacks of Wei Jingsheng and others, calling for an end to Communist Party rule and the introduction of a multi-party system, and challenges to Party orthodoxy in art and literature, Deng Xiaoping proclaimed the 'four cardinal principles' to which the Chinese are expected to adhere – 'the socialist road; the

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

people's democratic dictatorship; the leadership of the Communist Party; and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought' – in a deliberate reassertion of pre-Cultural Revolution Maoist values. Four years later, Deng called again for 'enhancing Mao Zedong Thought', this time in a campaign against 'spiritual pollution', which was equated with 'disseminating corrupt and decadent bourgeois ideology ... and sentiments of distrust towards ... the Communist Party leadership'.

Thereafter the scarecrow of 'Maoism' was dusted off and given a ritual shake every time it was felt necessary to crack down on liberal excesses. The next occasion, in 1987, was a campaign against 'bourgeois liberalisation', associated with Hu Yaobang, whose death in May 1989 triggered the student contestation which ended on June 4 in the carnage of Tiananmen. Then, in the 1990s, Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, revived a movement, originally launched a decade earlier, for 'a new, socialist spiritual civilisation'. Maoist role models from the 1960s, like the soldier Lei Feng, who considered himself 'a rustless screw' in the Chairman's scheme of things, were exhumed and put on show for a new generation of young Chinese to emulate. By then, enough time had passed since Mao's death for nostalgia to set in. The original personality cult had been dismantled, but in some cities, including Chengdu and Shenyang (and in Kashgar, to remind restive Uighurs of the revolutionary past), huge statues of Mao, many times life-size, still stood – and still stand today – in central squares, a gigantic arm outstretched as though to point the way ahead. Taxi-drivers hung amulets with Mao's portrait on their windscreens to ward off accidents, and stories circulated in Beijing of miraculous escapes thanks to the protection they conferred. In the Chairman's home province of Hunan, local officials recounted how flowers had come into bloom in mid-winter at the anniversary of his birth.

Artists like Shi Xinning, who paints Mao in imaginary, hyper-realist settings – at Che Guevara's funeral, for instance, or with the Big Three at Yalta in 1945, in place of Chiang Kai-shek – and whose works have been collected by, among others, Mao's daughter, Li Min; and Sui Jianguo, whose monumental headless Mao jackets are in collections all over the world, took over where Andy Warhol left off, reworking Mao's image in ways which, with irony and black humour, transformed him into a twenty-first-century icon. Groups of citizens, young people as well as old, gathered spontaneously in parks at weekends to sing rousing revolutionary songs with the fervour of boy scouts around a camp fire. The words were an antidote to the materialistic money-grubbing reality

around them, and the familiar, lilting melodies conjured up memories of simpler, more egalitarian times, when corruption was political rather than financial, people could have as many children as they wished and education and health care, limited though they might be, were free.

One Chinese leader, aspiring to yet higher office, sought to co-opt this movement for political ends. Bo Xilai was the son of Bo Yibo, who, when he died in 2007 at the age of 98, was the last survivor of the 'Eight Immortals', a group of conservative party elders led by Deng who had been together since the Long March. The family had a reputation for nepotism and ruthlessness. But the younger Bo, with his father's help, had been able to exploit the patronage network of the then Party leader, Jiang Zemin, to become First Secretary of Chongqing, the biggest of China's mega-cities with a population, including the suburbs, of some 30 million people, which he hoped to use as a springboard to membership of the Politburo's nine- (now seven-) member Standing Committee, the supreme organ of power.

Bo was not the inventor of what became known as the 'red culture movement' associated with his name: rather he seized on a phenomenon that had begun some years earlier and bent it to his own purposes. In Chongqing, the promotion of 'revolutionary singing groups' became a key official policy. Cadres came under intense pressure to foster a Maoist revival. In 2009, to mark the 60th anniversary of the Communist Party, Bo arranged for SMSs of Mao's quotations, taken from the 'Little Red Book', the Maoist breviary of the Cultural Revolution, to be sent to all 13 million cell-phone owners in the city. New statues of Mao were erected. Theatres revived Cultural Revolution operas and ballets.

Throughout China there was a veritable explosion of films and television programmes glorifying Mao's contributions, which reached a peak two years later on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the CCP.⁴ The centenary, in 2021, can be expected to produce an even greater outpouring of adulation for the founder of the regime. Nor should that be surprising. Half a century ago, the psychiatrist and historian Robert Jay Lifton wrote presciently: 'One cannot predict future attitudes of Chinese leaders towards the Maoist image, but there is good reason to believe that for some time at least they will continue to hold [it] on high, even as they retreat from its excesses ... it would be very rash to assume that a regime which has so recently commanded so much psychic power would suddenly cease to possess any at all.'⁵

Bo Xilai's exploitation of the Maoist myth was not all froth. In Chongqing he promoted egalitarianism and tried to reduce the gulf

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

between urban and rural life, epitomised by the *hukou* system of residence permits. Instead of repressing protests, he organised round-table discussions. He launched a massive programme to build cheap housing and promote social welfare and a relentless campaign against crime. But his methods were controversial and sometimes illegal and, like many other Chinese leaders, he was deeply corrupt. More important to his peers, his outsize ego, charismatic personality and disdain for collective decision-making made him a potential threat to their own power. In 2012, a bizarre case involving the poisoning of a British businessman who had worked for him and a request by his police chief for asylum at the nearest American consulate became the pretext for his undoing. Xi Jinping marshalled support in the Standing Committee and, eleven days before Xi's appointment as Party leader, Bo was expelled from the Party. In 2013 he was sentenced to life imprisonment at Qincheng prison, where Mao's widow, Jiang Qing, had languished before her suicide in 1991. Caught up in Bo's fall was his mentor, Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the Standing Committee, who became the first leader at that level to be purged since the arrests of Jiang's colleagues, Wang Hongwen and Zhang Chunqiao, during the campaign against the so-called 'Gang of Four' almost forty years earlier. Zhou, too, was expelled from the Party and sentenced to life imprisonment.

But it did not end there. In China, it rarely does.

After Bo's imprisonment, Xi proceeded to steal his challenger's clothes, approving extravagant ceremonies to mark the 120th anniversary of Mao's birth that winter; resurrecting Mao's guidelines on literature and art, laid down at Yan'an seventy years earlier; and initiating a comprehensive campaign against ideological laxity. In November 2013 a Central Committee directive entitled 'The Current State of the Ideological Sphere'⁶ listed seven deadly sins which Party members were required to flee like the plague. Five dealt with ideas imported from the West – constitutional democracy; human rights; civil society; economic neo-liberalism; and a free press – and the sixth was aimed at neo-Maoists who resisted the Party's policies of 'reform and opening up'. The seventh 'false ideological trend' was described as historical nihilism, which meant seeking to undermine the historical legitimacy of the CCP by emphasising Mao's mistakes. To Xi, as to Mao himself, the erosion of the Soviet Communist Party's strength – which would lead to its collapse and the break-up of the Soviet Union – began in 1956 with Khrushchev's secret speech which exposed Stalin's crimes.

MAO

Mao was not only the Stalin but the Lenin of the Chinese Revolution and, at a still deeper level, the founding emperor of the dynasty which Xi now heads. Chip away at Mao's image and the whole system might come crashing down. That is not a risk which either Xi himself or any of his colleagues is prepared to take.

There is another reason for Xi to preserve Mao's memory: not everyone in the Chinese Party, or in the country at large, is bowled over by what critics deride as 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' – the programme of economic reforms launched by Deng in 1978, which Xi is now continuing. To leftists in the Party, the reforms, and the corruption they have engendered, are a betrayal of everything Mao stood for. Such people applaud Xi's frequent warnings that, unless corrupt behaviour can be brought under control, the Party will eventually lose power, but complain that he is attacking the symptoms, not the root of the disease: the abandonment of socialist policies. Although today the leftists have less influence than in the 1980s and 1990s, it is not inconceivable that, should China encounter serious turbulence in the years ahead, the charge of jettisoning the Party's founding principles, inherited from Mao, could furnish a pretext for mobilising opposition to Xi's leadership. In this context, Mao's image is a talisman, to be burnished constantly for the protection it provides.

At the same time Xi has begun dismantling the modest checks and balances which Deng installed after 1980 to prevent any Chinese leader ever again acquiring the late Chairman's awesome powers. The old revolutionary had written in the *People's Daily* that year: 'If systems [of governance] are sound, they can place restraints on the actions of bad people; if they are unsound, they may hamper the efforts of good people or indeed, in certain cases, may push them in the wrong direction.' His answer was to separate the Party from the State; to keep the army out of politics; and, eventually, to give more power for the judiciary. The last principle was honoured in the breach, and in his later years, Deng himself was given the right – like Mao after 1943 – to approve or negate whatever decisions the Standing Committee might take. None the less, collective leadership was the lodestar and under Deng's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, it was largely observed.

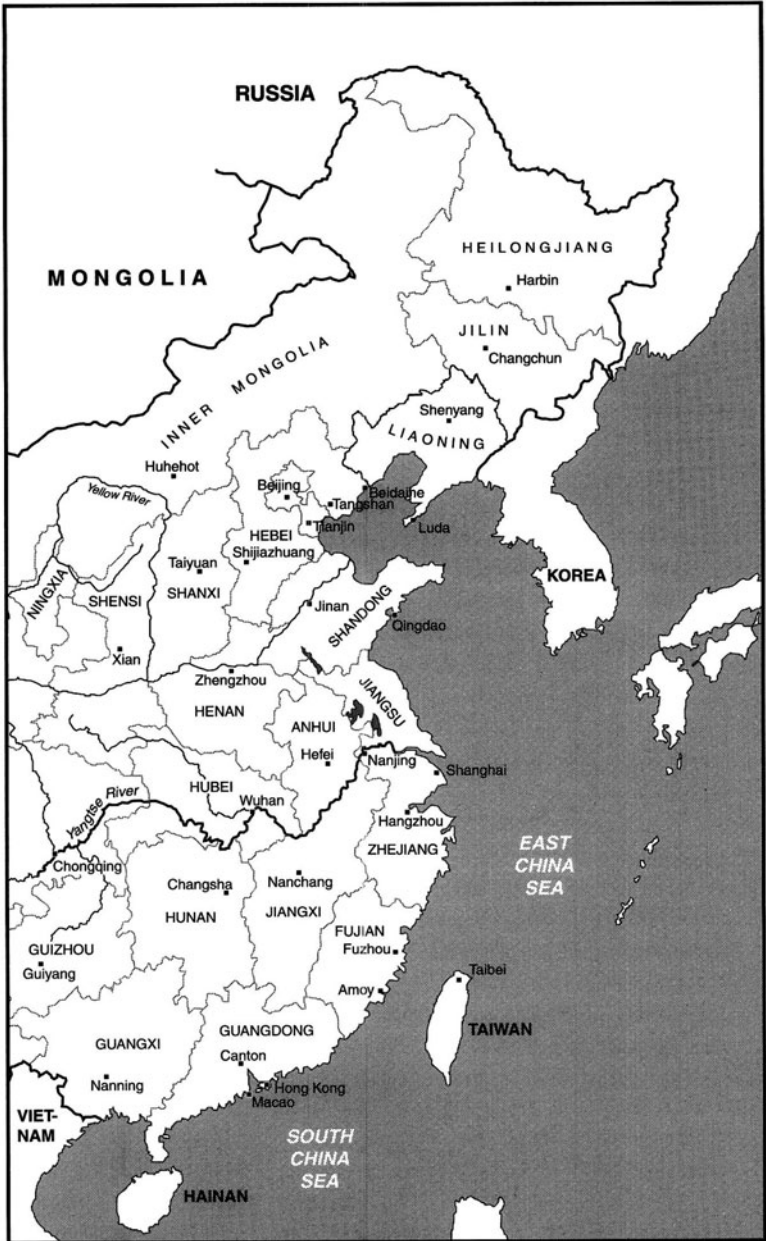
Xi's approach has been very different. His audacity in meeting Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore, thereby opening a door to eventual reconciliation which not even Deng had attempted, was the clearest sign of that. Although in a very different context, it has echoes of Mao's decision to overrule opposition and invite the US ping-pong team to China in 1971. Xi

CHINESE VIEWS OF MAO

has promoted strong centralised internal controls, creating 'super-committees', under his own leadership, responsible for security and for economic reform in all three branches – party, government and military – and inaugurating the biggest shake-up of the armed forces since 1949, ensuring that 'the gun', from which, as Mao noted, 'all political power grows', remains loyal not merely to the Party but to himself. In so far as that too is a throwback to Mao's methods, it offers another compelling reason for leaving the Great Helmsman's image intact.

China





Prologue

Few people today, even in China, have heard of the little market town of Tongdao. It extends for about a mile along the left bank of the Shuangjiang, squeezed into a narrow strip of land between the wide, brown river and a range of terraced hills. Tongdao is the centre of a small non-Han minority area where the three provinces of Guangxi, Guizhou and Hunan meet. It is a scruffy, run-down place, with one long, muddy main street, few shops and fewer modern buildings, where even the locals say resignedly that nothing of interest ever happens. Yet once something did happen there. On December 12, 1934,¹ the Red Army leadership gathered in Tongdao for a meeting which was to mark the beginning of Mao Zedong's rise to supreme power.

It was one of the most obscure events in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. The only written trace of the Red Army's passage is an old photograph of a faded slogan, chalked up by the troops on a wall: 'Everyone should take up arms and fight the Japanese!'² All the participants are now dead. No one knows exactly who was present, or even where the meeting took place. Premier Zhou Enlai, years later, recalled that it had been in a farmhouse, somewhere outside the town, where a wedding party was in progress.³ Mao was two weeks short of his forty-first birthday, a thin, lanky man, hollow-cheeked from lack of food and sleep, whose oversize grey cotton jacket seemed perpetually about to slide from his shoulders. He was still recovering from a severe bout of malaria, and at times had to be carried in a litter. Taller than most of the other leaders, his face was smooth and unmarked, with a shock of unruly black hair, parted in the middle.

MAO

The left-wing American writer, Agnes Smedley, who met Mao not long afterwards, found him a forbidding figure, with a high-pitched voice and long, sensitive woman's hands:

His dark, inscrutable face was long, the forehead broad and high, the mouth feminine. Whatever else he might be, he was an aesthete . . . [But] despite that feminine quality in him he was as stubborn as a mule, and a steel rod of pride and determination ran through his nature. I had the impression that he would wait and watch for years, but eventually have his way . . . His humour was often sardonic and grim, as though it sprang from deep caverns of spiritual seclusion. I had the impression that there was a door to his being that had never been opened to anyone.⁴

Even to his closest comrades, Mao was hard to fathom. His spirit, in Smedley's words, 'dwelt within itself, isolating him'. His personality inspired loyalty, not affection. He combined a fierce temper and infinite patience; vision, and an almost pedantic attention to detail; an inflexible will, and extreme subtlety; public charisma, and private intrigue.

The nationalists, who had put a price on his head, executed his wife and sent soldiers to vandalise his parents' tomb, viewed Mao throughout the early 1930s as the dominant Red Army political chief. As so often, they were wrong.

Power was in the hands of what was known as the 'three-man group' or 'troika'. Bo Gu, the 27-year-old acting Party leader (or, as he was formally known, 'the comrade with overall responsibility for the work of the Party Centre') had graduated from the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow. He had the face of a precocious schoolboy, with bulging eyes and black-rimmed spectacles, which a British diplomat said, unkindly but accurately, reminded him of a golliwog. The Comintern* had parachuted him into the leadership to ensure loyalty to the Soviet line. The second member, Zhou Enlai, General Political Commissar of the Red Army and the real power behind Bo Gu's throne, also had Moscow's trust. The third, Otto Braun, a tall, thin German with a prominent nose and horsey teeth, set off by a pair of round spectacles, was Comintern military adviser.

Over the previous twelve months, these three men had presided over a shattering series of communist military reverses. The nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, had consolidated his hold over most of the rest of China and was determined to extirpate what he rightly saw as a

* The Communist International (Comintern) was established by Lenin, in March 1919, as an instrument whereby Moscow could control the activities of foreign communist parties. These were treated as Comintern branches under the orders of a Russian-dominated Executive Committee.

PROLOGUE

potentially fatal long-term challenge to his rule. With the help of German military advisers, he began building lines of fortified blockhouses around the region the communists controlled. With excruciating slowness, the lines were pushed forward, the vice around the base area tightened, the communist forces hemmed in. Very gradually, the Red Army was being strangled. It was a strategy to which the troika could find no adequate response.

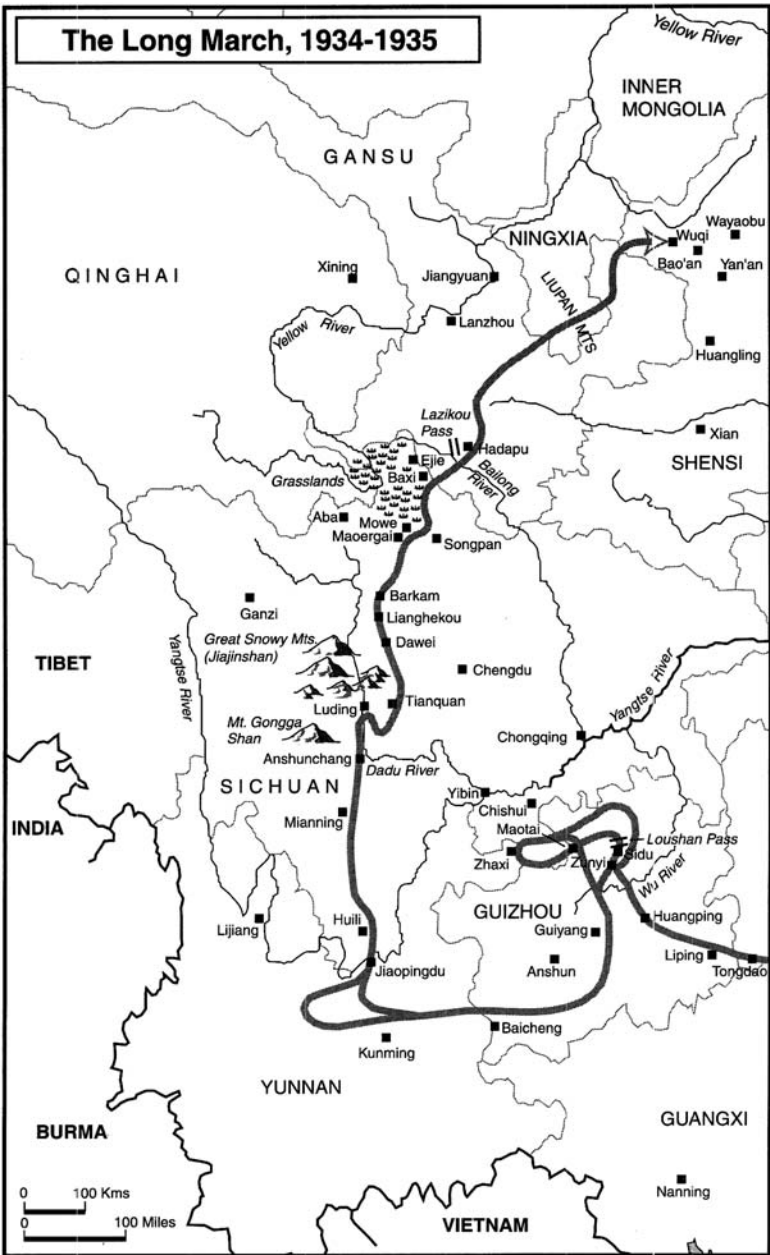
Mao might have been no more successful. But Bo Gu had sidelined him more than two years before. Mao was not in power.

In October 1934, after months of agonised debates among the Party leadership, the Reds abandoned their base area in a last despairing gamble to ward off total defeat as Chiang's forces closed in for the kill. Their 6,000-mile trek across China would later be celebrated as the Long March, an epic symbol of courage in adversity, selfless discipline and indomitable will. At the time it was called, more prosaically, the 'strategic transfer', and a little later, the March to the West. The plan, in so far as there was one, was to make for north-west Hunan, where the local warlords were wary of Chiang's ambitions and reluctant to make common cause with him, and there to link up with other communist forces to create a new central Red base area to replace the one they had just lost.

It started well enough. The Red Army slipped through the first line of blockhouses, meeting little resistance. The next two lines also fell. More than three weeks passed before nationalist intelligence realised that its prey had escaped.⁵ But Chiang's fourth line, on the Xiang River, was different.

The battle lasted more than a week, from November 25 to December 3.⁶ When it ended, the Red Army had lost between 15,000 and 20,000 combat troops. Up to 40,000 reserves and bearers had deserted. Of the 86,000 men and women who had set out in October, not many more than 30,000 were left. The baggage train, which had stretched for fifty miles, a serpentine leviathan which, Mao said later, resembled a house-moving operation more than an army on the march,⁷ had its back broken at the Xiang River. Scattered in the mud and littering the hillsides were the office furniture, the printing presses, the Party archives, the generators – all the paraphernalia that the communists had amassed in three years' rule of a region bigger than Belgium – which had been lugged painfully on the backs of porters over mountain paths and paddy fields for hundreds of wearisome miles. Artillery pieces, heavy machine-guns, the one X-ray machine the communists possessed, all were jettisoned. But not before they had so slowed the army's progress

The Long March, 1934-1935





that, bloated and weak, it had dragged itself into the trap which Chiang Kai-shek had set.

It was a worse disaster than even the most phlegmatic Red Army leaders were prepared for. In October, the base they had spent years building had been abandoned; now two-thirds of their army had been lost as well.

A week later, having thrown off their pursuers, the remnants of the communist forces crossed into southern Hunan. They had regrouped and were in good order. But among the senior leadership, mutiny was in the air. The time was fast approaching when the troika would be called to account.

But not quite yet. The eight or nine weary men who met that afternoon at Tongdao faced a much more pressing question: where to head next? Bo Gu and Otto Braun insisted they keep to the original plan and make for north-west Hunan. The military commanders refused. Chiang Kai-shek had 300,000 troops blocking the route north. To try to force a passage was to court annihilation. A decision had to be made fast. Word came that Hunan warlord troops were closing in from the east.

After a tense, hurried debate, it was agreed as an interim measure that the army would go west, into the mountain fastness of Guizhou.⁸ There a full meeting of the Politburo would be called to discuss future strategy. The compromise proposal came from Mao. It was the first time since his dismissal from the military command in 1932 that his views had been heard and accepted in the inner circle of power. His presence was due only to the gravity of the Xiang River defeat. But a journey of 10,000 li, say the Chinese, starts with a single step. For Mao, Tongdao was that step.

Guizhou is, and has been for centuries, one of the poorest of China's provinces. In the 1930s, the villages were opium-sodden, the people illiterate and so impoverished that whole families possessed only a single pair of trousers. Girls were frequently killed at birth; boys were sold to slave-merchants for resale in richer areas near the coast. But it was a place of exquisite natural grandeur: the countryside that unrolled before the Red Army, as it marched west, was drawn from the fantastic landscapes of a Ming scroll.

Beyond Tongdao the hills grow steeper, the mountains wider and more contorted: great conical limestone mounds, thousands of feet high; mountains like camels' humps, like giant anthills; plum-pudding mountains like ancestral tumuli. Miao villages perch on the bluffs – clusters of thatched roofs and ochre walls, with overhanging eaves and latticed paper windows, standing out dark against a yellowish-green

PROLOGUE

carpet of dead winter grasses and early shoots of spring. Hawks circle above; frost lies white on the rice stubble below. Guizhou people say: 'No three days without rain; no three li without a mountain.' In this part of the province there are only mountains and, in December and January, perpetual drizzle and fog. The higher slopes, wrapped in mist, are thick with pine forests, golden bamboo and dark green firs, while far below, the valley bottoms are filled with bright lakes of white cloud. Chain bridges are slung across the rivers, and alongside the torrents that cascade down from the heights are pocket-handkerchief sized patches of cultivated land, where a peasant works on a fifty-degree slope to coax a few poor vegetables from the dark red soil.

The soldiers remembered only the rigours of the journey. 'We went up a mountain so steep that I could see the soles of the man ahead of me,' one army man recalled. 'News came down the line that our advance columns were facing a sheer cliff, and ... to sleep where we were and continue climbing at daybreak ... The stars looked like jade stones on a black curtain. The dark peaks towered around us like menacing giants. We seemed to be at the bottom of a well.'⁹ The cliff, known locally as the Thunder God Rock, had stone steps a foot wide carved into its face. It was too steep for stretcher-bearers: the wounded had to be carried up on men's backs. Many horses fell to their deaths on the rocks below.¹⁰

The Red Army Commander, Zhu De, remembered the poverty. 'The peasants call themselves "dry men",' he noted. 'They are sucked dry of everything ... People dig rotten rice from the ground under a landlord's old granary. The monks call this "holy rice", Heaven's gift to the poor.'¹¹

Mao saw these things too. But he wrote instead of the power and beauty of the country through which they were passing:

Mountains!
Surging waves in a tumultuous sea,
Ten thousand stallions
Galloping in the heat of battle.

Mountains!
Blade-sharp, piercing the blue of heaven.
But for your strength upholding
*The skies would break loose and fall.*¹²

These short poems, composed in the saddle, were not simply a celebration of the elemental forces of nature. Mao had reason to exult.

*

MAO

On December 15, the Red Army reached Liping, a county seat in a valley surrounded by low, terraced hills, and the first level ground they had seen since leaving Tongdao. Military headquarters were set up in a merchant's house, a spacious, well-appointed place with a small inner courtyard, ornamented by Buddhist motifs and emblems of prosperity. It had four-poster beds and a tiny Chinese garden behind, and opened on to a narrow street of wood-fronted shops and houses with grey-tiled roofs and upturned bird's-wing eaves. A few doors further down stood a German Lutheran mission. The missionaries, like the merchant, had fled at the communists' approach.

It was here that the Politburo met for its first formal discussion of policy since the Long March began.¹³ There were two main issues: the Red Army's destination, which was still unresolved; and military tactics.

Braun and Bo Gu wanted to join up with the communist forces in northern Hunan. Mao proposed heading north-west, to set up a new Red base area on the border between Guizhou and southern Sichuan, where, he argued, resistance would be weaker. He was supported by Zhang Wentian, one of the four members of the Politburo Standing Committee, and Wang Jiaxiang, Vice-Chairman of the Military Commission, who had been gravely wounded in battle a year earlier and spent the whole of the Long March in a litter with a rubber tube sticking out of his stomach. Both were Moscow-trained. Both had initially backed Braun and Bo Gu but had grown disillusioned. Mao had been cultivating them ever since the march began. Now they swung the balance in his favour. Sensing the mood of the meeting, Zhou Enlai added his voice and most of the rest of the Politburo fell in behind. Bo Gu's proposal was rejected. Instead they resolved to set up a new base area with its centre at Zunyi, Guizhou's second city, or, if that proved too difficult, further to the north-west.

But Mao did not have it all his own way. On tactics, the resolution was more even-handed. It warned against 'underestimating possible losses to our own side, leading to pessimism and defeatism' – an implicit reference to the rout on the Xiang River and thus a criticism of the military line of the three-man group of Zhou, Bo Gu and Braun; in the same vein, it ordered the army to refrain from large-scale engagements until the new base area had been secured. But it also spoke of the danger of 'guerrillaism', a codeword for the 'flexible guerrilla strategy' associated with Mao. Zhou Enlai evidently was not prepared to yield to Mao without a fight.¹⁴

Next day, December 20, the Red Army resumed its march. Bo Gu and Otto Braun were fatally weakened. The real conflict shaping up was now between Mao and Zhou.

PROLOGUE

They had so little in common, these two men: Zhou, a mandarin's son, a rebel against his class, supple, subtle, the quintessential survivor, who had learned the cheapness of life as a communist working underground in Shanghai, where death was never more than a whisper of betrayal away; Mao, a peasant to his roots, earthy and coarse, his speech laced with picaresque aphorisms, contemptuous of city-dwellers. One was urbane and refined, the indefatigable executor of other men's ideas; the other, an unpredictable visionary. For most of the next forty years they would form one of the world's most enduring political partnerships. But as 1934 drew to a close, that was far from both their minds.

On December 31, the army command halted at a small trading centre called Houchang (Monkey Town), twenty-five miles south of the River Wu, the last natural barrier before they reached Zunyi.¹⁵ That night the Politburo met again. Otto Braun proposed that the army make a stand against three warlord divisions which were reported to be closing in on them. The military commanders reminded him that they had agreed at Liping to avoid large-scale set-piece battles and give priority to securing the new base area. After a furious argument lasting late into the night, Braun was suspended as military adviser. To underline the importance of the change, the Politburo resolution approving it included a ringing endorsement of one of Mao's cardinal principles, which had been ignored for the previous two years. 'No opportunity should be missed,' it declared, 'to use mobile warfare to break up and destroy the enemy one by one. Then we shall certainly gain victory.'

The tide had turned. The old chain of command under the troika had broken down. As a temporary measure, it was agreed that all major decisions would be referred to the leadership as a whole. The old strategy had been abandoned. A new one had to be worked out to replace it. In the early hours of New Year's Day, the Politburo agreed to convene an enlarged conference at Zunyi. It was to have three tasks: to review the past, determine what had gone wrong, and chart a course for the future. The stage was set for a showdown.

Deng Xiaoping was thirty years old, a stocky man, very short, with a close-shaven bullet head. As a teenager in Paris he had learned how to produce a news-sheet for the local branch of the Chinese Communist Youth League, scratching characters on to a waxed sheet with a stylus and rolling off copies in black Chinese ink, made from soot and tung oil. His reputation as a journalist had stuck. Now he was editor of the Red Army newspaper,

an equally crude mimeographed one-page broadsheet called *Hongxing* (Red Star).

The issue of January 15, 1935, related how the people of Zunyi had welcomed the communist forces after they had taken the city without a shot being fired: the advance guard had persuaded the defenders to open the city gates by pretending to be part of a local warlord force. Other articles described in glowing terms 'the Red Army's image in the hearts of the masses', and recorded the establishment of a Revolutionary Committee to administer the city.¹⁶

Nowhere did it give the slightest hint that the Politburo was about to hold the most important meeting in its history, which Deng himself would attend as note-taker – a meeting so sensitive that, for almost a month after, senior Party officials were kept in ignorance of its decisions, until the leaders had met again to decide how the news should be broken to them.

Twenty men gathered that night on the upper floor of a handsome, rectangular, two-storey building of dark-grey brick, surrounded by a colonnaded veranda.¹⁷ It had been the home of one of the city's minor warlords until Zhou and the military commanders took it for their headquarters. Bo Gu and Otto Braun were billeted close by, along a lane leading to the Roman Catholic Cathedral, an ornate, imposing structure with a fanciful three-tiered roof, more chinoiserie than Chinese, set amid flower gardens where the Red Army detachment escorting the leadership was encamped. Mao and his two allies, Zhang Wentian and Wang Jiaxiang, with six bodyguards, were in another warlord's house, with art-deco woodwork and stained-glass windows, on the other side of town. Ever since they had arrived, a week earlier, Mao had been canvassing support. Now the preparations were over. The two sides were ready to do battle. In Otto Braun's words:

It was obvious that [Mao] wanted revenge ... In 1932 ... his military and political [power] had been broken ... Now there emerged the possibility – years of partisan struggle had been directed at bringing it about – that by demagogic exploitation of isolated organisational and tactical mistakes, but especially through concocted claims and slanderous imputations, he could discredit the Party leadership and isolate ... Bo Gu. He would rehabilitate himself completely [and] take the Army firmly into his grasp, thereby subordinating the Party itself to his will.¹⁸

The small, crowded room where the meeting was held overlooked an inner courtyard. In the centre, a brazier full of glowing charcoal threw

PROLOGUE

its puny heat at the damp, raw cold of the Zunyi winter. Wang Jiaxiang and another wounded general lay stretched out on bamboo chaise-longues. Braun and his interpreter sat away from the main group, near the door.

Bo Gu, as acting Party leader, presented the main report. He argued that the loss of the central Red base area and the military disasters that had followed were due not to faulty policy, but to the enemy's overwhelming strength and the support the nationalists had received from the imperialist Powers.

Zhou Enlai spoke next. He acknowledged having made errors. But he, too, refused to concede that the policy had been wrong. Zhou still had hopes of saving something from the ruins.

Zhang Wentian then presented the case for a change in strategy, which had been alluded to though not discussed openly at Liping and Houchang, and Mao followed up with a full-scale attack on the troika and its methods.¹⁹ Braun remembered, forty years later, that he spoke not extempore, as he usually did, but from a manuscript, 'painstakingly prepared'.²⁰ The fundamental problem, Mao said, was not the strength of the enemy: it was that the Party had deviated from the 'basic strategic and tactical principles with which the Red Army [had in the past] won victories', in other words, the 'flexible guerrilla strategy' which he and Zhu De had developed. But for that, he claimed, the nationalist encirclement would probably have been defeated. Instead, the Red Army had been ordered to fight a defensive, positional war, building blockhouses to counter the enemy's blockhouses, dispersing its forces in a vain attempt to preserve 'every inch of soviet territory' and abandoning mobile warfare. Temporarily surrendering territory could be justified, Mao said. Jeopardising the Red Army's strength could not, because it was through the army – and the army alone – that territory could be regained.²¹

Mao laid the blame for these errors squarely on Otto Braun. The Comintern adviser had imposed wrong tactics on the army, he said, and his 'rude method of leadership' had led to 'extremely abnormal phenomena' within the Military Council, a reference to Braun's hectoring, dictatorial style, which was widely resented. Bo Gu, Mao declared, had failed to exert adequate political leadership, allowing errors in military line to go unchecked.

When Mao sat down, Wang Jiaxiang launched his own tirade against Braun's methods. Another Moscow-trained leader, He Kaifeng, then sprang to Bo's defence. Some of those present, like Chen Yun, a former print-worker who had been close to Zhou in Shanghai, found Mao's

attack one-sided.²² Although Chen had no military role, he was a Standing Committee member and his opinions carried weight. Others may have had in the back of their minds a message received from Wang Ming in Moscow shortly before they left the base area, indicating that the Comintern took a favourable view of Mao's experience as a military leader.²³ The ground commanders, whose armies had had to pay the price of the troika's mistakes, also weighed in. Peng Dehuai, a gruff, outspoken general who cared for only two things in life, the victory of the communist cause and the welfare of his men, likened Braun to 'a prodigal son, who had squandered his father's goods' – a reference to the loss of the base area for which Peng, with Mao and Zhu, had expended so much time and blood.

Braun himself sat immobile in his corner near the door, smoking furiously, as his interpreter, growing increasingly agitated and confused, tried to translate what was said. When he finally spoke, it was to reject the accusations en bloc. He was merely an adviser, he said; the Chinese leadership, not he, was responsible for the policies it followed.

This was disingenuous. Under Stalin in the 1930s a Comintern representative, even an adviser, had extraordinary powers. Yet there was some truth in what he said. Braun had not had the last word on military affairs. That had rested with Zhou Enlai.

Mao had no illusions that Zhou was his real adversary. He had known it since Zhou had arrived in the Red base area at the end of 1931 and unceremoniously elbowed him aside. Neither the amiable Zhang Wentian nor, still less, Bo Gu, was a serious contender for ultimate power. Zhou Enlai was. But to have attacked Zhou head-on at Zunyi would have been to tear the leadership apart in a battle which Mao could not win. So, in a move characteristic of his political and military style, he concentrated his attack on the weakest points of Zhou's armoury, Braun and Bo Gu, while leaving his chief opponent a face-saving way out.

Zhou took it. On the second day of the conference he spoke again. This time he acknowledged that the military line had been 'fundamentally incorrect', and made a lengthy self-criticism. It was the kind of manoeuvre at which Zhou excelled. From being Mao's opponent, he transformed himself into an ally. Mao, of course, knew better. So did Zhou. But for the moment there was a truce.

The resolution drawn up afterwards excoriated Zhou's two colleagues in the troika for their 'extremely bad leadership'. Braun was accused of 'treating war as a game', 'monopolising the work of the Military

PROLOGUE

Council' and using punishment rather than reason to suppress 'by all available means' views which differed from his own. Bo Gu was held to have committed 'serious political mistakes'. But Zhou escaped unscathed, even managing, on paper at least, to achieve a short-lived promotion: when the troika was officially dissolved, he took over its powers with the cumbersome title of 'final decision-maker on behalf of the Central Committee in dealing with military affairs'. His role in the débâcle that had preceded the Zunyi conference was passed over in silence. The resolution condemned the 'elephantine' supply columns which had slowed the advance, but omitted to say that it was Zhou who had organised them. It referred to 'the leaders of the policy of pure defence', and on one occasion, to 'Otto Braun and the others', but did not say who those 'others' were. Zhou was mentioned explicitly only once, as having given the 'supplementary report' following Bo Gu's. Even then, in all copies of the resolution except those distributed to the highest-ranking cadres, the three characters of his name were left blank.

Mao was named to the Politburo Standing Committee, and became Zhou's chief military adviser. Small recompense, it might seem, for two years in the wilderness. But, as so often in China, the spirit of these decisions counted far more than the letter. Even Braun acknowledged that 'most of those at the meeting'²⁴ ended up in agreement with Mao. In spirit, Mao's cause had triumphed. Zhou, notwithstanding his new title, was identified with the discredited leadership whose policies had been condemned.

Over the next few months the spirit was given flesh.²⁵ Early in February, Bo Gu was replaced as acting Party leader by Mao's ally, Zhang Wentian. A month later a Front Headquarters was established, with Zhu De as Commander and Mao as Political Commissar, which effectively removed a large measure of Zhou's operational control. Soon afterwards, his power was further eroded when a new troika was established, consisting of Zhou, Mao, and Wang Jiaxiang. By early summer, when the Red Army succeeded in crossing the River of Golden Sand into Sichuan, Mao had established himself as its uncontested leader.

Other battles lay ahead. It would be eight more years before Mao was formally installed as Chairman, the title he would keep until his death. But Zhou's challenge was over. He would pay dearly for it. In 1943, his position was so precarious that the former head of the Comintern, Georgii Dimitrov, pleaded with Mao not to have him expelled from the Party.²⁶ Mao kept him. Not because of Dimitrov but

because Zhou was too useful to waste. The future Premier was instead humiliated. In the new Party Central Committee, formed two years later, he ranked twenty-third.

Twenty-five years after Zunyi, in the spring of 1961, Mao was aboard his private train, travelling through his home province of Hunan in southern China.²⁷

The years seemed to have been good to him. Adulated and glorified as China's Great Helmsman, the ageing, corpulent figure whose moon face gazed out serenely from the Gate of Heavenly Peace appeared to the rest of the world as undisputed ruler of the most populous nation on earth and standard-bearer of a puritanical global revolution which the fleshpots of Khrushchevite revisionism had abandoned.

Yet Mao was not as the rest of the world imagined.

He was accompanied on this journey, as on all such trips, by a number of attractive young women with whom he shared, severally or together, the pleasures of an oversized bed, which was specially installed wherever he went, not so much for carnal reasons as to accommodate the piles of books he insisted on keeping at his side.²⁸ Like Stalin, who, after his wife's suicide, was provided with attractive 'housekeepers' by his security chief, Lavrentii Beria, Mao in late middle age had given up on family life. He found in his relations with girls a third his own age a normality which was denied him elsewhere.

By the 1960s Mao was totally cut off from the country that he ruled, so isolated by his eminence that bodyguards and advance parties choreographed his every move. Sex was his one freedom, the one moment in his day when he could treat other human beings as equals and be treated as such in return. A century earlier the boy Emperor, Tongzhi, used to slip out of the palace incognito, accompanied by one of his courtiers, to visit the brothels of Beijing. For Mao that was impossible. Women came to him. They revelled in his power. He revelled in their bodies. 'I wash my prick in their cunts,' he told his personal physician, a strait-laced man whom he took a perverse delight in shocking. 'I was nauseated,' the good doctor wrote afterwards.²⁹

Mao's peccadilloes, like the private lives of all the leaders, were hidden behind an impenetrable curtain of revolutionary purity. But on the train one afternoon that February, the veil was suddenly pierced.

He had spent the night with a young woman teacher and, as was his custom, had risen late and then left to attend a meeting. Afterwards she

PROLOGUE

was talking with other members of Mao's suite when a technician joined them. Mao's doctor takes up the story:

'I heard you talking today,' the young technician suddenly said to the teacher, interrupting our idle chatter.

'What do you mean you heard me talking?' she responded. 'Talking about what?'

'When the Chairman was getting ready to meet [Hunan First Secretary] Zhang Pinghua, you told him to hurry up and put on his clothes.'

The young woman blanched. 'What else did you hear?' she asked quietly.

'I heard everything,' he answered, teasing.³⁰

Thus did Mao discover that, on the orders of his senior colleagues, for the previous eighteen months all his conversations, not to mention his lovemaking, had been bugged and secretly tape-recorded.³¹ At the time, the only heads to roll, and those not literally, were of three low-level officials, among them the hapless technician. But four years later, when the first political tremors announcing the Cultural Revolution began to roil the surface calm of Party unity, Mao's fellow leaders would have done well to have reflected more deeply on what had led them to approve those secret tape-recordings.

In one sense their motives had been innocent enough. The six men who, with Mao, made up the Politburo Standing Committee, at the summit of a Party which now counted 20 million members, were all Zunyi veterans, part of the minuscule elite which had accompanied him throughout the long odyssey to win power. By the early 1960s, they found the Chairman increasingly difficult to read. They wanted advance warning of what he was thinking, so as not to be caught off-guard by a sudden change in political line or an off-the-cuff remark to a foreign visitor. Yang Shangkun, another Zunyi survivor, who headed the Central Committee's General Office, decided that modern technology, in the shape of recording machines, was the obvious answer. From that standpoint it was almost a compliment. Mao had achieved such Olympian status that his every word must be preserved. But it also reflected an uneasy awareness within the Politburo of the mental gulf that had developed between the Chairman and his subordinates – which was all that the other leaders now were.

From this mental chasm sprang an ideological and political divide which, before the decade was out, would convulse all China in an iconoclastic spasm of terror, destroying both the Zunyi fellowship and the ideas that it had espoused.

MAO

The struggle in the 1960s was more subtle, more complex, and ultimately far bloodier and more ruthless than that of thirty years before. Small wonder: all that had been at stake at Zunyi was the leadership of a ragtag army of 30,000 men playing an apparently dwindling role on the periphery of Chinese politics. In Beijing the battle was for control of a nation which would soon number more than a billion people. But the ground rules were the same. On that earlier occasion, Mao himself had spelt them out:

Under unfavourable conditions, we should refuse ... battle, withdraw our main forces back to a suitable distance, transfer them to the rear or flanks of the enemy and concentrate them in secret, induce the enemy to commit mistakes and expose weaknesses by tiring and wearing him out and confusing him, and thus enable ourselves to gain victory in a decisive battle.³²

'War is politics,' he wrote later. 'Politics is war by other means.'³³

CHAPTER ONE

A Confucian Childhood

In winter, in Hunan, the wind howls bone-cold across bare fields of dry yellow earth, kicking up the dust so that it stings the eyes of the horses and makes men squint as they lean into the frozen air, their faces like leather masks. This is the dead season of the year. The peasants, in unheated mud-brick huts, bundle themselves up in layers of dirty, quilted cotton, drawing their hands up into their sleeves so that only their heads protrude warily from the folds of blue cloth, tortoise-like, waiting for better days.

Mao was born into a Hunanese peasant household in the village of Shaoshan, a few days after the winter solstice, the great mid-winter festival when the Emperor Guangxu in far-off Beijing was borne in solemn procession to the Temple of Heaven to perform the sacrificial rites and give thanks for another year safely passed.¹ It was the nineteenth day of the eleventh month of the Year of the Snake by the old calendar, December 26 1893 by the new.²

By tradition, which was strictly adhered to in the case of a firstborn son, the baby was not bathed until three days after the birth.³ A fortune-teller was then called in and a horoscope drawn up, which showed that the family was lacking in the water element. Mao's father therefore named him Zedong, because the character *ze*, 'to anoint', which has the secondary meaning, 'beneficent',⁴ is held in Hunanese geomantic lore to remedy such a deficiency.* That marked the start of a year of the Buddhist

* Attempts to translate Chinese names are misguided. The name Mao Zedong means literally 'Anoint the East' Hair, for that is what the characters *ze*, *dong* and *mao* individually signify. Used together in a name, however, they no more have that connotation to a Chinese than Philip signifies 'Lover of Horses' in English or the name, Pierre, suggests 'stone' to a Frenchman. There are exceptions, both in antiquity and in recent times (during the Cultural Revolution, for example, many Chinese changed their names to make them

and Daoist folk-rituals with which Chinese peasants through the ages have tempered the harshness of their existence, adding a touch of colour and excitement to the severe Confucian teachings around which their lives were fashioned and society revolved. After four weeks, the baby's head was shaved, apart from a small tuft left on the crown by which 'to hold him to life'. A few copper cash, or sometimes a small silver padlock, attached to a red cord, were placed around his neck for the same purpose. In some families, the hair that had been cut was mixed with the hairs of a dog and sewn into the child's clothing so that evil spirits would see him as an animal and leave him alone. Others made a boy-child wear an earring so that the spirits would think he was a girl and not worth bothering with.

By the standards of the time, Mao's family was comfortably off.⁵ His father, Shunsheng,⁶ had enlisted at the age of sixteen in the army of the Viceroy of Hunan and Hubei, and within five or six years had accumulated a small capital, with which he bought land. By the time Mao was born, the family owned two-and-a-half-acres of rice paddy, a substantial holding in a county renowned as being among the wealthiest and most fertile in one of the richest rice-growing provinces in China.⁷ His father, a thrifty man who counted every copper cash, later bought another acre and took on two farm labourers. He gave them a daily ration of rice and, as a special concession once a month, a dish of rice cooked with eggs – but never meat.

His penny-pinching coloured Mao's image of his father from an early age. 'To me,' he later recalled pointedly, 'he gave neither eggs nor meat.' Although there was always enough to go round, the family ate frugally. To Mao as a small boy, this stinginess was compounded by a lack of paternal affection, a deficiency made all the more glaring by the warmth and gentleness of his mother. It blinded him to his father's good points, the single-mindedness, drive and determination which Mao would later demonstrate in such abundance in his own life. While still a child he came to view the family as split into two camps: his mother and himself on one side, his father on the other.

A combination of parsimony and unrelenting grind soon made Mao's father one of the most prosperous men in Shaoshan, which then had a population of about 300 families, most of them also surnamed Mao, theirs being the dominant clan.

more revolutionary), but even where a name does have an unambiguous meaning, it is often not understood as such. Shaoshan, for instance, has the literal meaning, 'Music Mountain', but to its inhabitants it is simply the name of the village.

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

In those days, a peasant family in Hunan was thought to be doing well if it had an acre-and-a-half of land and a three-roomed house.⁸ Mao's parents had more than twice that much, and built a large, rambling farmhouse, with a grey-tiled roof and upturned eaves, beside a cascade of terraced rice-fields tumbling down a narrow valley. Pine woods stood behind and there was a lotus pond in front. Mao had a bedroom to himself, an almost unheard-of luxury, and when he was older would sit up late at night reading, hiding his oil-lamp behind a blue cloth so that his father would not see. Later, after his brothers were born, they too had rooms of their own.⁹ His father's capital amounted to two or three thousand Chinese silver dollars, 'a great fortune in that small village', as Mao himself acknowledged.¹⁰ Rather than extend his own land-holdings, he bought mortgages on other peasants' land, thus indirectly becoming a landlord.¹¹ He also purchased grain from poor farmers in the village and sent it for resale in the county seat, Xiangtan, thirty miles away.¹² A sprawling agglomeration of several hundred thousand people, Xiangtan was then the hub of the provincial tea trade and an important entrepot and financial centre because of its position on the Xiang River, Hunan's largest navigable waterway and the main artery of trade in the province. From Shaoshan, it was two days' journey by oxcart along a rutted earthen track, although porters could do it in one, carrying 80 kilograms of merchandise on their backs.

Much as he might complain about his father's meanness, Mao inherited his sense of thrift. Throughout his adult life, at least where his own person was concerned, he was famously unwilling to buy anything new if the old one could be patched up and made to serve a little longer.¹³

The earthiness of his childhood proved equally tenacious.¹⁴ Hygiene was rudimentary, and washing as much a rarity as in medieval Europe. 'A total apathy in regard to matter in the wrong place pervades all classes from the highest to the lowest,' wrote a contemporary observer. 'Gorgeous silks conceal an unwashed skin, and from under the rich sable cuffs of the official protrude fingernails innocent of soap or penknife.'¹⁵ To the end of his days, Mao preferred a rub with a steaming towel to washing with soap and water.¹⁶ Nor did he ever get the hang of using a toothbrush. Instead, like most rural southerners, he rinsed his mouth with tea.¹⁷

The other constants of peasant life were bedbugs, lice and itch-sores. When Mao itched, he scratched: at Bao'an, in the 1930s, he had no compunction about lowering his trousers, while receiving a foreign

visitor, to search for an uninvited guest in his underwear.¹⁸ In part, he disdained convention; in part, it was ingrained peasant habit. Nowhere was that more viscerally evident than in his attitude to the workings of his own body. The Chinese as a nation have always been unfazed by natural processes which send Anglo-Saxons in particular into contortions of squeamishness. Small children were, and in many parts of the countryside still are, brought up wearing split trousers so that they can squat and relieve themselves wherever the urge takes them. Adults used communal latrines, where defecation was a social event. Mao was never reconciled to Western-style lavatories with a seat and flushing water. Even at Zhongnanhai in the early 1950s, when he was already Head of State, it was one of the duties of his personal bodyguards to follow him out into the garden with a shovel, and dig a hole in the ground for Mao to perform his bowel movement. The practice ended only after Zhou Enlai arranged for a specially built latrine which met with Mao's approval to be installed next to his bedroom.¹⁹ He was equally ill at ease with Western-style beds, insisting all his life on having hard wooden boards to sleep on.

When Mao was six he started helping in the fields like other children of his age, carrying out the small tasks which Chinese peasant families always left to the old and the very young: watching over the cattle and tending the ducks.²⁰ Two years later, his father sent him to the village school – an important decision for it cost four or five silver dollars a year, nearly six months of a labourer's wages.²¹

Among all except the very wealthy, every family's dream in nineteenth-century China was to have a son whose brilliance in expounding the classical Confucian texts would win him a place of honour in the imperial examinations, opening the way to an official career with all the prestige, and opportunities for 'squeeze', which that entailed. In the words of one of the most sympathetic Western observers of Chinese life at that time:

Education is the royal road to the honours and emoluments that the state has to bestow, and it is by means of it that the wildest ambition that ever ran riot through a young man's brain can ultimately be satisfied. In the West there are many ways by which a man may rise to eminence, and finally occupy a prominent position as a member of Parliament, or as holding some office under Government that will bring him before the notice of the public. In China they are all narrowed down to one, and it is the one that leads from the schoolhouse ... It may be confidently asserted that every schoolboy carries in his satchel a possible

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

viceroys when . . . untrammelled by parliaments, he may rule over twenty or thirty millions of people.²²

Yet the dream was for the few. Most of the population was too poor to take even the first step: learning to read and write.²³

Mao's mother, Wen Qimei, literally 'Seventh Sister', the peasant custom then being not to name girls, but simply to number them in order of their birth, may have had dreams for him. Three years older than her husband, she was a devout Buddhist. She introduced her son to the mysteries of the village temple with its fantastic images of arhats and bodhisattvas, blackened by grime and smoke, the air heavy with the smell of incense; and later she grieved when, as an adolescent, his faith began to falter.

Mao's father did not dream. His ambitions, typical of the small landlord he had become, were much more down-to-earth.²⁴ He himself was barely literate, having had but two years' schooling. He wanted his son to do better, but for strictly practical ends: to keep the farm accounts, and then later, after an apprenticeship with a rice merchant in Xiangtan, to take over the family business and support his parents in their old age.²⁵

Royal road it might be, but a village school in the last days of the Chinese Empire was a grim place, calculated to dampen the boldest spirit.²⁶ It consisted of a single room with bare mud-brick walls and a floor of beaten earth, unheated in winter, sweltering in summer, with a central door and two small apertures at each end allowing in air and a little light to pierce the gloom. The school year began in February, on the 17th of the First Moon, two days after the Lantern Festival, which brought to an end the festivities marking the Chinese New Year. Each boy waited at the school gate, carrying a small desk and stool which he had brought from home. Usually there were about twenty of them, the youngest, like Mao, seven or eight years old, the oldest seventeen or eighteen. They all wore identical loose jackets, cross-tied at the front, of homespun blue cotton, and loose, baggy trousers made from the same material. The teacher sat at a table, with an ink-stone and water-dropper, a small earthenware teapot and cup, bamboo tallies to record the presence of each pupil, and a stout bamboo rod before him. Tradition held that he should show no sign of interest in, or sympathy for, his students lest it endanger his authority, which was absolute.

Mao's teacher was in that mould. He belonged to the 'stern-treatment school . . . harsh and severe', Mao remembered.²⁷ They learned to fear his bamboo rod, which he used frequently, and his 'incense board' – a slatted

wooden washboard on which a pupil would be made to kneel for the time it took an incense-stick to burn down.²⁸

If the material conditions were depressing, the method of teaching was more so. There were no picture books to excite the imaginations of Mao and his classmates, no simple stories to capture the attention of their young minds. Instead, they were subjected to a system of rote-learning, which had been handed down almost unchanged for 2,000 years and whose guiding principle was to keep knowledge the preserve of the elite by making it as difficult as possible to acquire.

The first schoolbook with which the children of Mao's generation were presented was the *Three Character Classic*, so-called because each of its 356 lines contains three Chinese characters. Written in the eleventh century to introduce young people to Confucian ideas, it opens with the words:

Men at their birth are by nature radically good,
In this, all approximate, but in practice widely diverge.

To which a fifteenth-century commentator adds:

This is the commencement of a course of education and explains first principles ... That which heaven produces is called 'man'; that which it confers is called 'nature'; the possession of correct moral principle is called 'goodness' ... This refers to man at his birth. The wise and the simple, the upright and the vicious, all agree in their nature, radically resembling each other, without any difference. But when their knowledge has expanded, their dispositions and endowments all vary ... thus perverting the correct principles of their virtuous nature ... The superior man alone has the merit of supporting rectitude. He does not allow the youthful buddings of his natural character to become vitiated.²⁹

That is heavy going for eight-year-olds in any circumstances. But to the strain of mastering such abstruse metaphysical notions was added another, more fundamental obstacle.

The textbooks were printed on flimsy paper in large characters, five pairs of lines to a page.³⁰ First the teacher would summon the pupil to his table and make the child repeat after him the lines he was to learn, until he had them off by heart. Then the next child would come up, until the whole class had been seen, and each boy had returned to his desk to practice what he had learned while tracing, on thin slips of paper, the shapes of the corresponding characters. But not in silence:

After [being] informed what sounds to utter, each [pupil] spends his time in bawling out the characters at the top of his voice to make sure he is

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

not idle, as well as to let the teacher hear whether the sounds have been correctly caught. When the lesson has been 'learned', that is when the scholar is able to howl it off exactly as the master pronounced it, he stands with his back to the teacher and repeats (or 'backs') the lesson in a loud sing-song voice until he reaches the end of his task, or the end of what he remembers, when his voice suddenly drops from its high pitch like a June beetle that has struck a dead wall.³¹

As each one practised in his own time, the result was an incomprehensible cacophony.³² Incomprehensible, not merely to others but also to themselves. For the meanings of Chinese characters are, in most cases, not immediately apparent from their form. The teacher did not explain what any of the lines meant: he merely required his pupils to be able to reproduce, singly or as blocks of text, the characters they had learned and the sounds they represented.³³

Altogether six books had to be memorised in this way. After the *Three Character Classic* came the *Book of Names*, which lists in an arbitrary and unbroken sequence the 454 permitted Chinese surnames; the *Thousand Character Classic*, written in the sixth century, composed of a thousand characters, no two of which are the same; the *Odes for Children*, on the importance of study and literary pursuits; the *Xiaoqing*, or *Filial Classic*, which is ascribed to Confucius himself and dates back at least to the fourth century; and the *Xiaoxue*, or *Filial Learning*, which sets out in exhaustive detail the duties of each member of the Confucian family and state.³⁴

It was like asking a child in Britain or America, speaking only English, to learn by heart a sizeable part of the Old Testament in Greek. The result was that many Chinese completed their schooling without ever learning to read or knowing the meanings of more than a handful of characters.³⁵

For two years, until Mao was about ten, he spent his days from sunrise to dusk memorising, copying and reciting moralistic phrases like, 'Diligence has merit; play yields no profit', having no idea what they meant.³⁶ The only respite was on festival days, which came round on average once a month, and in the three weeks' holiday when the school closed over the Chinese New Year.

Then, finally, the teacher began to work through the texts again, this time explaining their meaning.

For Mao, as for all Chinese of his generation, the importance of these texts and their commentaries, together with the Four Books – the Confucian Analects, the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the works of Mencius – which he studied next, cannot be overstated.³⁷ The

ideas they contained, the way those ideas were formulated and the values and concepts that underpinned them, fixed the underlying pattern of Mao's thought for the rest of his life, just as surely as, in Western countries, the parameters of thought for atheists, no less than believers, are defined by Judæo-Christian values and ideas.

Learning the Classics may have been drudgery, but Mao realised early on that they were extremely useful. Confucian thought was the common currency of Chinese intellectual life, and quotations from the Master an essential weapon in argument and debate – as even Mao's father recognised after the family had been defeated in a lawsuit because of an apt Classical quotation used by their opponent.³⁸

Moreover, there were passages which, as a boy of eleven or twelve, Mao must have found exhilarating, prefiguring his lifelong exaltation of the power of the human will:

*Men must rely on their own efforts ...
In all the world there is nothing that is impossible,
It is the heart of man alone that is wanting resolution.*³⁹

The textbooks stressed, too, the importance of studying the past, another Confucian pursuit which was to stay with Mao all his life. His fascination with history may have come initially from novels like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Journey to the West*,⁴⁰ whose hero, the Monkey King, had captivated generations of Chinese, but his approach to it was that set out in the *Three Character Classic*:

*Records of rule and misrule, of the rise and fall of dynasties,
Let he who studies history examine these faithful chronicles,
Till he understands ancient and modern things as if before his eyes.*⁴¹

More broadly, Mao drew from Confucianism three key ideas which were to prove fundamental to the whole of his later thought. These were, first, the notion that every human being, and every society, must have a moral compass; if not Confucianism, then something else which fulfils that role. The second was the primacy of right-thinking, which Confucius called 'virtue': only if a person's thoughts were right – not merely correct, but morally right – would his actions be right. Third was the importance of self-cultivation.

Mao claimed to dislike the Classics,⁴² but his fondness for quoting them belies that. His speeches in later life were packed with allusions to Confucius, to the Daoist thinker, Zhuangzi, to the Mohists and other early philosophical schools, far outnumbering those to Lenin and

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

Marx.⁴³ Theirs were the ideas with which he grew up, and which he knew better than any other.⁴⁴ The Confucian legacy would prove at least as important to him as Marxism, and in the last years of his life it became once more ascendant.

While he was at the village school, Mao continued to help out with odd jobs on the farm and, at his father's insistence, learned how to use an abacus so that in the evenings, when he got home, he could do the daily accounts.

The family had grown. When he was two-and-a-half years old, Mao's mother had given birth to a second son, Zemin.⁴⁵ Four other children, two boys before Mao was born and afterwards two girls, died at birth, but in 1903 a third brother, Zetan, survived, and soon afterwards Mao's parents adopted a baby girl, Zejian, the child of one of his paternal uncles.⁴⁶ By 1906 there were six mouths to feed as well as the hired labour. So, shortly after Mao's thirteenth birthday, his father decided that he must work full-time.

Mao's relations with his father were difficult, though perhaps not more so than for most Chinese boys of his time. Filial piety was a fine concept, and Mao, like all his classmates, was brought up on exemplary tales, supposed to have come down from the deepest antiquity, of sons who performed extraordinary feats to show their devotion to their parents: Dong Yong of the Han, who sold himself into slavery to raise the money to give his father a proper burial; Yu Qianlu, who ate his dying father's excrement in the hope that the old man's life might be saved; and many others still more farfetched.⁴⁷ In theory, a father had the right to put to death an unfilial son. But in practice, all this was honoured in the breach.

'The term "filial" is misleading, and we should not be deceived by it,' wrote an American missionary towards the end of the nineteenth century. 'Of all the people of whom we have any knowledge, the sons of the Chinese are the most unfilial, disobedient to parents and pertinacious in having their own way from the time they are able to make known their wants.'⁴⁸

That was certainly so in Mao's case. While he accused his father of being hot-tempered, miserly and excessively strict, frequently beating himself and his brothers, even his own account makes clear that the blame was not all on one side:

My father invited many guests to his home, and while they were present a dispute arose between the two of us. My father denounced me before the whole group, calling me lazy and useless. This infuriated me. I cursed

him and left the house. My mother ran after me and tried to persuade me to return. My father also pursued me, cursing at the same time that he commanded me to come back. I reached the edge of a pond and threatened to jump in if he came any nearer . . . My father insisted that I apologise and kow-tow as a sign of submission. I agreed to give a one-knee kow-tow if he would promise not to beat me.⁴⁹

Mao neglected to mention that it was against every rule of propriety for a thirteen-year-old to argue with his father before guests, and the family must have lost much face as a result.

Years afterwards, Mao portrayed such experiences as teaching him the value of rebellion against authority: 'I learned that when I defended my rights by open rebellion my father relented, but when I remained weak and submissive he only beat me more.'

Yet what comes across most strongly is the essential ordinariness of it all. Mao's mother, whom he loved deeply – a kind woman, generous and sympathetic and ever ready to share what she had – trying to make peace. His father, angry and hurt, but wanting somehow to retrieve the situation. And Mao himself, recalcitrant but also wanting a way out. Hardly an untypical relationship between parents and a teenage child.

As Mao grew older, however, the atmosphere at home soured. His father perpetually nagged and found fault with him, and he became increasingly alienated.⁵⁰ Then came the fiasco of his marriage. At the age of fourteen, his parents betrothed him, in keeping with custom, to a girl four years older than himself, the eldest daughter of an impoverished rural scholar, a distant relative who had fallen on hard times.⁵¹ She would be an extra pair of hands to work in the fields and, in time, would assure the family's posterity.⁵² Gifts were exchanged, the bride-price paid – no small matter in those days, when a marriage portion could amount to a family's annual income⁵³ – and the young woman, Luo Yigu, moved into the family home. But Mao refused to go along with the arrangement. By his own account, he never slept with her, he 'gave little thought to her' and did not consider her to be his wife.⁵⁴ Shortly afterwards, he compounded his offence by leaving home and going to live with a friend, an unemployed law student.⁵⁵

Mao is oddly reticent about this episode. His father should have been furious, not only because of the money wasted but because of the shame brought on the family by such egregious flouting of social convention. Yet he says nothing of the arguments and bitter recriminations that might have been expected to follow. One account suggests that she remained in Mao's father's household, perhaps to become the older man's concubine, before dying of dysentery shortly after her twentieth birthday.⁵⁶ Whether for this

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

or other reasons, Mao's mother left the family home in Shaoshan to live instead with her brother's people in her native village in Xiangxiang.⁵⁷

When she died, ten years later, after a long illness, Mao gave vent to his bitterness at these events in an emotional oration at her funeral, in which the sole reference to his father was the cryptic line: '[Mother's] hatred for lack of rectitude resided in the last of the three bonds.'⁵⁸ The last of the 'three bonds' is that between husband and wife. That Mao should have made this charge at the funeral ceremony, before his father and all their relatives, testified to extraordinary depths of hostility and unwillingness to forgive. Interviewed in the 1930s in Bao'an by the American journalist, Edgar Snow, he said of his father, 'I learned to hate him'.

Mao's opposition to the marriage his parents had arranged may have been due partly to suspicion that his father wanted to tie him to the land, and to a life of rural drudgery which he had come to loathe. From then on he showed a growing determination to strike out on his own. He started studying again, this time at a private school in the village run by an elderly scholar who was a clansman, and shortly after his fifteenth birthday, told his father he no longer wished to be apprenticed at Xiangtan. He wanted to enrol at junior middle school instead.⁵⁹

In this, as in much else, he eventually had his way. What followed showed a side of his father for which, in later life, Mao gave him little credit.

Where the older man consistently underestimated his son's strength of character and stubbornness, so Mao failed to recognise that behind the skinflint exterior there dwelt a parent's pride. Implicit in Confucian thought is the notion of a continuum between the generations. A man counts his life a success if his children succeed; their success in turn brings glory to himself and to his ancestors. Mao's father may have been uneducated, but he recognised that Mao was, in his own words, 'the family scholar',⁶⁰ and alone had a chance to succeed beyond the narrow confines of their native village.

For most of the next ten years, the father whom Mao portrayed as an avaricious, tight-fisted tyrant, blinkered by the narrow prejudices of his class, paid his school fees and living expenses, and continued to do so even when it became clear that his son had no intention of returning home permanently and would therefore bring him no practical advantage.

A generation earlier, such repeated challenges to parental authority would not have been tolerated. But China was changing. Even in remote Shaoshan, the old immutable ways were crumbling.⁶¹

Change was wrought by internal decay and by foreign pressure. In the century-and-a-half since the Emperor Qianlong had dismissed King George III's request for trade facilities with the contemptuous words, 'China has ... no need of the manufactures of outside barbarians', the balance of power in the world had altered. China had stagnated, its wealth haemorrhaging away in bloody rebellions and civil unrest. Europe, through the Industrial Revolution, developed undreamed-of power and irresistible pressures for expansion. Conflict between the two was inevitable. In 1842 came the First Opium War, in which Britain acquired Hong Kong, and foreign settlement was permitted for the first time in Shanghai and four other Treaty ports. In the Second Opium War, in 1860, British and French troops marched on Beijing and burned to the ground the Emperor's Summer Palace. Foreign privileges expanded to include the right of residence in the capital itself.

But not in Hunan. Of all the Emperor's subjects, the Hunanese were the most conservative and the most virulently hostile to outsiders. '[They] seem to be a distinct type of the Chinese race [and] ... appear to trust no other provincial in the Empire', one early traveller related, 'and from all I can see and hear, this feeling is thoroughly reciprocated.'⁶² The Prince Regent, Prince Gong, called them 'turbulent and pugnacious'.⁶³ Hunan's people boasted openly that 'no Manchu ever conquered *them*'.⁶⁴ To foreigners, it was 'the closed province'.⁶⁵ When the English missionary, Griffith John, arrived outside the walls of the capital, Changsha, in 1891, he was stoned by the mob. 'Like the Forbidden City at Beijing and the kingdom of Tibet,' he wrote afterwards, 'it is one of the few places left in the whole world which no foreigner may presume to enter. It is perhaps the most intensely anti-foreign city in the whole of China, a feeling kept up by the literati with the full sympathy of the officials.'⁶⁶ Yet the early travellers were also struck by 'the keenness of the people' and their 'stubborn disposition', in contrast to the 'disheartening apathy' found in other parts of China.⁶⁷

Already in the eighteenth century the Jesuits regarded Hunan as the most impenetrable part of China, a place 'where persecution is most to be feared'.⁶⁸ More recently, in Mao's grandfather's time, Hunan had held firm against the Taiping Rebellion, which devastated eight provinces and claimed 20 million lives. Changsha withstood a siege lasting eighty days, and afterwards called itself 'the City of the Iron Gates'. The resistance was not out of loyalty to the throne, but rather because Changsha's elite saw the Taipings' Christian-inspired teachings as heretical to Confucianism. A Hunanese viceroy, Zeng Guofan, who became one of Mao's childhood

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

heroes, defeated the Taiping forces. Another Hunanese, Hong Tachuan, was one of the two principal Taiping leaders.

'Independence and aloofness have long been characteristic of the Hunanese,' one writer noted at the turn of the century. 'Certain intellectual qualities have tended to make them marked men.'⁶⁹ The province produced a disproportionate number of high imperial officials and an equally large number of reformers and revolutionaries.

The Chinese Empire's reaction to the foreigners at its gates was initially to do nothing. But then, in the 1870s, the so-called self-strengthening movement began. Under the slogan, 'Western function, Chinese essence', reformers argued that if the country had access to modern weapons, it could repel the invaders and preserve unchanged its Confucian way of life. That was seen to have failed when China was again humiliatingly defeated in 1895 and, to add insult to injury, not by a Western power but by fellow Asians, the Japanese, who until then had been regarded contemptuously as dwarves. Three years later an attempt to reform the imperial system, initiated by the young Emperor Guangxu, was crushed by conservatives led by the Empress Dowager. It was assumed abroad that China would be partitioned by the Powers. The issue was debated in London in the House of Commons, and in 1898 Hunan, along with the rest of the Yangtse Valley, was declared part of the British sphere of influence.⁷⁰ Then came the Boxer Rebellion, last spasm of a moribund regime. To Chinese progressives and foreigners alike, the old order was dead. It only remained to be cut down.

Little of this reached Shaoshan. News was exchanged in the teahouses, and there was a noticeboard, surmounted by an awning, where official proclamations were posted.⁷¹ Traders came and went through the nearby port of Xiangtan from Canton, Chongqing in Sichuan and Wuhan on the Yangtse, bringing with them, as in medieval Europe, the gossip of the roads. Yet the peasants heard only vague rumours of the Boxers, and nothing at all of the menace weighing down on China from without. Even the death of the Emperor in 1908 did not become known in the village until nearly two years after it occurred.⁷²

Mao first became aware of his country's predicament when he was about fourteen through a book he borrowed from one of his cousins, called *Words of Warning to an Affluent Age*, written shortly before the Sino-Japanese War by a Shanghai comprador named Zheng Guanying.⁷³ It urged the introduction of Western technology to China. Its descriptions of telephones, steamships and railways, things beyond the understanding of a village which knew nothing of electricity and where the only power came from draught animals and human brawn, fired Mao's imagination. He

was then working full-time on the farm. The book, he said later, was instrumental in deciding him to stop farm work and start studying again.⁷⁴

Zheng Guanying denounced the treatment of Chinese by foreigners in the treaty ports. He advocated parliamentary democracy, a constitutional monarchy, Western methods of education and economic reforms.

But these ideas made less impression on Mao than a pamphlet he came across a few months later, which described China's dismemberment by the Powers. Nearly thirty years on, he still remembered the opening sentence: 'Alas, China will be subjugated!' It told how Japan had occupied Korea and the Chinese island of Taiwan, and of China's loss of suzerainty in Indochina and Burma. Mao's reaction was that of millions of patriotic young Chinese. 'After I read this,' he recalled, 'I felt depressed about the future of my country and began to realise it was the duty of all the people to help save it.'⁷⁵

The other major influence on Mao at this time was the growth of banditry and internal unrest as the Qing Empire decayed.

Tales of rebels, like the 108 heroes of Liangshanpo, in the novel, *Water Margin*, and of secret societies and sworn brotherhoods, pledged to right wrongs and protect the poor, had entranced him since he was first able to read. Most of his classmates at Shaoshan devoured the stories too, hiding them under copies of the Classics when their teacher walked by, discussing them with the old men of the village and reading and rereading them until they knew them by heart. Mao recalled being 'much influenced by such books, read at an impressionable age', and he never lost his love of them.⁷⁶

Much more important in shaping his ideas, however, were the food riots that broke out in Changsha in the spring of 1910, an event which Mao said later, 'influenced my whole life'.⁷⁷ The previous year, the Yangtze had burst its banks twice, flooding much of the riceland of northern Hunan and Hubei, on the second occasion so suddenly that 'people were obliged to flee, being unable to rescue even their clothes'. The British consul in Changsha, citing treaty rights, opposed the provincial Governor's proposal to limit rice exports to other provinces. So did some of the leading gentry, who saw the famine as an opportunity to make fat profits by cornering the market.⁷⁸ By early April the price of rice reached 80 copper cash a pint, three times the normal level.⁷⁹ Reports from the interior of the province spoke of 'people eating bark and selling children, of corpses piling up along the sides of the road, and of cannibalism'.⁸⁰

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

On April 11, a water-carrier and his wife who lived near the city's South Gate committed suicide. In the words of one contemporary account:

The man carried water all day and his wife and children begged, and still they could not get enough to keep the children from being hungry, for the price of rice was so high. One day the woman and children came back after begging all day, and there was not rice enough for the children's supper. She built a fire and got some mud and made some mudcakes and told the children to cook them for their supper. Then she killed herself. When the man came home he found his wife dead and the little children trying to cook their mud cakes for supper. It was more than he could stand and so he killed himself too.⁸¹

The suicide triggered an uprising which the Japanese consul at the time described as 'no different from a war'.⁸² A mob gathered by the South Gate, seized the Police Commissioner, and then, instigated, it later transpired, by arch-conservative xenophobes among the Changsha gentry, began a wild night and day of burning and looting directed mainly at foreign-owned targets – among them, foreign steamship companies, blamed for sending rice downriver and aggravating the grain shortage; the foreign operated customs service; foreign missions; and Western-style schools which disseminated foreign learning. Not until next morning did the rioters, now numbering some 30,000, remember their grievance against the Chinese authorities and turn their attention to the Governor's yamen, which they burned to the ground.⁸³ Another seventeen buildings, most of them either occupied by or having connections with foreigners, were totally destroyed, and many more vandalised.⁸⁴

The Powers reacted swiftly. Although no foreigner was harmed, Britain sent gunboats up the Xiang River to bring out its citizens, and the United States alerted its Asiatic Fleet, based in Amoy. Later a large indemnity was imposed.

But it was the Qing government's response that was most revealing. The Governor and other officials were dismissed. Several of the gentry, including two Hanlin scholars, holders of imperial China's highest literary distinction, were impeached for fomenting the unrest and subjected to what was termed 'the extreme penalty', which turned out to mean little more than being degraded in rank. But two of the poor of the city, 'unfortunate wretches' as one foreign resident called them, a barber and a boatman, alleged to have been among the leaders of the riot, were taken through the streets in wicker cages to the city wall, where they were decapitated and their heads exposed on lamp-posts.⁸⁵

For days, Mao and his friends talked of nothing else:

It made a deep impression on me. Most of the other students sympathised with the 'insurrectionists', but only from an observer's point of view. They did not understand that it had any relation to their own lives. They were merely interested in it as an exciting incident. I never forgot it. I felt that there with the rebels were ordinary people like my own family, and I deeply resented the injustice of the treatment given to them.⁸⁶

A few weeks later, another incident occurred at a small town called Huashi, about twenty-five miles south of Xiangtan. A dispute broke out between a local landlord and members of the Gelaohui (the Elder Brother Society), a secret brotherhood with branches throughout Hunan and the neighbouring provinces. The landlord took his case to court and, in Mao's words, 'as he was powerful ... easily bought a decision favourable to himself'. But instead of submitting, the members of the brotherhood withdrew to a mountain fastness called Liushan and built a stronghold there.

They wore yellow head-dresses and carried three-cornered yellow flags. The provincial government sent troops against them, and the redoubt was destroyed. Three men were captured, including their leader, known as Pang the Millstone Maker. Under torture they confessed that they had been instructed in the methods and incantations used by the Boxers, which they had believed would make them invulnerable. Pang was beheaded. But in the eyes of the students, Mao wrote, 'he was a hero, for all sympathised with the revolt'.⁸⁷

Mao's views, however, were not yet as clear-cut as these statements make it appear. Early the following year another rice shortage arose, this time in Shaoshan itself. Mao's father continued to buy grain and send it for sale in the city, aggravating the shortage. Eventually one of the consignments was seized by hungry villagers. His father was furious. Mao did not sympathise with him but 'thought the villagers' method was wrong too'.⁸⁸

By this time Mao was enrolled at the junior middle school which he had bullied and cajoled his father into letting him attend. It was in the neighbouring county of Xiangxiang, where his mother's family lived, and was a 'modern' establishment with Western-inspired teaching methods, opened a few years earlier as part of the Qing court's belated endeavours to come to terms with foreign learning after the defeat of the

A CONFUCIAN CHILDHOOD

Boxers. Mao, on his first journey outside his native Shaoshan, was overwhelmed:

I had never before seen so many children together. Most of them were sons of landlords, wearing expensive clothes; very few peasants could afford to send their children to such a school. I was more poorly dressed than the others. I owned only one decent coat-and-trousers suit. Gowns were not worn by students, but only by the teachers, and none but 'foreign devils' wore foreign clothes.⁸⁹

Dongshan Upper Primary School, as the place was officially named, had in earlier times been a literary academy. It was surrounded by a high stone wall with thick black-laquered double doors, reached by a balustraded white stone bridge across a moat. On a hillside nearby stood a seven-storeyed white pagoda.⁹⁰

Mao paid 1,400 copper cash (equivalent to about one Chinese silver dollar, or five English shillings) for five months' board, lodging, books and tuition fees. To attend such a school was an exceptional privilege: not one child in 200 at that time had access to education of this level. In these elite surroundings, the unmannered, gangling youth from Shaoshan, older and taller than most of his classmates and with an accent different from theirs, was given a hard time. 'Many of the richer students despised me because usually I was wearing my ragged coat and trousers,' Mao remembered. 'I was also disliked because I was not a native of Xiangxiang ... I felt spiritually very depressed.'⁹¹

It took all the fortitude acquired in his clashes with his father to overcome this hostility, which Mao himself frequently made worse by the arrogance, mulishness, and sheer childish pig-headedness with which he stuck to his guns when he thought he was right.⁹² But eventually he made friends, among them Xiao San, who later became a writer under the name Emi Siao. He was also close to a cousin, one of his maternal uncles' children, who had started at the school a year before him.

Despite his problems, Mao made good progress and his teachers liked him. It quickly became clear that his inclinations were literary rather than scientific. History was his favourite subject, and he read every book he could about the two great founding dynasties of modern China, the Qin and the Han, which flourished around the time of Christ. He learned to write Classical essays, and developed a love of poetry which was to become one of the lasting pleasures of his life. A quarter of a century later, he could still quote the words of a Japanese song, celebrating victory in

the Russo-Japanese War, which the music teacher, who had studied there, used to sing to them:

*The sparrow sings, the nightingale dances,
And the green fields are lovely in the spring.
The pomegranate flowers crimson, the willows green-leafed,
And there is a new picture.*⁹³

Japan had become the inspiration for all those who made up what the newspapers called 'Young China', the reformers and intellectuals who saw their country's salvation in a modernisation movement on the lines of Japan's espousal of foreign ideas after the Meiji restoration. By its defeat of China in 1895, Japan had forced them to face the reality of their country's weakness. By its defeat of Russia ten years later, Japan had shown that an Asian army could defeat a European one. For China, the latter victory would prove a mixed blessing, since Japan replaced Russia as the dominant power in Manchuria. But to young men of Mao's generation, what mattered was that the yellow race had proved it could defeat the white.

'At that time,' he said, 'I knew and felt the beauty of Japan, and felt something of her pride and might in this song of her victory over Russia.'

Starting in the 1890s, thousands of Chinese had made their way to Tokyo to soak up the new Western learning. Among the most influential were Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the architects of the Emperor Guangxu's abortive reform movement, who had fled into exile there after the reforms were crushed. Kang's great contribution to the modernisation debate had been to redefine Confucianism to make it forward-looking and therefore compatible with reform, instead of perpetually harking back to a supposed golden age in the remote past. Liang, a Hunanese, took Charles Darwin's thesis, 'the survival of the fittest', and applied it to China's national struggle against the encircling Powers. He argued that China had to modernise in order to survive.

Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were Young China's idols. Mao's cousin gave him two books about the reform movement, one by Liang himself. 'I read and reread those books until I knew them by heart,' he wrote. 'I worshipped Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao.'

As he turned seventeen, Mao still supported the imperial system: 'I considered the Emperor as well as most officials to be honest, good and clever men,' he declared. 'They only needed the help of Kang Youwei's reforms.'⁹⁴

That was about to change.

CHAPTER TWO

Revolution

At around noon on October 9, 1911, a partly completed bomb exploded in a house owned by a Chinese army officer in the Russian concession at Hankou, the main commercial city of central China, two days downriver from Changsha.¹ The man who had been making it, Sun Wu, was the youthful leader of the Forward Together Society, a splinter group of the Tongmenghui, the secret Revolutionary Alliance led by the Cantonese anti-monarchist, Sun Yat-sen.²

Sun Wu's friends succeeded in getting him to the safety of a Japanese hospital. But the concession police searched the house, and found revolutionary flags and proclamations and a list of activists. The Qing authorities sprang into action. Thirty-two people were arrested and, next day at dawn, three of the leaders were executed. The Manchu Viceroy, Ruizheng, telegraphed Beijing: 'Now all ... is peaceful and quiet. This case was broken so early that the area was not harmed.'

The executions proved a fatal mistake. Rumours spread among the Han troops garrisoned across the river at Wuchang that the Viceroy was planning wholesale reprisals against all who were not of Manchu blood. That evening an engineering battalion mutinied. Officers who resisted were shot. Two infantry regiments joined them; then an artillery regiment. The heaviest fighting, which took several hundred lives, was around the Viceroy's yamen, which was defended by a machine-gun emplacement. In the early hours of the morning, Ruizheng fled aboard a Chinese gunboat, leaving Wuchang in the insurgents' hands. Years of revolutionary agitation had finally paid off. Yet victory, when it came, was fiercer and bloodier than its architects had planned. The white flags of the rebels, edged with red, bore the legend, '*Xin Han*,

Mie Man' – 'Long Live the Han, Exterminate the Manchu'.³ The Manchu 30th Regiment was virtually wiped out in a racial massacre. A civilian pogrom followed. Three days afterwards, a local missionary counted 800 Manchu corpses lying in the streets, 'fifty being heaped together outside one gate alone'.⁴

Revolutionary proclamations appeared, inflaming feelings further. The 'descendants of Holy Han', one asserted, were 'sleeping on brushwood and eating gall' under the yoke of a northern, nomadic tribe.⁵ Another diatribe warned:

The Manchu government has been tyrannical, cruel, insane and unconscious, inflicting heavy taxations and stripping the people of their marrow ... Recollect that when the Manchus first entered the Chinese domain, cities full of men and women were put to the sword without exception ... To leave the wrongs of our forefathers unavenged would shame us who are gentlemen. Therefore all our brothers should ... help the revolutionary army in the extirpation of such barbarous aliens ... Today's opportunity is bestowed on us by Great Heaven. If we do not seize and make use of it, until what time shall we wait then?⁶

The outside world reserved judgement. In London, *The Times* reported that most educated Chinese unreservedly supported the revolution, adding snootily: 'Little sympathy is expressed for the corrupt and effete Manchu dynasty with its Eunuchs and other barbaric surroundings.'⁷

But there was little sense that history was in the making, that the obscure events unfolding in Wuchang were the harbingers of millennial change for the oldest and most populous of the world's nations. No one predicted the imminent collapse of a system of rule that had endured without interruption since pre-Christian times, longer than any other in history. Indeed the prevailing view then, and for several weeks after, was that the imperial house would rally, and as had happened so often in the past, the rebellion would eventually be put down.

Chinese bonds weakened slightly, but financial markets took the view that the movement would probably be beneficial to foreign commerce with China. Even in the English-language newspapers in Shanghai, first reports of the revolution had to compete for space with the Italian bombardment of Tripoli; the assassination of Prince Troubetzkoy by a student in Novochoerkassk; the illness of Prince Luitpold, the ninety-year-old Regent of Bavaria, who had caught a chill while out stag-hunting; and 'the most brilliant wedding of the year, at St Peter's, Eaton Square, between Earl Percy and Lady Gordon Lennox'.

REVOLUTION

Only in Beijing itself was the true gravity of the situation recognised. Guards were doubled outside the palaces of the Prince Regent and other dignitaries; imperial cavalry patrolled the streets; and as reports came in of Manchu families in the provinces being hunted down and killed by revolutionary mobs, Manchu women in the capital abandoned their elaborate hair ornaments and characteristic high-soled shoes and started wearing Chinese dress.⁸

Mao was in Changsha when these events occurred. Six months earlier he had come by riverboat from Xiangtan, carrying with him a letter of recommendation from one of his teachers, who had helped him convince his father that he should enrol at a secondary school in the capital for students from Xiangxiang county.⁹

He had heard before setting out, he said later, that it was 'a magnificent place', with 'many people, numerous schools and the yamen of the Governor', but his first sight of the city as the little steamer came slowly downstream must have exceeded all his imaginings.¹⁰ A 'perpendicular wall, of noble grey-stone blocks' reared up from the water's edge, fifty feet thick at its base and more than two miles long, with a forest of junks before it.¹¹ Inland it continued for eight miles more, with ramparts 40 feet high, wide enough at the top for three carriages to ride abreast, encircling the city like a medieval fortress, which indeed it was. On each quarter, the wall was pierced by two massive gates, guarded by militiamen wearing dark blue turbans, short military cloaks with red cloud-pattern collars and brightly coloured facings, wide, loose sleeves, and cotton trousers tied at the calf. They were armed with a motley collection of spears, halberds, tridents, two-handed swords, muskets, flintlock and even matchlock guns.

Within lay a warren of grey-tiled roofs and 'dark tunnel-like streets, burrowing away into the city's heart', paved with granite slabs, often no more than six feet wide, and reeking with squalour and bad smells, 'all the encumbrances and filth of too much living like spawn', as one Western resident put it. But, hidden from view behind windowless street-walls, were also splendid mansions, where the great officials lived among 'flower-decked courtyards, gracious reception halls with stately blackwood furniture and wall paintings on silk scrolls', and two immense Confucian temples, with curved yellow-tiled roofs and vast teak columns, surrounded by ancient cypress trees.

In the commercial district, during business hours, the wooden shopfronts were removed, so that the shops opened directly on to the

street, and bamboo matting was stretched over poles between the roofs, turning parts of the city into an immense covered arcade. Long hanging wooden shop-signs, written in gold characters on a black lacquer ground, greeted prospective customers and advertised what was on sale.

There were no bicycles, no motor-cars, no rickshaws.¹² The wealthy used sedan chairs. For everyone else the main form of transport, whether for people or goods, was the humble wheelbarrow. All day long the city resounded with the deafening squeals of ungreased axles, as labourers hauled loads of coal, salt, antimony and opium; firecrackers, calico and linen; and medicinal supplies of foxglove, monkwood, and rhubarb, to the junks along the river. Water was carried in on men's backs, in buckets slung from bamboo poles, from the 'Sand Spring' by the South Gate. Pedlars cried their wares, or made their presence known by shaking wooden rattles and bells. The sweetmeat-seller had a tiny gong and chanted, in a thick Hunanese accent:

*They cure the deaf and heal the lame,
Preserve the teeth of the aged dame!*¹³

Daoist monks, in dark blue robes, and Buddhists, wearing saffron, walked in procession, chanting prayers for the sick. Beggars, blind or hideously disfigured, sat at the roadside asking for alms, and each year extorted 'squeeze' from the householders, promising in return to stay a respectable distance from their homes.

At dusk, the wooden boards were replaced on the shopfronts. The pious bowed three times, to heaven, earth and man, and placed glowing sticks of incense over their doors to protect them from evil during the night. The city gates were dosed, each secured by a huge beam which took three men to lift. There was electricity at the Governor's yamen and in the Western-style houses on an island in the river where the foreign consuls lived. But in the rest of the city, the only light was from the sputtering wicks of small oil-lamps provided by the street guilds. Later, the district gates were locked too, isolating the different wards of the city. After that, the only sound was the sharp crack of the constable's stick striking a long bamboo gong as he beat out the watches of the night.

Mao had at first been doubtful whether he would be able to stay in the city: 'I [was] exceedingly excited, half fearing that I would be refused entrance, hardly daring to hope that I would actually become a student in this great school.'¹⁴ To his surprise, he was accepted without difficulty. In the event, however, the six months he spent at the middle school did more for his political education than for his academic progress.

REVOLUTION

Changsha had been seething with anti-Manchu feeling since the rice riots the year before. Secret societies put up placards, calling in cryptic language for the Han to rise: 'All should bind their heads with a white kerchief and each should carry a sword ... The eighteen provinces of China will be returned to the descendants of [the legendary Chinese emperor] Shen Nong.' The slogan 'Revolt and drive out the Manchus' was chalked up on walls.¹⁵

That spring, soon after Mao's arrival, came news of an anti-Manchu uprising in Canton under the leadership of a Hunanese revolutionary named Huang Xing, in which seventy-two radicals had been killed. Mao read about it in the *Minli Bao* (People's Strength), which supported the revolutionary cause. It was the first newspaper he had seen, and he remembered afterwards how impressed he had been that it was so 'full of stimulating material'. Here, too, he first encountered the name of Sun Yat-sen and the Tongmenghui, then based in Japan. It inspired him to write a poster, which he put up on the school wall, calling for a new government with Sun as President, Kang Youwei as Premier and Liang Qichao, Minister of Foreign Affairs. It was, he admitted later, a 'somewhat muddled' effort.¹⁶ Kang and Liang were both constitutional monarchists, opposed to republican government. But Mao's new willingness to renounce the Empire, and the fact that he had been moved for the first time to try to give public expression to his political ideas, showed how a few weeks in the city had already changed his thinking.

This was demonstrated most dramatically by his attitude to the queue. At Dongshan he and the other schoolboys had ridiculed one of the teachers who had had his queue cut off while studying in Japan, and now wore a false one in its place. The 'false foreign devil', they called him. Now, Mao and one of his friends clipped off their own pigtails in a show of anti-Manchu defiance, and when others who had promised to do likewise failed to keep their word, 'my friend and I ... assaulted them in secret and forcibly removed their queues, a total of more than ten falling victim to our shears'.¹⁷ Similar scenes had been taking place in schools in Changsha and Wuchang since the beginning of the year, horrifying traditionalists – who held that hair was a gift from one's parents and destroying it a violation of filial piety – no less than, for quite different reasons, the Manchu authorities.¹⁸

Two other events occurred in April which helped to bring the Hunan gentry on to the revolutionaries' side. The Court announced the appointment of a cabinet, which the elite had long been demanding as a step towards constitutional government. But, to the fury of reformists, it

was dominated by Manchu princes. It also became known that the government intended to nationalise the railway companies as a preliminary to accepting foreign loans to finance railroad construction, which was widely regarded as a sell-out to the Powers. These issues, Mao recalled, made the students in his school 'more and more agitated', and when in May the foreign loans were confirmed, most of the schools went on strike.¹⁹ With other boys of his age, he went to listen to older students making revolutionary speeches at open-air meetings outside the city walls. 'I still remember', he wrote later, 'how one student, while making a speech, ripped off his long gown and said, "Let's hurry to get some military training and be ready to fight."' ²⁰ Inflammatory handbills were posted, and the situation appeared so threatening that Britain and Japan sent gunboats. By summer, a precarious calm was restored, but anti-Manchu rallies continued at the site of the former imperial examination halls. The reformist gentry gathered under the guise of holding meetings of the Wenxue Hui, the Association for Literary Studies, to discuss the dynasty's impending collapse.²¹ In neighbouring Sichuan, a full-scale rebellion broke out.

On Friday, October 13, a Chinese steamer arrived in Changsha, bringing the first confused reports of the rising in Wuchang.²² The passengers spoke of fighting between army units, of the sound of firing from the military camps, and of reports of soldiers tearing off the red facings and insignia from their black winter uniforms and putting on white armbands instead.²³ But nobody seemed certain who was fighting whom or what the outcome was. In 1911, the Hunanese capital was linked to the outside world by a single telegraph line to Hankou and that weekend it was down.²⁴ Even the officials at the governor's yamen had no way to discover what was going on.

The following Monday, the 16th, there was a run on the provincial banks, which ended only when the Governor sent fully armed militia detachments to stand guard outside. Most schools suspended classes.²⁵ The British consul, Bertram Giles, warned his legation in Beijing: 'News is scarce, wild rumours are current and great excitement prevails.'²⁶ That evening, a Japanese steamer arrived from Hankou with a thousand passengers aboard, who provided detailed accounts of the revolutionaries' success.²⁷ Next day, Mr Giles noted, 'a distinct change in the situation was perceptible'.²⁸

The new arrivals included emissaries from the Wuchang revolutionaries, who had come to urge fellow radicals in the Hunan garrison to speed up plans for their own mutiny. One of them visited Mao's school:

REVOLUTION

[He] made a stirring speech, with the permission of the principal. Seven or eight students arose in the assembly and supported him with vigorous denunciation of the Manchus, and calls for action to establish the Republic. Everyone listened with complete attention. Not a sound was heard as the orator of the revolution ... spoke before the excited students.²⁹

A few days later, Mao and a group of classmates, fired by what they had heard, decided to go to Hankou to join the revolutionary army. Their friends collected money to pay their steamer tickets. But events moved ahead of them before they could set out.

While the revolutionaries plotted, the Governor took counter-measures.³⁰ The regular garrison troops, the 49th and 50th regiments, which were known to have been infiltrated by the radicals, were redeployed to other districts away from the provincial capital. The 600 men who remained, in a barracks outside the East Gate, were ordered to surrender their ammunition. The militia, who were judged more reliable, were substantially reinforced.

The first attempt by the revolutionaries to take the city by stratagem, on Wednesday night, failed. The men at the East Gate barracks set fire to some straw in the stables, and then demanded that the city gates be opened to allow fire-engines to pass. The militia, pleading neutrality, refused. But in the confusion, the garrison men recovered most of their ammunition, which had been locked in a nearby arsenal. As a result their next foray, on Sunday morning, turned out very differently. Mao gave his own account of what he saw that day:

I went to borrow some [oilskin boots] from a friend in the army who was quartered outside the city. I was stopped by the garrison guards. The place had become very active, the soldiers ... were pouring into the streets. Rebels were approaching the city ... and fighting had begun. A big battle occurred outside the city walls ... There was at the same time an insurrection within the city, and the gates were stormed and taken by Chinese labourers. Through one of the gates I re-entered the city. Then I stood on a high place and watched the battle, until I saw the Han flag raised over the yamen.³¹

Even now, it makes dramatic reading. Unfortunately, so little of it is true that one might be forgiven for wondering whether Mao was there at all. There were no rebels, no battle, no insurrection and the gates were not stormed. Mr Giles, the British consul, reported drily:

At 9.30 a.m. [I was informed] ... that a number of the regular troops had entered the city, where they had been joined by certain representative

revolutionaries and had proceeded to the Governor's yamen ... The militia, adhering to their policy of neutrality, had refused to close the city gates [which were already open for the day]; and the Governor's bodyguard, already won over, offered no resistance. By 2 p.m. the whole city was in the hands of the revolutionaries without a shot having been fired, the white [rebel] flag was flying everywhere, guards with white badges on their sleeves were patrolling the streets to keep order, and the excitement of the morning subsided as quickly as it had arisen.³²

The discrepancies are a salutary reminder of the dangers of eyewitness testimony, decades after the event.³³ Yet Mao's overblown description is hardly to be wondered at. As an excited teenager, he had been present at one of the defining moments of modern Chinese history. As a communist leader years later, his memories were of what the day should have been, rather than what it was.

The Governor and most of his senior aides escaped. But the militia commander, whom the soldiers blamed for confiscating their ammunition, was led off to the East Gate and beheaded. Several other officials were executed near the yamen, their 'gory heads and trunks' left lying in the street.³⁴

Both in Wuchang, where the civilian revolutionary leaders were thrown into disarray by the raid on Sun Wu's bomb factory, and in Changsha, where their plans had been delayed by the Governor's countermeasures, the driving force behind the uprisings consisted of radical non-commissioned officers and rank-and-file troops. Once victory had been achieved, there was considerable confusion over who should head the new revolutionary order.

In Hubei, a brigade commander, Li Yuanhong, who had initially opposed the mutiny, agreed reluctantly to be sworn in as Military Governor.³⁵ The same day he issued a proclamation renaming the country the Republic of China, little guessing that less than six months later, he would become Vice-President in Beijing and, eventually, Head of State.

The situation in Changsha was more complicated. Within hours of the uprising, the flamboyant young leader of the Hunan branch of the Forward Together Society, Jiao Dafeng, was proclaimed Military Governor, with a leading member of the city's reformist elite, Tan Yankai, as his civil counterpart.³⁶ A dashing figure, who rode through the streets on horseback to wild acclamations from the populace, Jiao had close ties with Hunan's secret societies. Their leaders flocked to the provincial

REVOLUTION

capital to help him consolidate his power (and to share the spoils of victory), turning the Governor's yamen, in the words of one contemporary source, into 'a sort of bandits' lair'.³⁷

This was not what Changsha's reformist gentry had anticipated. Four days after the uprising, Consul Giles reported that tensions within the ruling group had reached such a pitch that 'revolvers were drawn and bayonets fixed'.³⁸ Then Jiao made the fatal error of sending his own loyal units to help the revolutionaries at Wuchang. On October 31, Jiao's deputy was ambushed outside the North Gate and decapitated, whereupon, in the consul's words, 'the soldiers rushed into the city with his head and killed Jiao in his yamen'.³⁹ Jiao Dafeng was twenty-five years old. He had been Governor for just nine days.

Mao saw the two men's bodies lying in the street. Years later, he would remember their deaths as an object lesson in the perils of revolutionary enterprise. 'They were not bad men,' he said, 'and [they] had some revolutionary intentions.' They were killed, he added, because 'they were poor and represented the interests of the oppressed. The landlords and merchants were dissatisfied with them.'⁴⁰ It was not quite that simple. Jiao's regime was too short-lived for anyone to have known what his policies might have been. But certainly the provincial elite saw him as a threat. His successor, the reformist Tan Yankai, who was sworn in as Governor later the same day, was one of their own, a Hanlin scholar from an eminent gentry family.

The situation in Changsha, and in the Yangtse Valley as a whole, remained extremely volatile. A pathetic edict, issued in the name of the six-year-old Emperor, declared:

The whole Empire is seething. The minds of the people are perturbed ... All these things are my own fault. Hereby I announce to the world that I swear to reform ... [In] Hubei and Hunan ... the soldiers and people are innocent. If they return to their allegiance, I will excuse the past. Being a very small person standing at the head of my subjects, I see that my heritage is nearly falling to the ground. I regret my fault and repent greatly.⁴¹

Early in November, rumours swept Hong Kong that Beijing had fallen and the imperial family been taken prisoner, provoking 'extraordinary scenes of enthusiasm'. It proved to be untrue, but residents in the capital reported that they were in 'a state of siege' and cannon were being mounted on the walls of the Forbidden City. Then came news,

immediately denied, that the Emperor had fled to Manchuria.⁴² Yet at the same time there were signs that the Empire was fighting back. Only four provincial capitals were firmly in revolutionary hands.⁴³ Troops loyal to the Throne counter-attacked at Hankou using German-made incendiary shells, and most of the Chinese city was burned to the ground. Soon afterwards, imperial forces seized Nanjing. Any Chinese found without a queue was summarily executed. Students who, like Mao, had sheared them off earlier in the year, now hid in terror.⁴⁴

With the outcome apparently hanging in the balance, Mao revived his earlier plan to join the revolutionary forces. A student army had been organised but, considering that its role was unclear, he decided to enlist instead in a unit of regular troops.⁴⁵ Many others were doing the same. Recruitment in Hunan in the first weeks of the revolution exceeded 50,000.⁴⁶ Given the prevailing uncertainty and the violence being meted out to the losers, it was an act of no little courage. Many of the new recruits were being sent to Hankou, where the revolutionaries were under fierce attack from imperial army units. One foreign resident described the fighting there as ‘possibly the bloodiest ... that has yet taken place. Day and night now for four days the battle has been raging ... The slaughter on both sides is terrific.’⁴⁷ Even for those, like Mao, who remained in Changsha, life under martial law was brutal and often perilously short. Consul Giles reported: ‘Brawls are continually taking place, either among the soldiers themselves or between them and the civilians ... One man alleged to be a Manchu spy was hacked to pieces in the street by the soldiery. His head was then cut off and borne to the Governor’s yamen. Another man was triced up on to a sort of triangle ... and riddled with bullets.’⁴⁸

There were attempts at mutiny, and on one occasion Mao’s regiment was called out to prevent several thousand rebellious troops from entering the city.⁴⁹ A senior Chinese commander complained that the men were totally without discipline: ‘They regard destruction as meritorious action and disorder as correct conduct. Insolence is equated with equality and coercion with freedom.’⁵⁰ As anarchy loomed, the American Legation in Beijing ordered its citizens to leave Hunan until stability was restored.

The company to which Mao belonged was quartered at the Court of Justice, which had been set up in the former provincial assembly building. The new recruits spent much of their time doing chores for the officers and fetching water from the Sand Spring by the South Gate.⁵¹ Many were illiterate, ‘chair-bearers, ruffians and beggars’, whose idea of soldiering was to assume the poses of military figures in traditional Chinese opera, as one

REVOLUTION

contemporary source witheringly put it.⁵² Mao made himself popular by writing letters for them. 'I knew something about books,' he said later, 'and they respected my "great learning"'. For the first time in his life he came into contact with workers, two of whom, a miner and an ironsmith, he particularly liked.⁵³

But there were limits to his revolutionary zeal. 'Being a student,' he explained, '[I] could not condescend to carrying [water]', as the other soldiers did. Instead, he paid pedlars to carry it for him, demonstrating precisely the same scholarly elitism that he would spend his later years condemning. 'I felt that intellectuals were the only clean people in the world ... I did not mind wearing the clothes of other intellectuals ... but I would not wear clothes belonging to a worker or peasant, believing them to be dirty.' Some of the men in his regiment vowed to take a reduced monthly food allowance of two silver dollars until the revolution triumphed,⁵⁴ but Mao took the full seven dollars. After paying for food and water-carrying, he spent whatever was left on newspapers, of which he became an avid reader, a habit that he retained all his life.

In early December, two events occurred which signalled the end of Manchu resistance. Imperial troops abandoned Nanjing, their last major southern stronghold. And Yuan Shikai, former Viceroy of Zhili and the leading military power-broker in north China, whom the Court had summoned to act as interim Premier, approved a ceasefire at Wuchang.

In Changsha, the news provoked another orgy of forcible queue-cutting, this time carried out by troops. The British consul, Bertram Giles, was outraged:

I protested strongly [to] ... the authorities, [telling them] that one of the first duties of a government was to preserve the public peace, and that if they allowed the soldiery to commit assault wholesale with impunity, then they could no longer lay claim to the title of Government but were merely an anarchical faction.⁵⁵

Others, with a better sense of humour, saw the farcical side:

Farmers and peasants ... came in from the countryside to the city gates, carrying their huge loads of rice or vegetables, or trundling their heavy wheelbarrows. The guards rushed out, seized every man's queue, and hacked it off with a sword or clipped it off with huge scissors. For many a man it was like parting with a limb to lose the queue which he had brushed and braided so painstakingly since early boyhood. We saw some of them on their knees, kowtowing to the guards as they pled for respite. Others actually fought the soldiers and many tried to run away ... But

MAO

before the week was out, all the city-dwellers and many of the villagers of central China were largely rid of this mark of Manchu control.⁵⁶

Ever wary of the winds of political change, many at first kept a false queue coiled under their turbans, ready to let down should the Manchus return. But that was not to be. On New Year's Day, 1912, the veteran revolutionary, Sun Yat-sen, was sworn in at Nanjing as China's first President. To mark the occasion, the authorities in Changsha held a military parade: 'Bugles were blown, flags were waved, bands played and the soldiers sang lustily ... Every shop displayed a coloured flag. Two border strips of red with a central strip of yellow.'⁵⁷ There was talk of sending an expeditionary force to Beijing to make Yuan Shikai and the northern military accept Sun's leadership, and mass meetings were held to oppose Yuan's nomination as Head of State. But, as Mao remembered it, 'just as the Hunanese were preparing to move into action, Sun Yat-sen and Yuan Shikai came to an agreement, the scheduled war was called off.'⁵⁸ On February 12, the Emperor abdicated, and two days later Sun stepped down in Yuan's favour.

Mao remained in the army until the spring. Then the cost of maintaining the swollen ranks of the revolutionary forces imposed wholesale demobilisation.⁵⁹ 'Thinking the revolution was over,' Mao said later, 'I ... decided to return to my books. I had been a soldier for half a year.'⁶⁰

CHAPTER THREE

Lords of Misrule

For a few glorious months, China abandoned itself to a turbulent confusion of new fashions, new ideas, new enthusiasms and new hopes, as the dead hand of dynastic orthodoxy was suddenly thrown off. Hunan's new Governor, Tan Yankai, was by his own lights a liberal, opposed equally to imperialism and to centralised control by Beijing. Under his regime, opium-growing was stopped and importation of the drug prohibited. New, independent courts were established in every district. For a time, a free press was permitted, to the dismay of the British consul, who protested vehemently at its outbursts against the Powers. The provincial administration encouraged the development of local industry to try to check the outflow of funds abroad, and the education budget tripled, financed partly by punitive land taxes imposed on conservative gentry families regarded as pro-Manchu. 'Modern schools sprang up like bamboo shoots after the spring rain,' Mao remembered.¹ So did wine-shops, theatres and brothels.² Even foreigners in Changsha caught the spirit of the times. 'The new men really do want to be good rulers,' one wrote, '[and] they have on the whole done very well.'³

As always in periods of revolutionary flux, the first changes were symbolic. Teenage girls started to bob their hair and to appear in public unchaperoned. Their mothers timidly approached foreign doctors to ask whether anything could be done for their crippled lily feet.⁴ The demise of the queue opened an exotic new world for shaven Chinese heads. 'People are wearing billycocks, bishop's hats, blue velveteen jockey caps, anything they can lay their hands on,' commented one bemused correspondent. 'The old red turban with its round button [has been] ... forbidden by revolutionary law, for the button was the mark of honour