

One of the Many Faces of China

Maoism as a Quasi-Religion

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As a direct result of the new contacts with China that have been made possible within the last years, many new questions have been raised, not only about the political problem of the shifting balance of world power, but also about what the new China means to the future of human civilization. To reach some understanding of this latter subject, we must begin with the recognition that China has many faces. At first, of course, because of the impression given by television coverage of President Nixon's visit to China, it might seem as though the whole of China is represented, intentionally or unintentionally, by one face, the ever present portrait of Chairman Mao. A *Time* magazine correspondent wrote about the East Wind Bazaar in Peking as follows: "As always, Mao is everywhere. His works are on sale in five languages. An entire counter is devoted to posters of the Chairman in various poses, ranging from his youthful days in Yen-an to swimming the Yangtze. There is Mao in a rice field, Mao in military dress, Mao surrounded by soldiers and sailors."¹ Yet we dare not forget that there are 800 million Chinese, all dressed to be sure, in quilted blue uniforms, but who like human beings everywhere have their individual hopes, fears, pride and aspirations. Thus it is important for us to remember as we watch the benign face of Chairman Mao that the future page of China's history will

1. *Time*, 6 March 1972, p. 18.

be written by many people whose faces we did not see in our first direct look at China in twenty years.

But there are still other faces of China that we must see in our concern to understand the new China. Admittedly, many people today are interested in the political, military and economic implications of the new China. Yet China is a complex, multi-dimensional entity, and our understanding of China would be terribly inadequate if we did not try to see its other dimensions or other faces, such as its art, culture, philosophy and religion. As for me, trained as I am in the History of Religions, I am especially interested in probing one important face of modern China, namely, the meaning of Maoism as a quasi-religion.

As we explore the meaning of Maoism as a religious or quasi-religious movement, we must be careful not to impose western concepts of "religion" on China. It has often been suggested that Chinese culture is essentially humanistic and not religious, and such a judgment is justified if we apply our western stereotyped notion of religion. As a student of religions, however, I am convinced that in every culture and in every phase of history, man—in order to be really human—has always seen the totality of existence in relation to sacred reality, whatever it is called. Seen from this perspective, all cultural traditions of the world are basically "religious," and in this respect Chinese culture is no exception.

When we say "the Chinese are humanistic," we must also be careful not to equate Chinese humanism with western forms of humanism. The Chinese are humanistic, precisely because they seek the meaning of human existence in the "whole" of

life, not confining their search to one segment of life designated as "religious." In Lin Yutang's phrase, the Chinese "are in love with life, with its kings and beggars, robbers and monks, funerals and weddings and childbirths and sicknesses and glowing sunsets and feasting days and wineshop fracas."2 This life, however, which the Chinese love so dearly, was understood in its cosmological setting, and not as something independent of nature. Thus, according to the Chinese, all human, social, and political activities, as well as natural events, are ultimately dictated by the Will of Heaven (*T'ien*). Also, running through the mysterious universe is an eternal, cosmic order called Tao, which manifests itself in the dual principles of male and female, or the positive and negative principles known as yang and yin. How to keep this harmony intact and how to actualize Tao in everyday life have thus been the "fundamentally religious concerns" of the humanistic Chinese. In this respect I am persuaded that Maoism, which claims to bring about a "new culture," can best be understood as the continuation of the humanistic-religious culture of traditional China, but with a radical re-interpretation based on the guiding inspirations of Marx and Lenin. This two-pronged attitude—of saying "yes but no" to Chinese culture while saying "no but yes" to Marx-and-Lenin—is succinctly stated by Mao Tse-tung :

...we must fully absorb progressive foreign culture as an aid to the development of China's new culture ; but it is also wrong to import indiscriminately foreign culture into China, for we must proceed from the actual needs of the Chinese people and assimilate it critically....Similarly, we must neither totally exclude nor blindly accept China's ancient

2. Lin Yutang, *My country and my people* (New York : John Day, 1935), pp. 103-104.

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culture ; we must accept it critically so as to help the development of China's new culture.³

Immanent Theocracy

The unique Chinese ethos of Maoism is derived in part from the fact that unlike East European Communist regimes which seized power with the help of the Soviet army, the Peking regime depended neither on the Soviet army nor on the proletariat in taking over political control of mainland China. Thus, while the Peking regime is avowedly Communist, it is also very nationalistic to the extent that its foreign policy, for example, has been determined to a great extent by the traditional interests of China. The Peking regime also inherited, unconsciously if not consciously, the structure and framework of the historic Chinese political system, namely, the ruler as the holder of the "mandate of Heaven," even though such an expression would not be acceptable today. Underlying the historic Chinese political system is a Chinese counterpart to the "theocratic principle," which affirms that the government of a state is under the immediate direction of the divine rule. In the classical Chinese formula, it is Heaven (*T'ien*) which bestows the mandate on an earthly ruler who demonstrates worthy moral virtues. Thus, the Chinese emperor was indeed the "Son of Heaven," even though much of his administration was handled by bureaucratic government officials. In order to differentiate the ancient Chinese political system from western forms of theocracy, I use the term "immanent theocracy,"

3. *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4 (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 1956), p. 300.

because Heaven was not understood by the Chinese as sending direct and minute instructions to the Son of Heaven but as giving "religious" or "quasi-religious" legitimation to earthly political authority. The immanent theocratic principle was accepted as early as the period of Chou, the ruling dynasty between 1111 and 249 B.C. In the Book of Odes,⁴ a collection of songs, we read :

The admirable, amiable prince
Displayed conspicuously his excellent virtue.
He put his people and his officers in concord.
And he received his emolument from Heaven.
It protected him, assisted him, appointed him king.
And Heaven's blessing came again and again. (Ode No. 249)

Speaking of King Wen, the founder of the Chou dynasty and the sage king par excellence, another ode reads :

King Wen is on high ;
Oh, he shines in Heaven.
Although Chou is an ancient state,
The mandate it has received from Heaven is new.
Isn't Chou illustrious ?
Isn't the mandate of the Lord timely ?
King Wen's ascends and descends
Are on the Lord's left and right....(Ode No. 235)

Or again, we read :

The Lord on High said to King Wen :
"I cherish your brilliant virtue,
Which makes no great display in sound or appearance,
Nor is changed with age.
Without any manipulation or deliberation,
You followed the principle of the Lord." (Ode No. 241)

I might add in this connection that Chairman Mao is venerated today as much as any ancient sage king, if not more. Certainly, these songs praising the virtues of King Wen in ancient times foreshadow the extravagant homage given today

4. The following verses are taken from Wing-tsit Chan et al., *The great Asian religions : An anthology* (New York : Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 101.

to Mao Tse-tung, who enjoys four official titles—Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander, and Great Helmsman.

Good, Evil, and the Meaning of History

There is another important area in which the Peking regime inherited the historic legacy of China. That is in reference to the locus of good and evil. In the west it is taken for granted that individuals not only possess moral qualities of good and evil but also the capacity to judge what is good and what is bad. That is to say, individuals bear within themselves scattered seeds of a divine spark, as it were, which is the basis and source of morality. Thus, the ancient Sophists proclaimed triumphantly that “man is the measure of all things.” In sharp contrast to the western view of man, the Chinese understanding of man is much more modest. Man is *not* the measure of all things; man is an integral part of the world of nature. The birth and death of man, as well as changes and processes in the world of nature, are not accidental; they are manifestations of the cosmic, eternal order, Tao, which was mentioned earlier. Tao is the path which the universe follows, and all beings evolve from it. Thus the Chinese seeks good and evil, operating to be sure within man, in the cosmic process, Tao, which is located somewhere outside man—in the universe and in history. In this connection we might recall the famous statement Confucius made about himself: “At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of heaven. At sixty, I was ready to listen to it. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing what was right.” That

is to say, the aim of ethics, according to Confucius, was not to cultivate the innate goodness within himself but rather to discipline himself to act in accordance with the will of Heaven or Tao which was outside himself. I share the observation of Professor Marc Mancall that the Chinese Communist today sees the problem of the locus of good and evil in much the same way as the ancient Chinese. "Good is located in history, and man has identity and value and is good only insofar as he acts so as to permit history to operate through him ; conversely, he is evil if he turns against the stream of history or tries to hold it back. But man may be saved by changing his viewpoint. This is what gives rise to such phenomena as 'brain-washing' and the 'educational' aspects of the Great Cultural Revolution."⁵

As to the view of history, the Chinese Communist today makes critical appropriation of traditional historiography, while at the same time shifting the location of history's meaning. As has been pointed out by Etienne Balazs, traditional Chinese historical writing, which cut history into dynastic slices and was written by official chroniclers of reigning dynasties, was a very stereotyped affair. Most dynastic histories followed, with variations, the same theme, using the so-called "praise and blame" (*pao-pien*) method, trying to demonstrate that the last emperor of a dynasty was not worthy, whence the "mandate of Heaven" had to be taken from him, either by forcing his abdication or by an act of revolt by the founder of the new dynasty, who in virtue of his success was considered worthy to

5. Marc Mancall, "Two realities," in J. M. Kitagawa, ed., *Understanding modern China* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 239.

receive the "mandate of Heaven." The aim of such historical writing was, in essence, "to make judgments and draw moral lessons from the past for application to the present."⁶ But the basis for moral judgment was sought in the golden period of the past, the legendary period of the ancient sage kings. That is to say, the paradigmatic meaning of history was located in the ancient past. It is pertinent to note that present Chinese Communist historiography, which likewise draws heavily on traditional historical writing for moral lessons, shifts the locus of the meaning of history from the past to the present and future. Thus, past historical events are judged not by whether they conform to the ancient moral norm, but by whether their meaning can be profitably utilized to give impetus to the creation of a new form of culture which is yet to come. Such a new culture, according to Mao Tse-tung, can and should emerge in the great land of China, which he loves and prides. In his poem "Snow" he reveals this fundamental view of history. (One of the faces of Mao himself which is not generally well known is that he is recognized as an accomplished poet.)

It might be helpful for us to know that in 1934 and 1935, shortly before this poem was composed, Mao Tse-tung, threatened by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army "extermination campaign," had to lead the Communist community, approximately 100,000 men, women and children, on an agonizing "Long March," from southeastern China to Yen-an in Shensi province. During the year-long trek through mountains and

6. Etienne Balazs, *Chinese civilization and bureaucracy*, ed. with an introduction by A. F. Wright, transl. by H. M. Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 131.

uninhabited regions, they were often bombed by the Nationalist air forces ; many died of starvation and disease. By the time they reached Yen-an, only 20,000 survived. In such a situation Mao Tse-tung, not the hero of a victorious army but the leader of a band of fugitives, fighting for bare survival in the desolate regions of Yen-an, nevertheless dared to compose the following poem inspired by a snowfall :

This is the scene in that northern land ;
 A hundred leagues are sealed with ice,
 A thousand leagues of whirling snow.
 On either side of the Great Wall
 One vastness is all you see.
 From end to end of the great river
 The rushing torrent is frozen and lost.
 The mountains dance like silver snakes,
 The highlands roll like waxen elephants,
 As if they sought to vie with heaven in their height ;
 And on a sunny day
 You will see a red dress thrown over the white.
 Enchantingly lovely !
 Such great beauty like this in all our landscape
 Has caused unnumbered heroes to bow in homage.
 But alas these heroes !—Chin Shih Huang and Han Wu Ti
 Were rather lacking in culture ;
 Rather lacking in literary talent
 Were the emperors Tang Tai Tsung and Sung Tai Tsu ;
 And Genghis Khan,
 Beloved Son of Heaven for a day,
 Only knew how to bend his bow at the golden eagle.
 Now they are all past and gone :
 To find men truly great and noble-hearted
 We must look here in the present.⁷

Not being an expert on poetic visualization myself, I turn to Professor Tay's commentary on this poem. He says : "Confronted by the splendor of snow-covered North China, with towering mountains rivaling 'Old Man Heaven' and plateaus

7. Translation by Andrew Boyd in Mao Tse-tung, *Nineteen poems* (Peking, 1958), p. 22.

stretching beyond the eyes, our poet [Mao Tse-tung] envisages a captivating beauty causing innumerable men of destiny to vie for her throughout the ages—men bold if boorish, men who founded dynasties or built empires, like Ch'in Shih-huang (reigned 140–87 B.C.) whose accounts had 'fascinated' him [Mao Tse-tung] as a child, and Genghis Khan (reigned 1206–1227) the 'favorite son of heaven' [barbarian]..., who 'knew only to bend his bow to big vultures.' Time has claimed the heroes all. But, lo ! here comes the hero."⁸ Professor Tay makes a special point of calling our attention to the statement by Mao Tse-tung's official commentator to the effect that "the last line is the most significant in the whole poem, one with a profound meaning which deserves pondering."⁹ The last line is :

To find men truly great and noble-hearted
We must look here in the present.

Why does Mao's official commentator think this line is so significant ? And who are "men truly great and noble-hearted" ? They deserve our pondering, indeed ! Parenthetically, Professor Tay makes the significant observation that the "present" in the line "we must look here in the present" has the connotation of "this dynasty."¹⁰

Vox Populi, Vox Dei

My own pondering of the last line of Mao's poem, "Snow," leads me to believe that the "new dynasty" of "men truly

8. C. N. Tay, "From snow to plum blossoms: A commentary on some poems by Mao Tse-tung," *Journal of Asian studies*, vol. 25 (1966), pp. 292–293.

9. Mao Tse-tung, *Nineteen poems*, p. 59.

10. Tay, "From snow to plum blossoms," p. 292.

great and noble-hearted” refers not to the proletariat, as one might expect from a Communist leader, but rather to the peasant masses in China. This theme is unmistakably stressed in Mao’s “Report on an Investigation of the Agrarian Movement in Hunan,” published in 1927, which is free of Marxist jargon to a remarkable degree. Unlike other Chinese Communist leaders who turned to the proletariat in accordance with Communist orthodoxy, Mao turned to the peasantry as the revolutionary vanguard of the new culture and society. Understandably, his view was rejected by the mainline leaders of the Chinese Communist party as much as by Moscow. Nevertheless, from 1927 to the present, Mao’s conviction about the peasantry has never been shaken. Mao stated in this Agrarian Report in 1927 :

The force of the peasantry is like that of the raging winds and driving rain. It is rapidly increasing in violence. No force can stand in its way. The peasantry will tear apart all nets which bind it and hasten along the road to liberation. They will bury beneath them all forces of imperialism, militarism, corrupt officialdom, village bosses and evil gentry. Every revolutionary party, every revolutionary comrade will be subjected to their scrutiny and be accepted or rejected by them....The broad masses of the peasantry have arisen to fulfil their historic destiny....The overthrow of feudal forces is, after all, the aim of the national revolution.¹¹

Ironically, such an emphasis on the supreme importance of the peasantry, unexpected from a Communist leader, led some westerners at one time to regard Mao’s Communism as a harmless agrarian reform movement. Today, no one doubts that Mao’s movement has always been Communist. It has also become apparent, however, that Chinese Communism, despite its passionate litany affirming the thoughts of Marx and Lenin,

11. This quotation is taken from Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the rise of Mao* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook 1308, 1967), pp. 74-75.

is very different from that of Soviet Russia. In a real sense Maoism is more akin to a quasi-religious if not a religious movement—here using these terms in a Chinese sense. What we are witnessing is the emergence of a Marxist-inspired, new form of “immanental theocracy,” dedicated to the creation of a new culture, a new society, and a new man.

Throughout his life, in all his voluminous publications and numerous speeches, Mao Tse-tung has been “preaching” one central message, that is, in his own words: “We must instill into the people throughout the country the faith that China belongs to the Chinese people and not to the reactionaries.”¹² The religious flavor of Maoism comes through clearly as Mao tells, and reinterprets, an ancient fable entitled “How Yu Kung removed the mountains.” According to Mao:

It is the story of an old man in North China in ancient times, by the name of Yu Kung of the North Mountain. His house faced south and its doorway was obstructed by two big mountains, Taihang and Wangwu. With great determination, he led his sons to dig up the mountain with pickaxes. Another old man, Chi Sho, witnessed their attempts and laughed saying: “What fools you are to attempt this! To dig up the two huge mountains is utterly beyond your capacity.” Yu Kung replied: “When I die, there are my sons; when they die, there will be their own sons, and so on to infinity. As to these two mountains, high as they are, they cannot become higher but, on the contrary, with every bit dug away, they will become lower and lower. Why can't we dig them anyway?” Mr. Yu Kung refuted Mr. Chi Sho's erroneous view and went on digging at the mountains day after day without interruption. God's heart was touched by such perseverance and he sent two celestial beings down to earth to carry away the mountains on their backs.

Mao then gives his own reinterpretation:

Now there are also two big mountains lying ahead like dead weight on the Chinese people: imperialism and feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party long made up its mind to remove them. We must work persistently, work ceaselessly, and we too may be able to touch God's heart. This God is no other than the masses of the people throughout China. And if they

12. *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4, p. 316.

rise and dig together with us, why can't we dig these two mountains up?¹³

Revolution, Mission, and the Cult of Mao

This is not an appropriate occasion to recount the bewildering, complex, and checkered development of China in our own time, except to point out that the Communists' decisive victory over the Nationalists in 1949 marked a new page in the history of China and the world. With the establishment of the Peking regime, the Mao-inspired revolutionary movement had to undertake the monumental task of building and governing the nation, much as the Muhammad-inspired religious movement in the seventh century was destined to create a new Islamic empire on the Arabian peninsula. Since 1949, Mao and his comrades have pursued unflinchingly the task of removing the two "big mountains," imperialism and feudalism, not by relying on small pickaxes, as Yu Kung and his two sons did, but by depending on two powerful tools, military and civilian state organizations, both of which are woven into the central Communist Party apparatus. Needless to say, both domestic and foreign policies have been dictated throughout by the Party under the chairmanship of Mao Tse-tung.

The fundamental motif of Peking's domestic policy is, to quote Mao's own statement again, to "instill into the people throughout the country the faith that China belongs to the Chinese people...."¹⁴ This implies not only that the people must be willing to make every sacrifice for the common cause

13. *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4, pp. 316-317.

14. *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4, p. 316.

of "self reliance," but also that the people's minds and hearts, as well as their economic and political life, must be collectivized, in the sense that every aspect of life will have to be disciplined in order to bring about a new society, a new culture, and a new people. For this task, the Peking regime has made a daring attempt to destroy the age-old family-centered social and cultural pattern. As is well known, in traditional China it was the family which was considered the ultimate unit of society, whereas in Communist China the ultimate unit is the state. The state creates "communes" into which the families must be dissolved. If the Peking regime should be successful on this score, it will virtually destroy what I call the "religion of family-ism,"¹⁵ the cement of Chinese society and culture since time immemorial.

I claim no competence in international affairs. As far as I can see, however, the Peking regime's foreign policy has had two components. The first is based on the principle of multipolarity in the balancing of power as over against the bipolar system centered in the two major powers of the U. S. A. and the U. S. S. R. that emerged following the end of World War II. Thus, while ideologically Peking was a member of the Communist bloc, she promoted the cause of solidifying a new potential power bloc of Asian and African nations, as evidenced by Chou En-lai's attempts at the Bandung Conference. The second component is seen in the fact that since 1956, with the increasing rift in Sino-Soviet relations, Communist China has

15. See J. M. Kitagawa, *Religions of the east*, enlarged edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), chapter 2: "Chinese religions and the family system."

begun to assert herself as a major power capable of redeeming the world singlehandedly from the evil influences of Soviet revisionism and American capitalism. In this messianic role the Peking regime universalizes its revolutionary rhetoric and applies it to the global scene. Much as imperial China considered herself as the Middle Kingdom, destined to enlighten and assist tributary nations in accordance with the will of Heaven, Communist China today takes seriously the mission to lure smaller and weaker nations into a "united front from above," under the inspired leadership of the Peking regime.

It is this image of messianic China as a dedicated ally of weaker nations and peoples oppressed by the tyrannical domination of the U. S. A. or Soviet Russia that has been shattered both by Communist China's admission to the U. N. last fall and by the visit of the American President to Peking this spring. To be sure, the admission of the Peking regime into the U. N. was considered a diplomatic defeat on the part of the United States, and it is reported that the Soviet delegate too confided on that occasion that his country "suffered a major victory." On the other hand, the Peking regime, now having attained a permanent seat on the Security Council, has become as vulnerable as all other superpowers, involved as she must be in the nitty gritty of international power games notwithstanding the self-righteous rhetoric to the contrary trumpeted by her spokesmen. President Nixon's visit to China also has many serious implications. In the eyes of smaller nations in Asia and Africa, every word and deed of the Peking regime might become suspect.

In the light of such a complex situation, with its contradictory

internal and external factors, the question may be raised as to what is happening to the revolutionary dynamics of the Mao-inspired Communist movement. We might recall that one of Mao Tse-tung's basic beliefs has been that the peasant masses are of supreme importance in achieving a successful revolution. Indeed, as Professor Pulleyblank points out, during the Second Five Year Plan, 1958-1962, known as the "Great Leap Forward," Mao convinced many segments of the peasantry to believe that "they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, establish a communal utopia overnight, revolutionize agriculture, and at the same time make human effort substitute for lack of capital in establishing a decentralized industrial basis in the countryside." More recently, in a so-called "Proletarian Cultural Revolution" aimed at increasing mass participation in various activities in accordance with his doctrines, Mao affirmed, in effect, that "even economic goals, even the achievement of technical expertise so necessary if China is to modernize herself, have been subordinated to the creation of a totally egalitarian society in which all that counts is selfless dedication and strength of purpose."¹⁶ Such visionary approaches to practical affairs of the nation have been called into question by the Party chieftains from time to time, but Mao has managed to survive politically by eliminating Liu Shao-ch'i, one time head of State, and Lin Piao, Mao's own hand-picked heir apparent, and many others who opposed his views. Nevertheless, in reality, Communist China has for the most part been governed not according to Mao's romantic visions but primarily

16. E. G. Pulleyblank, "The unity of China," in J. M. Kitagawa, ed., *Understanding modern China*, p. 90.

by realistic policies forged by the combination of various power bases, for example, the civilian and military chieftains in Peking and in the provinces, even though the Cult of Mao has consistently been maintained as the symbol of national unity. Hence the portraits and statues of the "one face" of Mao in every corner of the mainland !

Opinions vary as to what may happen to the influence of Mao after his death. My own prediction, which of course might be totally wrong, is that the Cult of Mao will survive even if his ideologies should be forgotten. Much as the followers of Buddha and Christ learned long ago and the followers of Mahatma Gandhi have learned more recently, the Chinese under Communist rule will soon discover that it is far easier to worship and pay homage to their Master than to follow his principles. In this sense the Chinese are just as human as the rest of us.